Generating an epistemology for educational research from the responsibility of educators and educational researchers to research their own professional development

Symposium BERA 2024

Overview of symposium

This symposium presents an epistemology for educational research that is grounded in an educator's and educational researcher's professional responsibility for their own professional learning and development in inquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve my educational influences in my professional practice with values of human flourishing?' The unit of appraisal is the individual, professional practitioner's explanation for their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which their practice is located. The standards of judgement include the unique constellation of values of human flourishing the practitioner uses to explain their practice and to evaluate its effectiveness. The living logics of their explanations include insights from dialectical and propositional logics.

How am I contributing to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing?

A contribution to the Symposium on 'Generating an epistemology for educational research from the responsibility of educators and educational researchers to research their own professional development.', presented to the 2024 Conference of the British Educational Research association 8-12 September 2024.

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Abstract

The research aim is to contribute to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing by teacher and teacher educators "to ensure that education truly transforms lives in the world" (Education 2030 Incheon Declaration, p.70). The theoretical framework integrates insights from educational theory and research, positive and social psychology and values-led practitioners' theories and research. It provides the basis of an argument, with evidence, which justifies teachers adopting a Living Educational Theory Research approach to their continuing and continual professional development. By using this approach teachers develop forms of educational research that are inclusive, equitable and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Notions of social validity and rigour are drawn on to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of Living Educational Theory Research as CPD. Papers published 2008-2024 in the Educational Journal of Living Theories, and Living Educational Theory Research Masters and Doctorates form the data which are analysed and used in the argument made.

Introduction

The focus of this symposium is on generating an epistemology for educational research from the responsibility of educators and educational researchers to research their own professional development. The contribution this paper offers is a distinct perspective created from my experience of realising my responsibilities as a professional practitioner, contributing to English local authorities, universities and the Educational Journal of Living Theories, realising their raisons d'être with values of human flourishing.

Most research in the social sciences is focused on understanding and/or improving the contribution members of a social formation make to its 'productivity'. There is often little focus on evaluating the contribution a professional practitioner makes to a social formation realising its productive raison d'être with values of human flourishing and its contribution to individuals, collectives and Humanity learning to flourish humanely and helping others to do so too. Another form of research is needed that enables a professional practitioner to develop practice that is both productive and worthwhile and helps others to do so too. In this paper I justify my claim that Living Educational Theory Research is such a form of research by addressing the question, "How am I contributing to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing?"

Living Educational Theory Research is a form of professional practitioner educational research that is inclusive, equitable and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. It is engaged in by practitioners to understand and improve their practice and offer a valid explanation for their educational influences in the learning of the social formation, which forms the context of their practice, to realise its raisons d'être with values of human flourishing, in the learning of those who comprise it, and in their own learning to realise their responsibilities as professional practitioners. These responsibilities include contributing the knowledge they create to the generation of an epistemology for educational research, which gives practical meaning to aspirational rhetoric that carries hope for Humanity learning to flourish.

The research aim of this paper is focussed on contributing to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing by teacher and teacher educators "to ensure that education truly transforms lives in the world" (Education 2030 Incheon Declaration, p.70). An argument is presented that justifies teachers, as professional practitioners, adopting a Living Educational Theory Research (Whitehead, 1989) approach to their continuing and continual professional development. Evidence is presented to illustrate how, by using this approach, teachers develop forms of educational research that are inclusive, equitable and promote lifelong learning and life-wide opportunities for all.

The significance of the paper is in its contribution to the generation of an epistemology for educational research from educators and educational researchers realising their responsibilities as professional practitioners to research their own professional development and contributing accounts of their Living Educational Theory Research to the growth of a global educational knowledgebase.

