What is the Potential Educational Influence of the Educational Journal of Living Theories (EJOLTs)? Explorations in Methodology and Theory

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Abstract

This paper focuses on my experience as anonymous and open reviewer for the journal EJOLTs to illuminate important research processes. Setting myself in context, I select an investigative (rather than descriptive) approach which I call my 'archaeology of personal knowledge' underpinning my values, a metaphor allowing a selective stripping back of features of interest to bedrock. This paper explores issues around methodology in living-educational-theory articles within the broad field of Living Educational Theory (LET) research. It links LET research with broader qualitative research fields from which individual living-educational-theory research projects can be constructed. These 'cousin' fields include Phenomenology, Experiential Reflection, Action Research, Critical Pedagogy, (Auto)Ethnography, and evaluation. The paper explores how theorising can link to Psychology, Sociology, Critical Theory, Experiential Learning, and Dialogic Pedagogy whilst still allowing valid evidence from unique circumstances to speak for itself. The discussion is designed to be helpful to authors of EJOLTs' papers for planning their study and theorising. Four short vignettes illustrate issues of research practice from my experience. A major conclusion is that care with methodology and theorising is essential for general acceptance of Living Educational Theory Research as it grows and develops globally.

Keywords: Living Educational Theory, Qualitative Research Methodology, Experiential Learning, Critical Theory and Pedagogy, Dialogue.

Introduction

Living Educational Theory (LET) research reflects on motivational relationships based on positive attitudes and values. An individual study is termed (lower case) living-educational-theory (l-e-t). The *Educational Journal of Living Theories* (EJOLTs) provides a home for such papers. The purpose of my paper is to explore the potential of this approach, in particular methodology and theorising, from the perspective of being an anonymous and open reviewer for EJOLTs. The papers of Williamson and Whitehead (2021) and Glenn (2021) as well as the Foreword in this Special Issue spell out the detail of the processes involved.

Key Living Educational Theory Research concepts such as 'improvement', 'experience' and 'dialogue' are scrutinized since simplistic assumptions are unlikely to produce persuasive conclusions. I make these points problematic in all humility. My writing colleagues have completed living-educational-theory PhDs and EJOLTs articles which I have not, and they have a group identity and language that I am just beginning to share. I hope that some elements of l-e-t occur in my text. I am writing a separate l-e-t project to further inform my understanding (see Vignette 4).

Reviewing a paper seeks to uncover valid methodology and clearly articulated theorising: that is, how can *evidence* and *argument* be persuasive to outsiders. LET research prioritises the '*I*' position, reflecting on oneself and one's performance, in dialogue with one's self, interviewing oneself about oneself as it were, in dialogue with others. Bagnoli (2007:51) concluded:

> Our first-person authority is vulnerable to Others exactly because they are *not* mere bystanders. They are our interlocutors. Relating to oneself authoritatively is a form of achievement that consists in healthy relations with others.

Delusion and self justification are dangers, so validity issues are important, and a validation group is helpful to question the author. Theory comes from explanations and abstractions that illuminate. As the argument comes from a unique person (the researcher) in unique circumstances, it does not simplistically apply generic theories, though these may inform the questions asked. I engage below in such dialogue with myself, assisted by at least 10 others, in writing and in person.

The EJOLTs review process is dialogic, offering discussion rather than high handed criticism – which is itself educational. EJOLTs has the ethical aim of communal guidance (Glenn, 2021, this issue, Griffin and Delong, 2021, this issue) which is not true of many journals. Sound methodology enables readers to have confidence in claims made. Theorising explains the author's argument and grounds the conclusions. All research leads to theorising, as PhD assessment criteria make clear. I explore how LET research can strengthen its credentials as an emerging qualitative field. Every researcher, author and reviewer is on a journey, reflecting on their life experiences and deepening understanding. In the case of Gumede (2020), I felt as reviewer that discrimination under apartheid was so important a topic that extra help was appropriate as the author was operating under logistical difficulties in South Africa. Transformative research is political, with a 'moral alchemy' (Magid and Schulz 2017).

Hatred, greed, selfishness and indifference are also personal and communal values. Values, whether pro-social or anti-social have roots in nurture, education and day-to-day attitudes.

