A Philosophical Perspective on the Shapiro Report

John P. Portelli, Mount Saint Vincent University

What is the relationship between critical and dogmatic philosophies of action? By 'critical,' I mean a philosophy that is aware of the limits of knowing. By 'dogmatic,' I mean a philosophy that advances coherent general principles without sufficient interest in empirical details.

Gayati Chakravorty Spivak (1993)

This paper comments critically on the *Teacher Education in Nova Scotia: An Honourable Past, Alternative Future* (1994) (*Shapiro Report*) from a philosophical perspective.[1,2] In offering these remarks, I am faced with the challenge of critiquing a piece of writing which is not itself philosophical. Perhaps the major problem I have with all such documents is the lack of the philosophical perspective—that is, philosophical analysis, clarity, and justification. I am not arguing that such a perspective alone will resolve the kind of issues the writers of this report faced. I do not adhere to a traditional, rather elitist view of philosophy—namely, that philosophers are expected to propose and defend substantial views about all sort of issues from which neat, specific guidelines or prescriptions for practice are deduced.[3] Nor do I share the popular view which sees philosophy as a general belief system or a set of principles arising from a general perspective about the world from which follow specific guidelines or strategies for solving practical dilemmas. According to Lugenbehl (1984), such a view of philosophy is egocentric. He argues that the "business/efficiency/-technocratic" mentality associated with this view is reflected in the "cash" value or the immediate "pay off" criteria that are used to evaluate the worth of one's philosophy. Philosophers of education have grown sceptical of this view for very good reasons. Unfortunately, those in administration and policy development seem to have accepted it. And the practice becomes more dangerous when the philosophical perspective is not made explicit.

In response to what some refer to as the "ivory tower" perspective, I see philosophy as critical inquiry into concepts, assumptions, values, and practices. Moreover, philosophy is seen as having a *public* dimension beyond the *personal* and *professional* dimensions. Hence, more than merely rigorous and systematic analysis and reflection on concepts and arguments is needed; proposals for action and justification of such proposals are required. From this point of view, questions of meaning and justification ultimately are not isolated from questions about power relations. As Steedman (1988) contends: "Aristotle knew that 'What should be taught?' is a question that epistemology cannot answer but rather must find its answer in politics" (p. 135). A critical commentary, then, ought to encourage an analysis that goes beyond personal or private lives to an understanding of the political and the specific context.

Let me now focus specifically on the *Shapiro Report*. While I realize that the reviewers had an onerous task in preparing and presenting this report, my conclusion is that the report is deficient. In this paper, I shall attempt to demonstrate this by identifying and briefly discussing some specific examples. The report consists of five chapters. Chapter 1, "An Honourable Past," gives

some general information about the universities in the province, the Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education (N.S.C.H.E.), the system-wide reviews, and the composition and mandate of the education review. (It is interesting to note that the chapter never really explains why the past is considered honourable!). Chapter 2, "The Written Submissions and Institutional Impressions," presents at times in a rather cryptic style the "rough descriptions" of these impressions and some critical remarks on the self-studies and the submissions of the stakeholder groups. Chapter 3, "An Alternative Future," identifies six major problems considered in the review: vision, inter/intra-institutional arrangements, professional development/relationships, research, capacity, and costs. It elaborates briefly on the first five (costs are dealt with in Chapter 4) and makes nineteen recommendations about the current programs and future directions. Chapter 4, which deals with issues and directions for implementation, presents fourteen more recommendations. Chapter 5 offers a summary and concluding comment.

I consider Chapter 3 to form the core of the report. The major recommendations may be summarized as follows: (a) the closure of the N.S. Teachers College in Truro, and the teacher education programmes at the Faculty of Education at St. Mary's University, the Department of Education at St. Francis Xavier University, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and at the School of Education at Dalhousie University (including the only English-language Ph.D. programme in education east of Montreal); (b) teacher education should be done in a two-year, university-based programme following a first degree; (c) all education programmes should be comprehensive, include both graduate and undergraduate studies, and should reflect the need of minority groups; (d) Mount Saint Vincent University and Acadia University were designated as the only two sites for the comprehensive teacher education programmes; (e) "the University of Ste. Anne [should] be maintained as the province's French-language facility for teacher education" (p. 34); and (f) professional development should take different forms apart from graduate studies.