The paper is organised as follows:
  • Context

- Focus
- Validity and Rigour
- Research Methods,
- Data
- Discussion
- Conclusion

Context

Whitehead is the progenitor of Living Educational Theory Research. During the 1970s Whitehead taught science in English secondary schools before becoming a university lecturer, academic and scholar. In 1989 he presented a paper as president of BERA and first coined the term living-educational-theory. A living-educational-theory is the valid, values-laden explanations generated by professional practitioner for their educational influence in their own learning, the learning of others and the learning of the social formation that forms the context of their practice and research (Whitehead, 2024). Since then, Living Educational Theory Research, as a form of professional practitioner educational research, has been engaged in by numerous professional practitioners, practicing in various fields of practice and diverse cultural contexts, to realise their responsibilities as professional practitioners. For examples, see Masters, Doctorates and Whitehead's presentations and publications to be found on https://actionresearch.net/, and peer reviewed papers published in the Educational Journal of Living Theories, free to access from https://ejolts.net/.

I first became aware of Living Educational Theory Research when working as an educational psychologist developing and implementing an inclusive educational policy across an English local authority at the turn of the century. I had a problem. I could describe what I was doing and account for my work, quantitatively, to the satisfaction of the local authority and the heads of the local schools. However, I did not have a way of evaluating my work or for developing a rationale for how I made decisions that satisfied me. The methodologies I was familiar with could not enable me to solve my problem, any more than they had enabled me to answer questions concerning my educational practice over the years I worked as a school psychologist. As I begun to become acquainted with Living Educational Theory Research, I realised that I had found a methodology which served my current purpose, and enabled me to clarify and realise my responsibilities as a professional practitioner, a member of a profession, and as an employee of a social formation within which I was practicing.

The social formation, which formed the context of my practice as an educational psychologist from 1976 to 2012, changed. There is no space here to go into detail but some indication of the social, cultural and political changes that occurred can be seen in the change in language. In 1970 the government department was called the Department of Education and Science. Since then it has been given various names to reflect both the various perspectives of education and the purpose of those with the power to influence the government of the day. For example, the exponents of a free-market economy and individualism have managed to replace local authorities with private businesses to provide education for children and young people by influencing government policies, strategies and legislation, such as *The Local Education Authorities and Children's Services Authorities (Integration of Functions) Order 2010.* That has removed all reference to local education authorities and children's services authorities from existing legislation, replacing them with

the term 'local authority'. Local authorities are left with responsibilities and no power or resources to improve the educational opportunities for the young, while 'academy trusts' multiply and profit from the public purse.

Given I have to live and work in social formations often dominated by individualistic, self-serving and illiberal ideologies, what can I do to improve the educational opportunities, relationships and experiences available to children, young people and adults learning life-long to live humanely a satisfying, socially productive and worthwhile life, help others to do so too, and contribute to Humanity learning to flourish as a benign presence in and of the world? Which bring me to the focus of this paper.

Focus

I follow the inspiration of Frankl (2006) and other positive psychologists like Dweck (2017) to focus on what I can do to contribute my grain of sand to the growth of professional practitioner educational research with the hope that eventually a more humane mountain might be created. Hence the research aim of this paper is to contribute to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing by teacher and teacher educators "to ensure that education truly transforms lives in the world" (Education 2030 Incheon Declaration, p.70). This I claim to be doing by researching the question, 'How am I contributing to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing?' and presenting an argument that teachers adopt a Living Educational Theory Research (Whitehead, 1989, 2024) approach to their professional development.

Validity and Rigour

What constitutes 'validity' and 'rigour' is given many meanings in the literature. I do not intend to argue for one meaning or another. Rather, I intend to simply clarify the meaning of both with respect to the validity and rigour of this research and paper.

I am working with the idea of a process of validation to include answering questions such as, 'is there sufficient evidence to support the conclusions drawn?', hence the use of Habermas's (1976) questions re social validity.

I am working with the idea of 'rigour' developed by Winter (1989) and more recently by Harley and Cornelissen (2022) as involving reflexive thinking and "as being first and foremost an outcome of inferential reasoning processes linking data to theoretical conclusions" (p.257).