My Own Values Journey: An Archaeology of Personal Knowledge

EJOLTs' authors locate themselves in their research's context with autobiographical content which carries also into their research report. Reflecting on one's own life journey can be unsettling and to be focused requires its own methodology. Michel Foucault's 'archaeology of knowledge' (1969/2012) suggests to me that an *archaeology of personal knowledge* can help to uncover our journey towards self understanding. Archaeology takes an overview, identifies where to dig, and forensically evaluates the finds. It does not draw conclusions but is continuous. Just as knowledge is not fixed, nor is personal knowledge (attitudes and values). Both are part of a longer journey. Polanyi's (1958) discussion of personal knowledge in science research lies at the bedrock of Living Educational Theory (LET) Research, through Whitehead's (1989:46) hermeneutic:

> ... In grounding my epistemology in personal knowledge, I am conscious that I have taken a decision to understand the world from my own point of view, as a person claiming originality and exercising his personal judgement responsibly with universal intent ...

Of course, that understanding is discussed and validated *with others*, so it is *co-constructed knowledge.* The purpose was to free research from a false objectivity, making it personally meaningful and emancipatory.

I examine how my various life experiences impacted on my values and understanding. The child me was a challenger, sceptic and free spirit. Always with books around, I remember the king dying, and age 4 disposed of Santa Claus to the annoyance of local parents. As a teenager I looked after two siblings, 7 and 11 years younger, also a house and garden before going to university. I was brought up in a controlling evangelical sect, an upbringing devoid of morality and compassion, a patriarchy repressing women. These memories are frequently reviewed in my family: even my mother regretted not escaping sooner, finding her village church more welcoming. One man abused just-teen girls, another publically declared me an unbeliever for asking too many questions. I was 17. My critical question was about women's rights. The other men stood by him against me, a life lesson teaching me to resist. My issue was a feminist one, against their patriarchy.

I struggled socially at school as I tried to sort out these issues. It was rule by cane and some teachers were abusive to me, physically and psychologically. My mid-school years were challenging and I was not expected to do well or to get into university, but I caught up without them noticing, in the end helped by a correspondence course as I needed to pass A level Religious Studies (a two year course) in eight months. The roots of my own morality came from many people, my parents who brought me up to be honest and kind, and from others, still remembered

and respected; and by learning to resist. As an experiential learner, learning came from relationships, investigations, enthusiasms and not-inconsiderable reading. Raval (2021, this issue) explains this as heutagogy (learning by oneself). Getting a First and PhD by the age of 25 at Manchester University therefore gave me great satisfaction.

I left Christianity gradually and now root my life in human rights and posthumanism (affirming compassion for all species, Braidotti, 2013), influenced by philosophical Buddhism and Bahá'í values though I am neither Buddhist nor Bahá'í. This life choice lanced the boil of living contradiction (generally then called 'doubt' but I think of as rejecting external control). Professionally, my belief in cooperation rather than competitive conflict and control was often not appreciated, especially by men. My personal and professional morality is rooted in partnership, fairness, cooperation, honesty, curiosity, accuracy and criticality in handling evidence. Feminism, equal opportunities, anti-racism, multicultural education and world religions dominated my teaching, research and social life. These build on empathy, compassion and concern for other people's concerns and experiences. We have to choose between being a giver or taker. I chose to be a giver, a contributor to society, perhaps to belittle the blind belief and obedience once demanded of me.

My PhD submitted in 1974 was a historical/anthropological study of women's experience of marriage in the ancient near east (social history essentially). My first published article age 23 criticised the evangelical prejudice against women. I was never compliant to authority but an intellectual rebel, and made enemies. Feminist Bible interpretation had hardly begun in 1974 but is now a major field which I follow. Feminism espouses values of equity unflinchingly, and is deliberately not neutral. Opportunities for women are greater now years ago, but equity has still not been achieved. Social justice for all is my non-negotiable 'theory of living' constantly reaffirmed. It is cradle to grave. A number of critical friends beyond my family have shared conversations: criticality and friendship are important, and conversations may not be comfortable.

My wife and I married as undergraduates, 52 years ago. With no children, before in vitro fertilisation, and when adoption had become difficult, we each developed meaningful careers, both suffering from dysfunctional managers interested only in power. From a long term medical condition, my wife now has brain damage and paralysis, with no language to explain her needs or feelings, totally reliant on me at home for everything. Adapting to this is part of my journey.