The Language of Rhetoric and Power

My first critical observation is about the excessive use of slogan-like language such as, "efficiency and effectiveness," "quality," "needs," "reflection" or "reflective practice," "excellence," "accountability," and "problem solving." My point is not that these terms should be abolished or avoided in such reports. My concern is that the constant reference to such catch-phrases can be extremely dangerous without some explanation of how they are being used.

The original meaning of the word "slogan," which is derived from Gaelic, is "army cry." A slogan, then, is meant to urge one to rally for battle and rush to action. While we do need to act quickly and spontaneously at times, regular uncalculated or generalized actions can impede progress, creating frustrations and myths. The problem with such slogans in this context is that they have become so popular and generalized that their meanings are taken for granted and the implications and justification of their use are not considered. Constant or excessive use of these terms creates statements with which few would disagree, and yet one is left wondering about what is really being claimed

or stated. Like Popkewitz (1991), "I am not concerned with words or language in and of themselves but with the forms of language that are part of power relations produced and embodied in the social practices" (p. 191). This kind of generalized and taken-for-granted language creates the aroma of universality or homogeneity and hides the possibility of differences and even conflict since these terms are presented as universal, absolute, and unchallengeable "procedural categories." As Popkewitz reminds us: "Policy is articulated through an instrumental language that make the problems seem administrative in focus and universal in application" (p. 194).

Let me be specific and focus on four of the most used terms in the document: effectiveness, needs, quality, and reflective practice. These concepts refer to or depend on normative or value-laden concepts. Effectiveness, needs, and quality do not exist equally and universally. The same thing may be deemed effective or needed or of quality in one context but not in another. This will depend on the evaluative criteria being used to judge whether or not something is effective, needed, or of quality. It would be rather difficult to argue against effectiveness, needs, and quality. However, different criteria apply to these very concepts. The problem with the slogans arises exactly because they deflect our attention from the discussion of the differences in these criteria and their justification or reasonableness. So when the report refers to effectiveness or effective teaching, we need to know what criteria are used in these evaluations and the reasons for them. And the argument would be quite futile if effectiveness is evaluated by referring to the quality and the needs of the future without identifying the very criteria used to determine the quality and the needs. Discourse about quality, needs, and effectiveness is hollow unless we ask and thoroughly discuss such questions as: What are the beliefs and values that determine quality in a certain context? In whose interests are certain things identified as needs? Who ought to determine such criteria? These are questions which go beyond the empirical realm.

Similar claims can be made about the term "reflective practice." Although the notion of reflective practice in education is usually contrasted with narrow training or the mere practice and development of behavioural skills, there are different, contrasting, and competing notions of reflection. The literature distinguishes between Dewey's (1933), Schon's (1987), Van Manen's (1991) and Schwab's (1971) notions. And more recently, with the influence of Habermas (1974), the references to the critical science notion of reflection as self-determination have increased. From this perspective, "reflection is viewed as a process of becoming aware of one's context, of the influence of societal and ideological constraints on previously taken for granted practices, and gaining control over the direction of these influences" (Calderhead, 1989, p. 44).

My point is not simply one of meaning; the issue is one of differences in values and ideological stances—differences that the general and universal language of the document does not reveal. And these differences, of course, impinge differently on practice. With regard to reflective practice, for example, different conceptions have in fact given rise to different practices in teacher education. As Calderhead (1989) notes:

> In the case of school experience, Schon's notion of reflection-in-action has been used to support the importance of "coaching," emphasising the need for early experience in schools and discussions between teacher and student

> teacher about teaching. The critical science notion of reflection, on the other hand, has been used to justify the avoidance of early experience in school [practice teaching]: exposure to the craft knowledge of the teacher is viewed in terms of its conservative effects, initiating the student teacher into taken-for-granted routines. Indeed, it has been recommended that student teachers build up critical skills and an understanding of the context in which teachers work, well before approaching the teaching task (p. 45).