Living Educational Theory Research offered me a way of developing a values-based rationale for my educational practice and criteria by which to evaluate its efficacy and effectiveness to make a difference to people's learning to live humanely satisfying, productive and worthwhile lives and helping others to do so too. Harley and Cornelissen's approach to addressing rigour therefore seems particularly appropriate:

To show others that one's research is rigorous, one's focus must be on showing and telling readers what one has done in relation to the suggested criteria. In this sense, the practice of writing and the rhetorical devices authors use to persuade readers that their conclusions are justified (see Langley & Abdallah, 2011; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997) cannot be decoupled from considerations of rigor. (ibid. p.247)

What constitutes tests of 'validity' and 'rigour' of research-generated knowledge must relate to the meaning and purpose of the knowledge created and tested. Here I am concerned with 'validity' and 'rigour' with respect to the meaning and purpose of *educational* knowledge generated through *educational* research.

First, what distinguishes what is 'educational'? Dictionary definitions, such as this one, "providing education or relating to education" (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/educational) beg further questions such as, 'what is educational about 'education?', 'what are the personal and societal educational purposes 'education' is intended to serve?' Here I work with an understanding of 'education' as a life-long, life-wide process of individuals and collectives learning to live humanely satisfying, productive and worthwhile lives and helping others to do so too, and contributing to individuals, collectives and Humanity learning to flourish as a benign presence in and of the world.

Over the last 50 years approaches to improving the validity and rigour of Living Educational Theory Research as process and product have been developed. They have primarily included approaches developed in 'validation groups' described by Whitehead (2024). In recent years it has become clear that there is a distinction between the meaning and purpose of a 'validation group' to: i) strengthen the research in progress and; ii) to evaluate the product of the research, which is the account of the living-educational-theory created.

In the early days of Living Educational Theory Research Whitehead was working with teachers registered on a Masters programme he tutored. The teachers worked together as 'critical friends' in a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998), as illustrated by the content of the, 'Advanced bluffers guide for educational action researchers improving the quality of professional practice and creating living educational theories for cultural renewal' (Whitehead, 1995). Subsequently the teachers submitted accounts of their research to count towards the award of a Masters. The validity and rigour of the product of their research was tested in the process by the academics appointed to examine their submissions. The examiners of a Masters in effect form a 'validation group' comprising knowledgeable, disinterested peers to test the validity and rigour of the researcher's knowledge-claims, as do academics examining a thesis for the award of a doctorate and reviewers examining papers submitted to academic journals.

Preparing and submitting an account of knowledge created for critical appraisal by members of a global educational community, as a contribution to a global knowledgebase, is a feature of 'research' that distinguishes it from 'enquiry' and 'inquiry'. Enquire, inquire and research are often used as though they are interchangeable although they have quite distinct meanings. So to be clear about my meaning:

"Enquire" ask questions to find out more about something
"Inquire" to formally investigate to resolve doubt or solve a problem (is it better to use this or that?)
"Research" a formal work undertaken systematically to increase the stock of knowledge

Responsibilities of a *professional* practitioner, as distinguished from those of a practitioner who is a member of a professional body, include holding them self to account for the consequences of their practice by researching it to understand and improve it and generate a valid values-laden explanation for their educational influence in their own learning, the learning of others and the learning of social formations (Whitehead, 2024). The responsibilities of a *professional* practitioner also include contributing the educational, values-laden knowledge generated in the process to a global educational knowledgebase to enhance the learning of individuals, collectives and Humanity learning to flourish as a benign presence in and of the world (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2021).

Living Educational Theory Research is an iterative, relationally dynamic and multidimensional process (Huxtable, 2012). The two forms of 'validation group' are "distinct but not discrete" (thanks to Alan Rayner for that very useful phrase). Together they contribute to the practitioner's professional development as they realise their responsibilities as *professional* practitioners. The review process of a paper submitted to the Educational Journal of Living Theories serves to illustrate.