Employment led me from secondary school teacher into primary teacher training where I also studied early year's education. I gradually taught qualitative research with Master's students and 20 PhD graduates, encouraging students to plan and evaluate their data and arguments persuasively. My PhD graduates covered a wide spectrum of topics – early years, junior, secondary, further education, University, gifted, special needs, leadership, police training, and street children in India. These were all topics other staff could not and would not pick up. I advised on methodology and theory and learnt the content with the student. I focussed on validity and experiential theorising based on qualitative evidence. Qualitative research values words rather than statistics and brings together professionals to discuss problems and

progress, promoting dialogue and authenticity. Such dialogue is made empowering by appropriate questions to seek answers to. 'How can I improve my practice' (or even 'life') is activity focused, 'how can I be kinder?' is relationship focused.

These contribute to theories of living. Multicultural, multi-faith and antiracist education has been life-enhancing and -affirming. I taught world religions in the 1970s-1990s within the religious education curriculum using phenomenology (Cush, 2019). Moving to HE allowed me to study in depth, and meet other practitioners through conferences, committees and research. I became close friends with Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Buddhists and Bahá'ís , also visiting places of worship with students. I wrote introductions to world religions for the MTh course in 1990 (Bigger, online), and designed and taught Interfaith Studies. I co-wrote a volume on race, gender and disability (Ashcroft, Bigger and Coates, 1996) and co-edited a teacher's book on spiritual, moral, social and cultural education (Bigger and Brown, 1999).

This section gives an account of why I am who I am. Developing Foucault's metaphor of archaeology has helped give it depth and coherence and offer a model for LET researchers. I have used it in my l-e-t paper in process, and find it a powerful tool to root the discussion. Interlocking with my story are others with their own potential archaeology who have accompanied me on the road through dialogue. Three, Monawar, Sean and Fozia, are introduced in vignettes below with their own archaeologies. The fourth is my own evaluation work, being developed as a future paper.

Living Educational Theory within Qualitative Research

LET research shares common ground with other qualitative research approaches, each with different histories and expectations. Qualitative methodologies are not competitors but methodological 'cousins' with helpful ideas for LET research, LET bringing a unique focus through its concern for personal and professional improvement. Cresswell (2007) offers summaries of each field which Whitehead (2018: 159-168, also 1919) compared to LET research, so I can be selective.

My personal account above draws on **phenomenology** as used in psychology (Moustakas, 1994), a therapeutic dialogue as a conversation of equals by eliminating ('bracketing out') power positions. The term for this is *epoche* (pronounced e-po-kay). Its best known practitioner was Carl Rogers (1967) who validated as 'real' the patient's experience, using a guided in-depth process of clarification through dialogue. Such a patient dialogue has value to LET research, non-confrontational dialogues with others over time to clarify and challenge. 'Bracketing out' in an interior interview, of myself, by myself, requires putting aside self-justification by being open to challenge by others.

Monowar's story illustrates learning from life. His story overlaps with mine, as the following reveals.

Vignette 1. Monowar

This example draws on reflective lives. Monowar was a dad who came to an evening meeting I ran around 1995 to encourage Asian pupils to go to university. We talked and he joined BA on which I taught him Interfaith Studies. He progressed to Imam training, became a hospital chaplain, local politician and now High Sheriff. We kept in touch over the years. He wrote recently:

> Dear Stephen, I'm well, thank you. It's been a very difficult year, in terms of hospital chaplaincy but also personally with a number of dear ones who've passed away due to the pandemic. I'm very sorry to hear of Jean being so poorly. I will hold you both in my thoughts and prayers. I have many fond memories and had it not been for you reaching out via your presentation at the Asian Cultural Centre, I would never have had such an opportunity to advance academically. I am where I am because of so many kind, generous and decent human beings, like you. I have always felt it important to remember as many people as one can who've been on the journey with me. Monawar.

A number of school pupils also became university graduates as we hoped.

Action Research (AR) has been central to LET research (McNiff et al, 1992, Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). Carr and Kemmis (1986) described AR as needing to be 'critical', having a social and political agenda which is a given (p.152). Elliott (1991, 2005) applauds local AR and political (critical) AR which emancipates people from oppression. The following vignette of Sean, my PhD graduate, shows how a long AR gradually became articulated as l-e-t. His account combines AR with Critical Pedagogy, problematizing school practices as oppressive.