The Misunderstood Gap or Gaps?

In several instances, the report refers to the gap that exists or seems to exist, between faculties of education and schools or teachers' work. In Chapter 1, we read that "relationships with the practising profession and/or Department of Education remain a problem" (p. 8). References to this dichotomy are more numerous in Chapter 2:

> There was a gap. . .between the teacher education units' own perception of their outreach activities and the perception of these same activities by those in the 'field' (p. 13).

> A number of submissions [from stakeholder groups] emphasized the need for strong subject-matter knowledge, and for close collaboration between the academic and professional units responsible for teacher education and those groups actually in professional practice (p. 18).

> The submissions certainly conveyed a sense that the teacher education institutions have been far too isolated from the rest of the system (p. 19).

> Some faculty are perceived as being completely out-of-touch with the realities of present-day schooling (p. 20).

This point is made once again in Chapter 3:

> From the point of view of the nine teacher education programmes, at least in terms of the self-study material, relationships between the programmes and the profession are excellent. . . .On the other hand, the situation appears quite different from the point of view of the practising profession. . . .The profession tends to regard their relationship with the institutions as one-sided... Indeed, in some instances, the universities are seen as defining the profession, often belligerently, primarily in terms of their own faculty! (p. 25).

Undoubtedly, this issue forms one of the major focuses or concerns of the report. Given that the report admits that "the complex ethical, social, political, epistemological, and psychological issues involved in education are of vital importance. . .and. . .should. . .be studied and discussed widely" (p. 28) and that there is a "substantial discrepancy between the 'voices' of the self-studies and the 'voices' of the stakeholder groups" (p. 33), the lack of any serious discussion of this matter in the report is very surprising. There are several questions that arise: What is exactly the nature of the discrepancy? Does it take different forms in different contexts? Do the differences arise from different, possibly competing, ideological stances? What are the assumptions and expectations of these different stances? On what grounds should one stance be considered more favourably than another? Is a one-to-one relationship between the education

faculties and stakeholders ideal and/or possible? Unfortunately, the report is silent on these matters other than what one can reasonably deduce by implication. For example, (i) the tone of the report seems to favour the positions taken by the stakeholders (it is, after all, the universities that are expected to change on demand and not the situations and conditions in Nova Scotia schools. The status quo in schools seems to be acceptable); (ii) while the self-studies produced by the universities are critiqued (in some regards perhaps rightfully so), no critical remarks about the stakeholders' views are made; and (iii) while the universities' self-studies are quite extensive and provide their own evidence, most of the nineteen submissions made by the stakeholders are very brief and provide very little evidence for the claims they make. The report does not comment at all on this difference. My observations are not meant to discredit the comments of the stakeholders but to point out a certain bias that emerges from the report. It is worth noting that not all submissions from the stakeholders are critical of the work done by universities. A couple of them are quite supportive of their work and speak very positively of their graduates. The report, however, never mentions this. Several of the submissions address the issue of the doctoral programme. Although suggestions for improvements are made, none of the submissions argue or even hint that the programme should be closed. Again, this fact is never mentioned in the report. I was unable to find in any of the stakeholder group's submissions evidence to support the report's claim that "the universities are seen as defining the profession, often belligerently" (p. 25).

The report also refers to another kind of gap about research: "[T]here tended to be a wide gap between the teacher education's research programmes, the research interests as described in the self-studies, and the much more modest actual research achievements of the unit." (p. 13). The report also makes a further evaluative comment about research when the team expressed its concern about the limited involvement of faculty in research and the great need for research of value to the profession, a point which is also made in a couple of the stakeholders' submissions. Once again, the report makes broad and serious evaluative judgments without providing either the criteria or the specific support for these judgments. To be fair, the report does make a passing reference to the importance of recognizing or acknowledging different modes of doing research. Yet, once again, one is left with several unanswered questions: what criteria are used to evaluate the research? What do the reviewers expect from educational research? Should educational research aim to supply the one right answer that will solve educational ills (as some of the submissions from the stakeholders seem to assume)? Have the reviewers analyzed the context in which faculty members in Nova Scotia universities operate and the possible constraints this context creates? What evidence do the reviewers provide for their claims about research? What about the connections between research and teaching, and the notion of teaching as a form of research?