Stage 1 - a double-blind review, when the knowledge-claims are tested for validity and rigour by disinterested knowledgeable peers.
Stage 2 – papers the Editorial Board agrees are within the scope of EJOLTs and reviewers advise the paper meets most of the publishing criteria, progress go onto open review. There reviewers and authors work together to strengthen the account, and hence the research. The conversation goes on in a public space so others may also both learn from and contribute to it.
Stage 3 – when reviewers are each of the view the paper meets all the publishing criteria the Editorial Board reviews the paper and, following Popper (see Whitehead, 2024), tests the validity and rigour of the knowledge-claims and come to an agreement as to whether to publish that iteration. Members of the Editorial Board who had been involved with the creation of the paper recuse themselves, where that is practically possible.

Interestingly issues of 'validity' and 'rigour', with respect to human science and educational, values-led research, appears, at least on first glance, to be better explored by professional 'health' practitioners than by many academic who are members of the BERA community, and more ready to acknowledge that:

… strategies for ensuring rigor must be built into the qualitative research process per se rather than evaluated only after the inquiry is conducted. Threats to reliability and validity cannot be actively addressed by using standards and criteria applied at the end of the study. Ensuring rigor must be upheld by the researcher during the

investigation rather than the external judges of the completed study. (Cypress, 2017, p. 260)

Methods to improve the validity and rigour of Living Educational Theory Research, while having drawn on Winter (1989) and Habermas (1976), are continually evolving and integrate insights developed in various fields of practitioner research. The methods to improve validity and rigour of research are related to research methods, data collection and analysis.

Research methods

Professional practitioners use various research methods to research their practice to understand and improve it and create their living-educational-theory. These include methods developed by researchers engaging in other forms of research, for example, Action Research, Ethnographical Research, Case Study and Teacher Self-Study Research. Other methods have been developed where those that exist don't serve well enough. For example, Whitehead (see Whitehead & Huxtable, 2024) developed a method of 'empathetic resonance' initially to analyse digital video data to identify where he was experiencing himself as a living-contradiction as a science teacher. He then went on to develop the method to enable digital data to be used by practitioners to communicate the embodied meaning of the values of human flourishing that form the explanatory principles in their living-educational-theories, standards by which they judge the effectiveness of their practice and their contribution to the growth of an educational epistemology.

Data

Papers published by the Educational Journal of Living Theories (https://ejolts.net/) and Masters and Doctorates accessible from https://actionresearch.net/ are drawn on to provide the basis for the discussion and argument which justifies teachers adopting a Living Educational Theory Research (Whitehead, 1989) approach to their continuing and continual professional development to contribute to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing

Mounter's Masters dissertation and Doctoral theses research are accessible from https://actionresearch.net/. Her Masters answers her question, 'A Headteacher Researcher How Can I Demonstrate the Impact and SelfUnderstandings Drawn From Living Theory Action Research, As A Form Of Continual Professional Development In Education?' This includes an account of when before Joy left the school where she was class-teacher and deputy headteacher to take up her post as head-teacher elsewhere she was approached by her former pupils. They had not worked with her since they were in Y2 but their time with her had left a continuing impression on them. One informed her he realised that the theory of learning they had developed two years before needed amending. Having learned about space and time he realised that it was not 3 dimensional it must be at least 5 dimensional. What is more he thought there must be more dimensions he had yet to learn about so it must be multidimensional. Through her doctoral research Mounter (2024) has gone on to extend her understanding and representation of the complex inter related nature of humane cooperative values as ~i~we~I~us~, which include understanding of self in relation

to others, caring and adding to something bigger than yourself with the desire to make a difference in the world.

Others who have submitted the knowledge they have created as contributions to knowledge for validation through examination for the award of a doctorate include Qutoshi (2016) working to transform education across Pakistan; Geller (2010) working across diverse and challenging cultural contexts in Israel; and Rawal (2006) working with children with specific learning difficulties in a Mumbai school (India) who has gone on to become influential in the creation of a national professional development programme for practitioners as illustrated by her 2021 living-poster, which can be accessed from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/indiangp21.pdf. Rawal has continued to test the validity of her knowledge-claims and contribute to a global knowledgebase by submitting her work to the Educational Journal of Living Theories, which can also be accessed from her living-poster.