Vignette 2. Sean

Sean conducted a three year school AR. As authoritarian head of discipline he became dissatisfied that being tough contradicted his values of positive learning relationships. He changed his practice in the classroom, and then trained other teachers. He and I turned his thesis into the book *Living Contradiction* (Warren and Bigger, 2017), a consequence of his exploration of personal values. The subtitle *A teacher's examination of tension and disruption in schools, in classrooms and in self* explains how changing himself meant putting aside assumptions based on his own schooling, and reflecting instead on how to help pupils to develop mature relationships and critical questioning. This was his l-e-t. He aimed for teacher-pupil relationships based on mutual respect rather than conflict. Discipline starts with self-discipline (in both pupils and teachers) fed by mutual respect. Sean kept a research blog visible only to him and me which related his daily progress and enabled us both to discuss incidents and possibilities.

His well articulated archaeology of personal knowledge, persistence in teaching and learning principles, and resistance to assumptions of power grounds his theorising, makes it also an example of anti-authoritarian critical pedagogy, and therefore political.

Autoethnography is a reflective study of my life by me, supported by others who know me. It reflects on what motivates me, my experiences, my values (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013). Denzin's *Interpretative Biography* (1989), exploring life stories, became *Interpretative Autoethnography* in 2013. Autobiography writes (or hides) life events *as remembered*. Ethnography expects observations and interviews. Auto-ethnography places the researcher within the action, asking and explaining. As in LET research, the 'I' perspective is central. There are rigorous expectations of recording the knowledge gained. Autoethnography is rich in psychological and socio-political discussion. Reed-Danahay (1997) used her subtitle 'Rewriting the Self and the Social' for edited papers. Her contributors follow the stories of researchers through the filters of postcolonialism and feminism, For example the final chapter (by Brettell) used life history, biography, autobiography and auto-ethnography to illuminate women's lives. 'Rewriting the self' encourages reflection and forward planning into what needs to be improved.

Whitehead (2018:166-167) identifies strongly with autoethnography, especially citing Ellis and Bochner's description of "concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality and self-consciousness" featuring in a rich context and revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language. Citing this he felt that his 1999 doctorate:

> …can be seen, in the above sense, as an autoethnographic text. It is also a Living Educational Theory autoethnography in the sense that the relational and institutional stories are presented within an explanation of my educational influence in my own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations that influence my practice and understandings.

The same is true for Fozia, my PhD graduate, detailed in this next vignette researching the lives of former pupils, and also her own.

Vignette 3. Fozia

Fozia, my MEd and PhD graduate, was raised and educated in Pakistan, coming to England when she married. She studied the lives of Pakistani Muslim women in the 2000s, mostly her former pupils. She had been a teacher assistant supporting mother tongue, later a mainstream teacher of Urdu and English, and finally a head-teacher. Her PhD reflected on her three decades of teaching, and her values.   She used social media to find 86 former female pupils to hear about their education and employment experiences. The two hour interviews also discussed their home lives and marriages. Her study was autoethnographic, exploring her own 'I position' and memories, triggered also by the memories and opinions of the participants.

Female perspectives in this demographic are under-researched since outsiders, especially males, are not given access. The data was rich, dynamic and dialogic. The process encouraged reflection on a working life, as respondents remembered their lives and schooling Issues of social justice, feminism, patriarchy, faith, equal opportunity, relationships, morality and culture all jostled together as these women,

including the researcher, negotiated their lives and selves. The personal relationships developed do not stop.

The 'how can I improve' question examined her teaching career and to her role in the community. Her interviews encouraged her former pupils to ask this question of themselves, examining their schooling and its consequences in life and for the choices to be made for their children. By extension the question asked how schools should improve their practice, and how Pakistani families can improve their family relationships.

Illuminative Evaluation (Parlett and Hamilton, 1972) moved evaluations away from tick lists to a nuanced discussion through observations and interviews concerned with systems and processes. Similarly a l-e-t study seeks evidence for process and systematic assumptions. Based on an evaluation I completed in 2008, I am submitting an l-e-t of this in a separate paper.

Vignette 4. Me

My evaluation programme took place during the first decade of this century. I evaluated the Swindon Youth Empowerment Programme by being embedded in the process, interviewing all participants, and discussing explanations of why the programme motivated the pupils. A 'Tranquillity Zone' (story visualisation) and 'Discovery Zone' (a range of coaching and motivational activities) provided experiential learning within relationships securely built up (Bartlett, 2014). Many pupils turned their lives around quickly. The education about life came out of dialogue which elicited positive values (called 'gems') and strategies to resist anti-social actions.