The reviewers' critical comments become more serious when one notes that the reviewers remind the reader that:

> The design of the N.S. system-wide review of teacher education. . .was not such as to yield an assessment of programme quality at each institution at a level typical of and appropriate to programme accreditation. . . . It was clear in advance that there would be no opportunity, to either convincingly validate the claims of the self-studies and/or independently and convincingly

> consider for each institution the quality of the teaching, research and outreach activities of either faculty and/or students (p. 22).

This is an explicit admission of a lack of detail and thoroughness—which surely ought to be avoided if one is engaged in responsible, serious, qualitative evaluative judgments![4]

Ultimately, the discussion about the gaps or dichotomies referred to above revolves around the issue of the nature of theory and practice and the relationship between the two. The traditional view assumes and aims for a one-to-one correspondence between theory and practice. Theories are expected to offer specific prescriptions, directions, or solutions that are meant to apply universally to the problems that arise from practice. From this perspective, the simpler, more concrete, or direct the suggestions the better, for teachers, who have no time or room for theoretical issues, will carry them out more efficiently. The influence of the culture of "positivism" in the dominant view of theory is quite obvious: the aim is to get to the correct view that is assumed to apply to all contexts, and to determine the correctness of that view and the specific strategies that will predictably fulfil such a view. The emphasis is on the procedures rather than the value questions, on how to achieve the ends rather than why we should achieve these ends, on what fits into what counts as normal, regular, and efficient rather than seriously acknowledging and exploring differences. And, hence, the result is a dichotomy between conception and execution.

Philosophy challenges the traditional view of the relationship between theory and practice. As Entwistle (1988) argues, there can never be a one-to-one correspondence between theory and practice—that is, one that "predicts accurately every contingency in a practical situation" (p. 26). The role of theory is "to evoke judgement rather than rote obedience," to bring "critical intelligence to bear on practical tasks rather than merely implementing good advice" (p. 26). Or, as Pinar and Grumet (1988) put it, the role of theory is "to consciously question [the practical]. . .to ask again the basic questions practical activity silences" (p. 98).

Although the report refers to reflective teaching, reflection in action, critical thinking, and the need and importance of taking issues of inclusiveness into account. Ultimately, the report is still hooked to a traditional notion of the relationship between theory and practice. The language and spirit of the document ultimately sympathizes with such a perspective. A one-to-one correspondence is expected between faculties of education and schools and/or the practice of the teachers, and the important issues are those perceived to be important by people working in the field without any concern for the dangers of reproducing the status quo. The primary and, perhaps, even exclusive purpose of programs in education is seen as producing people who will work in schools. Education and schooling seem to be equated, a view which disregards the fact that the study of education is both necessary and relevant to the preparation of other occupations such as community education, professional development within organizations and institutions, and school and community liaison. Significantly, the reviewers complain that there is no one common vision that "underpins the province's teacher education programme" (p. 24). While the report abounds with slogans arising from "liberal educational views" and encourages radical reform, the report is guided by a rather traditional, restrictive, instrumental no-

tion of the nature and role of theory. It lacks the critical, detailed analysis and the philosophical discussion that is called for when one proposes recommendations for serious change.

I want to reiterate that my criticisms are not meant as an endorsement of the current situation. I agree, for example, that teacher education ought to take place in a university, that a two-year programme (with a more extensive practicum) following a first degree based in a liberal education is desirable, that teacher education has been too dispersed, and with several of the report's other recommendations. Yet overall, the report lacks the clarity and justification that the philosophical perspective and reforms of this magnitude demand.[5]