Working as a lecturer in a South African university Kahts-Kramer (2024), uses other research methods as she engages in Living Educational Theory Research to give an account of how she contributes to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing. She submitted her account to the Educational Journal of Living Theories to test the validity of her knowledge-claims and contribute to the global growth of knowledge. Similarly Mat Noor (2023) reflected reflexively on his time working in a Malaysian school to answer his question, 'How can I improve my practice as a science teacher through the development of my pedagogical 'inquiry' skills?' and submitted his account to the Educational Journal of Living Theories to test the validity of his knowledge-claims and contribute to the global growth of knowledge. Kennedy (2022) continued to reflect reflexively on her practice as a primary school teacher in Ireland, supporting children to recognise and manage their anxiety, working with the reviewers of the Educational Journal of Living Theories after she had left Ireland to progress her professional educational development and realise her responsibilities as a professional practitioner to contribute to the global growth of educational knowledge.

Discussion

The argument I intend to offer is how educators contribute to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing and realise their responsibilities as professional practitioners by engaging in Living Educational Theory Research continually.

Whitehead and Huxtable (2024) have argued over years that there is a distinction between a practitioner holding themselves to account to standards dictated by a professional body or controlling organisation and a professional practitioner by engaging in predetermined programme of continuing professional development, and a practitioner holding themselves to account to realise their responsibilities as *professional* practitioners by researching their practice to understand and improve it, generate valid accounts of their living-educational-theories and contributing the knowledge generated in the process to the growth of a global educational knowledgebase, which constitutes their own programme of continual professional development.

Most programmes of professional development are concerned with what the practitioner must do to keep abreast of the knowledge of the field of their practice, develop expertise, extend their CVs with a view to improving their career chances, show they are complying with ethical standards and are fulfilling all requirements for maintaining their membership of a professional body or qualification to practice. These are important but only part of the story, which is illustrated by this quote from the website of the Australian Council of Professions:

> A Professional is a member of a Profession. Professionals are governed by codes of ethics and profess commitment to competence, integrity and morality, altruism and the promotion of the public good within their expert domain. Professionals are accountable to those they serve and to society.[1][2]
> *1: Evetts, J., 'Sociological Analysis of Professionalism: Past, Present and Future', Comparative Sociology 10, 2011*
> *2: Freidson, E., 'Professionalism: The Third Logic', Polity Press, London, 2001*
> https://professions.org.au/what-is-a-professional/

Many medical papers on professionalism, while recognising the importance of abiding by codes of ethics and developing competence, focus on professional practitioners developing their understanding and practice in terms of their embodied meaning of values of human flourishing; values such as integrity, altruism and 'the public good'.

Language creates as well as describes a reality by evoking 'deep frames' as illustrated by Lakoff (2004). Biesta (2014) draws attention to the consequence of 'learning' often being used in place of 'education'. Interestingly professional 'learning' is often being used with, or in place of, professional 'development' in papers published or presented at conferences (see for example recent conferences of The British Educational Research Association, The American Educational Research Association, The International Professional Development Association, The International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and The Association for Teacher Education in Europe and issues of their journals).

Similarly the word 'education' is used as though synonymous with 'training' or 'instruction'. For example, the English Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) has as its strap line, "raising standards improving lives". What they mean by that is they will ensure the young are prepared for employment, as can be seen in the Ofsted strategy 2022–27 document (Ofsted, 20 22, p.7) "We will… "assess all colleges on how well they are meeting the skills needs of the economy within the next four years". The lack of clarity as to what the purpose of 'education' is common. For example, in The Incheon Declaration i) the notion of what constitutes 'education' is confused and slips into preparing workers to serve employers (as does the Ofsted document referred to above), and ii) it is unclear as to the meaning of lovely rhetoric such as, 'transforms lives in the world', or "inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (point 5 - p. 7) etc. Notice reference to lifelong *learning* opportunities rather than lifelong *educational* opportunities.