General Methodological Issues

Qualitative research with a focus on experiences, my 'I' in dialogue with other people's 'I', requires honesty, openness, clarity and intelligent questioning. Dialogic interviews are two way conversations with open-ended questioning and not a verbalised questionnaire. The issue to be discussed needs to be identified and an agenda formed, like a semi-structured schedule. A form of recording is needed. It is worth noting that people respond differently in recording methods, some orally, some in writing and some preferring one to one. In a submission it is helpful to make working practices clear. Analysis requires a range of voices: Brookfield (2017) calls them 'lenses'. Each voice will have opinions based on their views and experiences which researchers collect, interact with, and respect. How these voices come together should be visible, showing that the story has been checked and enriched including evidence of disagreements.

A positivist scientist may find the interpretations and ambiguities in qualitative research a difficult transition but even in the lab the researcher chooses problems to solve, makes choices, rejects suspicious results, and computes conclusions. What is presented as evidence may be suspect (Polanyi, 1958, 1967). All researchers have presuppositions and opinions which will need exploring and perhaps challenging.

Doing this in dialogue discourages assumptions and empire building. Thomas Kuhn (1962), following Polanyi, well described the conservatism of scientific paradigms.

Assessing LET research looks for improvements in performance and relationships, in a particular setting and to life generally. Deciding on shared values is not easy. There are dominant voices unwilling to give way, internal politics supporting one faction against another. Votes to favour one faction against another do not result in partnership. LET research is different. Dominant speakers need to bring out and listen to quieter ones: LET partnerships need to leave all participants wiser, stronger and empowered.

Sound research investigates a real issue, is believable in real life, and is honestly planned, documented and completed. The evidence we gather has to be honest, accurate, relevant, and broadly meaningful. There has to be clear and lucid argument. The reader should be able to relate its findings to the life they know (Bassey, 1998). We are not claiming to have incontrovertibly proved a point, rather to have illuminated it. Claims of proof are unhelpful in qualitative research. Nevertheless others need to find conclusions relatable to their different circumstances.

Theorising for EJOLTS Research Projects

Politics and Critical Theory (CT)

Theory comes from explanations of action stimulated by the author challenging, interrogating and disrupting (attacking hegemonic thinking and abuse of power). Two exponents of CT, Habermas (1974) and Marcuse (1970), are referred to elsewhere in this issue as significant to validity. My former colleague Alan How (2003) critiqued the field helpfully, but left more questions than answers. CT embraces human emancipation leading to social progress. The process of change requires a discussion of values and issues. CT is not an imposed theory but an ethical agenda applied to a wide range of fields which exist to support a value position, such as social justice, anti-racism or feminism. It asks socially critical questions about power, politics, the economy, history, and land ownership. For LET research it emphasises political agendas rejecting abuse of power, injustice and discrimination. Questioning, challenging, interrogating and disrupting are political with small 'p', exposing issues of structural discrimination, power discrepancy, bullying, poverty and social deprivation. They provide preliminary questions about social justice in the heart, the mind and the community. Social justice is surprisingly controversial; callous politicians are often elected.

The term 'critical' when attached to feminism and antiracism oppose inappropriate power, discrimination and oppression in the area of study. Black Lives Matter changed minds, but met a backlash, white supremacy. Living Educational Theory (LET) research challenges systemic discrimination, dominant narratives, and privilege. The Schostaks call this political edge "radical research ... to make a difference", to empower whilst challenging power, and to enrich each other (John and Jill Schostak, 2008). Challenging people and systems in power, and the assumptions they take for granted is equally appropriate for LET research. Things are not always as

they seem to be. The dominant discourse may be accepted by all but need not be true. Gramsci (1971) called this 'hegemony', when the powerful set the agenda. There are powerful hegemonies in both society and education which need scrutiny.

Critical Pedagogy, pedagogy which counters oppression and encourages emancipation, draws from Paulo Freire's literacy pedagogy which raised political consciousness amongst 'oppressed' poor Brazilians: it has been widely applied to many other circumstances of oppression (Darder, Baltodano and Torres, 2009; Giroux, 2020; Pirbhai-Illich, Pete and Martin 2017). It demands that the curriculum addresses social and political inequity, and helps to fit learners with the skills and understandings to tackle the underlying causes of inequality. Searching out socially unhelpful assumptions could be part of our discussion in LET research, offering a critique of relationship, power (and powerlessness). A related field addresses the inequity experienced by indigenous populations (Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith, 2008). Patel (2016) looked beyond social justice to 'answerability' as part of growing work on decolonialism. Global LET research needs to come to terms with the effects of colonisation, especially 'white supremacy', for which colonisers are 'answerable'.