Notes

[1]The Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education (N.S.C.H.E.) was created in 1989 to advise the Nova Scotia Minister of Education on universities in the province. The N.S.C.H.E., which has a say over the distribution of funds made available by the government, acts in a way as an intermediary between the government and the universities since one of its functions is to represent the views of the government to the universities. In December, 1992, the N.S.C.H.E. issued a discussion paper on the need for "rationalization" of universities in Nova Scotia. In January, 1993, the N.S.C.H.E initiated the first step for a system-wide review of teacher education which was targeted as the first area to be "rationalized." After consultation with both the universities and stakeholder groups, the N.S.C.H.E. selected six external reviewers consisting of Bernard Shapiro (Chair), Jean Clandinin, Jane Gaskell, Robert Crocker, Emmet Currie, and Michael Fullan to write a report on teacher education. After reviewing self-studies by the universities and other submissions from the stakeholder groups, the external reviewers, in a total of eight days, made eight site visits at the universities, met with some of the stakeholder groups and others such as the Registrar of Teacher Certification and the Minister of Education. The report of the six reviewers was officially released in February, 1994. As a result of this report, some very drastic changes were proposed most of which were endorsed by the government. The entire report is sixty-two pages (including appendices) and is available from the N.S.C.H.E.

[2]The remarks in this article are simply my own and are not intended to represent the institution where I teach. They are made by an ordinary faculty member who was not directly involved in the process other than submitting information to the person who coordinated the preparation of the departmental self-study and attending meetings in which the co-chairs of my department informed us about the "rationalization" meetings they were involved in. My comments, then, are primarily about the document itself. Although they are critical, they are not meant as a defence of the status quo. I realize (actually I have always realized since I started work in Nova Scotia in 1985) that the current structure and situation are problematic and that some changes were needed. In this regard, I agree with several of the recommendations made, although I doubt whether these alone (as it seems to be suggested or implied in the report) will have a major impact on the educational system in the province.

[3]It is interesting to note that while philosophers of education have become

much humbler than they have been in the past and have found aspects of the notion of philosopher-king/queen problematic, educational administrators or, to be more exact, administrators of educational institutions, seem to have endorsed the notion and at times the rather dictatorial practices attached to it.

[4]It is worth noting that, although the report complains about a gap in research, it at times makes suggestions that would increase the gap. For example, while the importance of research is recognized, one is left with the impression that research is seen as separate from both professional development and certificate endorsements. The report pleads for more active research, debate, and publishing on the part of the faculty (p. 31-32); yet, at the same time, universities are chastised for defining the profession (p. 25). Is not an important role of active research, debate, and publishing to define the profession?

[5]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the C.S.S.E. Annual Conference (as part of the C.A.F.E. programme), The University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, June 1994. I would like to thank Ann Vibert and Rilda Van Feggelen who commented on an earlier draft of this paper. I also acknowledge the helpful suggestions made by an anonymous reviewer and the editor.

References

Calderhead, James (1989). "Reflective Teaching and Teacher Education," *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 5, 1: 43-51.

Dewey, John (1933). *How We Think*. Boston: D.C. Heath & Co.

Entwistle, Harold (1988). "The Relationship between Theory and Practice: A New Look." In W. Hare and J.P. Portelli (Eds.), *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Readings*. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd.: 23-32.

Habermas, Jurgen (1974). *Theory and Practice*. London: Heinemann.

Lugenbehl, Dale E. (1984). "Two Concepts of Philosophy," *Teaching Philosophy*, 7, 4: 289-301.

Pinar, William and Grumet, Madeline (1988). "Socratic Caesura and the Theory-Practice Relationship." In W. Pinar (Ed.). *Contemporary Curriculum Discourses*. Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick Publishers: 92-100.

Popkewitz, Thomas S. (1991). *A Political Sociology of Educational Reform: Power/Knowledge in Teaching, Teacher Education, and Research*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Schon, Donald A. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Schwab, John (1971). The Practical: Arts of Eclectic. *School Review*, 79: 493-543.

Shapiro, Bernard et al (1994). *Teacher Education in Nova Scotia: An Honourable Past, An Alternative Future*. Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Council of Higher Education.

Spivak, Gayati Chakravorty (1993). *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Steedman, Philip H. (1988). Curriculum and Knowledge Selection. In L.E. Beyer and M.W. Apple (Eds.), *The Curriculum: Problems, Politics and Possibilities*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press: 119-139.

Van Manen, Max (1991). *The Tact of Teaching: The Meaning of Pedagogical Thoughtfulness*. London, ON: Althouse Press.