I am not saying that providing instruction and training to enable people to efficiently learn skills and acquire knowledge that will enable them to earn a living is wrong. If humans produce nothing they are neither good for themselves or anyone else. We are also social animals and are part of complex relationally dynamic and multidimensional ecologies. What we individually and collectively produce (whether that is an artefact, an idea, a way of living etc) must benefit our self, others and the planet or we will all literally die in the future if not now. So, 'education' comprises more than the effective and efficient transmission of skills, knowledge, culture etc. As White (2007) says, a curriculum (a programme of study) should be aims-led with the touchstone provided by the 'why' – the purpose to be served. He illustrates by answering his question, 'What are schools for?' I go further to say that we each have a responsibility for creating our own life-long and life-wide curricula. I believe we have a responsibility for developing our own touchstones from our evolving understanding of the meaning and purpose we give to what we do, which includes criteria by which we hold ourselves to account as professional practitioners.

In the 'academic' world the phrase '*education* research' is often used as though it is synonymous with '*educational* research' with a similar effect of changing reality from a focus on the units of appraisal, logics and standards of judgement related to research into values-led practice that comprise the Discipline of Education to those related to research in the Disciplines of Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, History associated with creating knowledge in the fields of management, politics etc. The common point between education, professionalism and *educational* research is that they are all concerned with individuals, collectives learning (i.e. changing) with values of human flourishing; learning to live humanely satisfying, productive worthwhile lives, helping others do so too, and contributing to Humanity flourishing as a benign presence in the world. Perhaps it would be helpful to use the phrase 'continual professional *educational* development' to distinguish the programme through which a professional practitioner continually realises their responsibilities to hold themselves to account for their practice by researching it to understand and improve it and generate valid, values-based accounts of their explanations for their educational influence in the learning of the social formation, which is the context of the practice, to realise its raisons d'être with values of human flourishing, in the learning of those who comprise it and in their own learning to realise their responsibilities as professional practitioners (indicated above).

The data presented and analysed illustrates how educators living and working in diverse cultural contexts and fields of practice can, and do, contribute to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing and realise their responsibilities as professional practitioners by engaging in Living Educational Theory Research continually. Their accounts contribute to generating an epistemology for educational research to bring into being a world where individuals, collectives and Humanity flourish as a benign presence in the world

Conclusion

The key issues addressed have been those arising from asking and trying to formulate a coherent answer to the question, 'how does my paper contribute to generating an epistemology for educational research?' The main insights created have come from my

reflexive and reflective thinking, revisiting past, present and future, and exploring that complex foggy worlds 'where there be (Eastern and Western) dragons'. The implications for my professional development is for me to use what I have gleaned to improve my practice with the hope that in doing so I might help "to ensure that education truly transforms lives in the world" (Education 2030 Incheon Declaration, p.70). In practical terms that means going on to draw on this paper to create a submission to a peer reviewed journal to publically test the validity of my claims and contribute a global educational knowledgebase. It also has implications for my learning to improve the Living Educational Theory Research workshops I am involved in, the support I can offer to those engaged in their own and others' continual professional educational development, and my practice as 'editor' of the Educational Journal of Living Theories (ejolts.net).

Whether presenting this paper, as part of the symposium, has any other use value will only be known by what members of the audience subsequently do and share. I hope that they might explore the implications of Living Educational Theory Research to improve their contribution to the development of education, research and pedagogical practices with values of human flourishing – or at least feel curious enough to find out more by visiting https://actionresearch.net/, the website of Jack Whitehead (the progenitor of Living Educational Theory Research) and https://ejolts.net/, the website of the Educational Journal of Living Theories where there is a large freely accessible archive of papers created by values-driven practitioners.

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