CT aims towards emancipation in utopian ways – that is, to work towards a better world combining imagination with intellectual rigour. LET research is also idealistic and utopian – that is not something we should shy away from. Rossatto (2005) called Freire's pedagogy 'transformative optimism'.

Dialogue

I have spoken about qualitative research taking account of diversity of voices in dialogue. That is not as easy as it sounds. My experience of teams has been that there can be domineering voices and silenced voices, even where there is an overt policy of consensus. A team ideally will have developed strategies of equity. A discussion of a professional context needs to address workplace politics, which may involve issues of racism, sexism, disability and so on. This of course will be nuanced, but still investigated. A discussion group needs to ensure that all involved are listened to, and so too focus groups. The researcher/leader should get a clear idea of where tensions and disagreements lie, and where silent voices are.

Dialogic pedagogy is rooted in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (Renfrew, 2014) who developed his critique of literature into a critique of life and society. Life he argued is a dialogue, with statements and answers in an unending sequence, a clamour of multiple voices. Nothing is finalised, but just raises a new set of questions. These can be provocative ('provocations') to encourage challenging discussions. From this comes 'answerability', a political process of action to reverse inequities revealed. In LET research, the dialogic process when articulated enriches positive action. Dialogue is internalised within the self when we argue with ourselves about choices and values. We use our reading and conversations ('voices') to clarify our thoughts. Regrets may suggest something we feel 'answerable' for.

In **Dialogic Self Theory** (Hermans and Gieser, 2012) what we refer to as 'self' is a mental construction based on constant internal dialogue. In other words, there is

nothing static in our thinking about ourselves but ideas flow and change, influenced by conversations with others, by what we read and by what we observe and do in a professional situation. Dialogue, according to this view, is a continuous reviewing of what came before, never resolved. Our personal opinions come from our past, and evolve as we discuss and read, to be constantly provoked to provide new answers. Our concept of 'self' is never stable. The EJOLTs process when encouraging dialogue, done with respect and over time, should not expect easy and short term answers.

Values

LET research gives great store to values, and EJOLTs authors declare their values. However, values are troublesome. They are content free – we could have selfish values, seeking money, fame, power, influence or honours, people who use others and spit them out. Some have other-centred values, people dedicated to compassion and social justice. Our own values need articulating. My metaphor of 'archaeology' encourages serious investigation, which requires guidance. Values lead to actions and we may only see the values through these actions. Unconscious truth-beliefs, social, religious and political, may produce values we are not even aware of. We may presume that these unconscious thoughts and beliefs are true, when really they need to be challenged and interrogated with methodological scepticism – subjected to critical archaeology. Unconscious thoughts/attitudes/beliefs can be refined, but only if the unconscious is made conscious. Vignette 4 above described a process whereby pupils seriously consider the difficulties of converting their ambitions of goodness into action.

Social justice

That my own values prioritise social justice has permeated this paper and its implications are pertinent to equitable investigation of educational workplaces and processes. I was faced with injustices in school, church and university, and have encountered a degree of inequitable practice from various senior managements as my own leadership style opposed authoritarianism. This of course was nothing compared to the everyday experiences of people of colour, women, the disabled, mental health sufferers and those in poverty worldwide. Leadership ethics and equity are valid issues for workplace evaluation. Some practices have improved, some not. There is still work to do.

Glenn (2020, p. 27- 8) highlighted my marginal comment on her paper:

> Never before has social justice become more problematic, rejected by enough people to vote the uncaring into power. Social justice includes discussion of the causes of poverty, the massive gap between rich and poor, south and north, first world and third world.

Glenn comments:

> Bigger's comments inspired me to peer outside of the limited world of my practice and to look outwards to the injustices that permeate society globally. These comments influenced me to write what I believe was a better and more critically reflective paper.

This dialogue enhanced breadth, depth and relatability. LET research will encounter prejudices of poverty, race, gender, disability, sexuality, and ageism. The researcher needs to develop understandings and practices that both see and overcome biases. Prejudice may be explicit or implicit, institutional or personal, structural or attitudinal. The researcher needs sensitising to dangers and issues. In my own case, study of social justice was a matter of friendships, relationships, action and experience and not book learning, though that came later. LET research requires sincere projects, making lasting supportive friendships: research participants have expectations of continuing friendship, not to be used and dropped when the research is over.

'Living' in LET research

'Living' Theory points us to a theory of life and living, as noted in Jack Whitehead's 2018 title *Living Theory Research as a Way of Life*. Researchers' personal understanding lies beneath the articulation of the research, helpfully or unhelpfully. Crucial in LET research, 'living' suggests a concern for present ongoing process, a reflection on real-life experience past and present. If I view my life as moral, compassionate, generous, pro-social, helpful, honest and open, this will impact on my whole life, not just my professional work. When there is conflict, we feel 'living contradiction'. Reflecting on past and present practice and understanding has a history – David Kolb (1975, experiential learning), Argyris and Schön (1978, single and double loop learning) within the pragmatic experiential paradigm developed by John Dewey (1973/1981, 1998). There is an emphasis on reflecting *together* rather than in isolation, which applies to LET research also. 'Living' contrasts with 'dead', so having current relevance and being life-affirming. Important too is that the quality of *collective* life is theorised, supporting communities and individuals. My own academic field of Near Eastern Studies has moved from 'dead' history to living hermenteutics across the fifty years I have been involved with it (Bigger, 1989). 'Living' implies reflecting one's inner life, *educating the heart, mind, body and spirit* (Archibald, 2008), a helpful pointer to theorising which might include political analysis (reflection on social background and policy) and psychological analysis (how the politics affected people).

Improvement: From personal to political

'To improve my practice' is at the heart of LET research, including when 'my practice' widens to 'my life and community'. Improvement will be interpreted differently in various contexts so disagreements are inevitable. In educational policy, it may mean the victory of one ideology by defeating another. The claim for improvement needs its own archaeology and justification, taking into account motivations and arguments which take a contrary view. 'Improvements' requires definition – improvements in pedagogy, in resources, in assessment, in relationships perhaps. Improvement as a concept will differ between people and groups, some focusing on exam results, others on well-being and relationships. Which side the researcher is on engages with political discussion, and ethical defence. They involve contrasting visions of education, formal learning (school and beyond) and society. Improvements ideally involve personal pro-social, life affirming values.

One example is 'Decolonialism'. Power provides one of the most significant socio-political dysfunctions in social and political institutions, leading to oppression, violence and war. Paulo Freire's work in Brazil led him to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, helping people to be literate and politicised. Indigenous empowerment recognised how European colonisation affected the assumptions of victims and perpetrators, cementing racism and white supremacy into our social and political discourse. Much of the new literature encourages the colonised to think differently, to decolonise the mind (Wa Thiong'o Ngugi, 2009). Archibald (2008), Archibald *et al*, 2019) on first nation storytelling highlighted seven principles of *respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness* and *synergy*. That is, a community comes together when these are present. Her title is instructive: '*educating the heart, mind and body and spirit*'. Once we free ourselves from inappropriate power, then empathy, compassion, morality and action result. This focus on diversity, inclusion, justice, mental health and ethics can guide our search for 'improvement'. The valuable *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith, 2008) demonstrates methodological creativity and hybridity. Learning from that, the global reach of LET research, the themes of power, transformation, politics, radical social change, and (de)colonialism empower and enrich discussion.

Motivating Learning

There are often savage disagreements today contrasting teaching *content* with teaching *children*. Of course teachers generally balance both: teaching is not content free (Kidd, 2020). Schools pass on what we consider to be knowledge, but need also to guide pupils to critique it. This is something I have worked towards for decades and seems particularly   relevant today, when untrustworthy information can be downloaded uncritically from the internet. 'Content' (knowledge) needs to provide opportunities for questioning and discussion if intellectual development is to continue. This results in children having a more thoughtful relationship with knowledge, checking, experimenting, describing and expressing. This brings knowledge to life, interesting, motivating but also mysterious. Otherwise it is dead 'stuff' to be memorised unchecked. Our current fake news era makes scrutiny of information a very relevant skill. Pupils need to see through scams and conspiracy theories.

LET research stands for partnership, with teachers and students combining to generate and scrutinize knowledge. Learning is a complex process, not an act of memory. This is not to say that memorising is irrelevant: times tables provide short cuts; memorising lines for drama is necessary. 2020-1 school lockdowns caused national hand wringing about pupils damaging their life chances and needing to 'catch up'. Schooling and life-chances are not in easy conjunction. Privileged schools offer (inequitable) life-chances. A year without formal schooling has possibilities for child initiated activities - exploration, reading, research, talking about the past, story writing, drama, drawing, measuring, modelling with plenty of time for joint projects between children and adults. Alas, in 2021 there are also demotivating forces at work, a constrained lifeless curriculum, too much assessment, and sometimes a non-friendly school atmosphere. With home schooling, the strangeness of the current school curriculum has been seriously exposed.

LET research can be playful. The group can share photographs and memories, write stories of incidents, role play relationships, draw and paint. It is part of a journey, an exploration of self and others so an ethical process rooted in mutual respect. Everyone involved will have their own deeply meaningful stories, sometimes of goodness, sometimes of assault. Qualitative methods do not provide yes-no answers but are rooted in conversation, dialogue, discussion, a back and forth which leads understanding forwards. We should not be afraid of ambiguities and uncertainties. The archaeology of the unconscious brings things to light which once controlled our thinking. Humans resist change, even to their own disadvantage. But in engaging with others in discussion, we open our hearts and minds to people we once thought of as Other. Our mindset changes as we enter into theirs.

Living Educational Theory: Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to strengthen articulation of methodology and theory to enable Living Educational Theory (LET) to gain wider acceptance. Methods available to us are broad, and can be creative. Although LET research often used Action Research (AR), other 'cousin' qualitative methodologies are also appropriate, with projects on phenomenology, experiential learning, AR, critical pedagogy, autoethnography and evaluation described above (vignettes 1-4).

To locate my experiences in the discussion, I have considered and explained how my own knowledge about myself developed using the metaphor of archaeology. I have applied this also more briefly to partner colleagues. Discussion naturally come from relationships often hard to record, but the editing of three books with colleagues on my claimed values (as well as discussions with PhD students) presents formal ways of eliciting such appropriate dialogue. Sean's fieldnotes blog began a dynamic record of research and thinking.

LET research prioritises reflection about potential 'improvement' here analysed and theorised. It can be life-changing and life-affirming (Whitehead, 2018), developing pro-social values which show us to be helpful contributors rather than wasteful consumers. LET research has moral, ethical and interpersonal implications – spiritual in the broadest sense of that word.

Using LET research, researchers identify an issue, undertake conceptual and values archaeology, and work through an action plan. Assiduous collection of conversations and observations facilitate a clear discussion and argument. Living-educational-theories will be small scale. Any claims made will illuminate rather than conclusively prove.

Theory comes from analysis and explanation. This also constitutes an archaeology of knowledge, both personal and conceptual. Socially critical theorising can guide l-e-t researchers to issues of equity, social justice, restorative practice, and democratic pedagogy.   All research develops theory. A PhD is judged by it. Theory however is not static but continually re-articulated. LET research theorises everyday learning structures, policies and practices, critiquing practice in terms of positive pro-social (life affirming) values which will have moral, social, political, psychological and

spiritual implications. Like feminism and anti-racism, LET research cannot be neutral, it has to promote life affirming energy against immense life-disabling social pressures.

Unique research sites cannot be replicated by others but conclusions can illuminate the work of others. Various papers in this issue refer to this as *relatability.* This paper emphasises what I say to authors to emphasise criticality. One replied (private communication):

> You reminded me that: "The trouble is that reflecting on life needs to have hard edges to be rigorous. I tend to look hard for criticality … i.e. evidence of theoretical underpinning)." That woke me up with a start.

I was surprised, but shouldn't have been, that my detailed advice in that early review is precisely paralleled in this current paper, the need to ask proper rigorous questions about one's own life experiences.

I conclude that LET research is a globally useful research method, ethical and pro-social, promoting compassion, respect and justice through self improvement. It supports living and working with equity and social justice, and this is proper and defensible. Unique researchers investigating unique circumstances cannot be replicated by others in other contexts, but can be relatable, contributing to a broader picture and inviting further discussion.

Endnote

This paper has been a significant learning experience for me, requiring me to think through various ways of articulating a living-educational-theory (l-e-t). My own l-e-t based around a three year evaluation vignette 4, above) could not be contained within this short paper and will be submitted later. I could not have written this paper convincingly without starting this l-e-t. Placing myself within my context forced me into a complex narrative of values development, a phenomenology which I gradually defined as an 'archaeology of personal knowledge', which also fitted the PhD theses of Sean and Fozia admirably and is also central to my own l-e-t in process. I hope also that my journey in this paper provides a sense of l-e-t, an explanation of the living contradictions of my life, and the ways I resolve them. The comments of the editors, the anonymous reviewer and peer reviewers have sharpened my text far beyond their comments, and helped to release me from the tyranny of earlier drafts. To them my thanks.

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