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## Educational Journal of Living Theories

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### Foreword

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Welcome to the June 2014 issue of EJOLTS, which includes four richly varied author voices, writing from South Africa, India, USA and UK, with young children in school and in vulnerable out-of-school settings, in higher education, and in teacher education. This issue also introduces two new regular features, a book review and review of living-theories theses and dissertations. The introduction starts with a brief summary of the individual voices found in this rich mix, and then explores what the shared systems and messages are which unite them as living-theories to which this journal gives its name. Jack Whitehead, (June 2nd 2014) in dialogue about the term “Living Theories,” wrote “I like the distinction between Living Educational Theory as a conceptual form of understanding that allows for a shared understanding in our use of concepts, and a living-educational-theory that refers to an individual's unique explanation for their educational influences in learning.” To unpack this explanation, I shall ask in this editorial: what are these shared understandings as they emerge from the papers in this issue? What are these unique explanations as offered by each author in this issue?

## **What are the unique explanations offered by our authors in this issue?**

### **Paul Rampaola Mokhele - *Exploring an extended role for legitimizing self-study action research projects: From examiners' perspectives.***

Paul Rampaola Mokhele, focuses on the way in which self-study reports were received and evaluated by four external assessors at MA and doctoral level at the Walter Sisulu University in South Africa. The author as doctoral research candidate and an MA researcher included self-study reports as part of the assessed work. The researchers participated in the assessment process by making clear to their assessors the criteria by which they wished the self-studies to be evaluated. Mokhele identifies six criteria, some of which may appear radical to the traditional MA and doctoral examiner. Criterion 1) is: "Candidates opinions and insights should take priority over other people's knowledge." Such a criterion radically reframes the self-study researcher's obligation to defer to others. Criterion 5) claims, "Few sources in literature review of self-studies cannot be viewed as a limited reading." This criterion questions the traditional meaning of scholarship, and the literature review as the place where scholarship is demonstrated. The four examiners in his research were able to enter into dialogue about these meanings and values, and to arrive at shared understandings with the researchers. What Mokhele highlights, however, is that this example of negotiation contrasts with the inflexibility of the research committees and conferment panels. The criteria they stood by included non-negotiable meanings for scholarship and omitted criteria essential to qualitative self-study, such as "critical reflection, critical friend, living-theory, trustworthiness, knowledge generation."

What the reader takes away from this paper is the importance of revealing values and resolving the sources of differences. This process of dialogue between assessors and the assessed highlights the importance of talking to 'the other' across and between different paradigms and approaches to learning. It also shows ways in which new forms of knowledge can be made meaningful to those who start from a different ideological base. The MA and doctoral students participated in the assessment process by making transparent the criteria they were prepared to be judged by and finding a language by which they as 'insiders' and assessors as 'outsiders' to the self-study process could understand one another.

### **Joy Mounter - *Improving Practice as a Head-Teacher Through Living Theory Research and Communicating Meanings of Embodied Values***

Joy Mounter describes the tensions she experiences as a primary school head teacher seeking to reconcile her values as an educator with the perceptions and values of others. Her paper offers us an 'ecology' of the working world of the UK school head, functioning in a world of policies, directives, audits and measures which are frequently at odds with core values. In addition, she describes a world of perpetual change, in which the future can never be quite predicted or prepared for "as technology races ahead faster than our imaginations." In this world of complex demands, she navigates her own path of guiding values, striving to equip the children in her school "to lead a life that is personally flourishing" and "help others to do so" (Reiss & White, 2013, p. 1). She arrives at a 'loving recognition' of her practice (Huxtable, 2012) recognising values which are central to her energy, such as the joy and passion for learning; and

others which surprise her such as the capacity for uncertainty. In clarifying these values, and the way they are evidenced in her practice, she has found a source of strength and stability in a climate of change, and a strategy for resisting 'conformity' and responding to it in a way that is congruent with her own notion of excellence.

### **Laurie A. Ramirez and Valerie A. Allison-Roan - *A collaborative retrospective analysis of becoming teacher educators***

Laurie Ramirez and Valerie Allison-Roan focus on their own transition as they move from teacher into junior teacher educator roles for the first time. Their paper offers two dimensions for the reader: firstly, it reveals to us what can be learnt through collaborative engagement with self-study, as the two researchers work together to 'revisit' journals tracking arrival and change in their new professional roles. Secondly, the paper illustrates the benefits of 're-analysis' of reflective journals and student feedback, after a period of time has elapsed. As the researchers 're-analyse,' they recognize the way that their view of past events has changed, issues have re-prioritised, and problems have been resolved. We see the pace and process of acclimatization to their new roles as past and present voices 'talk' to one another, set out side by side in conversation with one another. The researchers draw on 'how I am seen from the outside' and 'what I experienced on the inside' as rich data, and in so doing we are witness to the fluidity of interpretation, as time changes their view of past events, gives them deeper explanations, and helps them manage the present. Collaboration and 're-analysis' function powerfully together as forms of support in journeying from the familiar to the new. The authors illustrate the value of self-study and mutual support for improving practice, and making change positive and developmental.

### **Swaroop Rawal - *Making Magic.***

Swaroop Rawal's paper offers us a powerful insight into her influence as life skills mentor for social workers supporting vulnerable children in India. She defines her meaning of life skills as the capacity "to overcome adversity and become resilient," and tracks her learning through her own and student journal entries, photographs, and reports from her sponsoring organisation Save the Children. Her paper reverses the whole construct of training as a top-down process, in which the more experienced trainer controls the learning for the less experienced. She reveals a process of co-learning through drama and dialogue in which children/students/ tell their stories and take control, arriving at a climate of deep mutual trust. Rawal is able to create an optimal learning climate that empowers and inspires. By their own testimony the children describe how she has been able to reach them in a way that other adults have not. The 'deep structure' of her approach derives from Sanskrit drama, and here she reveals extraordinary links between Sanskrit drama and the principles of action research. Both offer positive messages of change and transformation. Sanskrit drama moves in a cycle from arambha - planting the seed, to halagama - realisation of success. Both the drama and the action research cycle confront obstacles and seek to resolve them through effort and action. Both, in turn, see as their goal wellbeing and transformation: the Sanskrit play ends with a prayer of wellbeing – bharatvakya; Living Theory and Action Research end with an improvement of practice in some way. We are thus doubly privileged in this paper; firstly to see in practice the

impact of truly transformative learning on the lives of children. We see the way in which this learning has been created, through teacher/trainer 'alongside' students, and a climate of mutual respect that gives dignity back to the learners. Secondly, Sanskrit drama offers us refreshed ways of explaining and tracking the stages of action research learning, and an extraordinary metaphor of hope powerfully illustrated by Rawal's own story.

**Thesis/Dissertation review: Jack Whitehead - Mark Potts. (2012) *How can I Reconceptualise International Educational Partnerships as a Form of 'Living Citizenship'?* PhD thesis, Bath Spa University, UK.**

Jack Whitehead explains his selection of this thesis as an answer to critics of the Living Theory approach, who write: "it seems incapable of addressing social issues --- as well as power and privilege in society" (Noffke, 1997, p. 329). Potts' dissertation amply contradicts this criticism. His thesis emerges from ten years of partnership activities in the black townships of Durban, South Africa. His work strongly connects the values of social justice with proactive fieldwork for social change. If any reader needs affirmation that practitioner research based on self-awareness and self-questioning has validity in the real world, this dissertation will provide an answer.

## **What are these shared understandings as they emerge from the papers in this issue?**

The papers, independently of one another, illustrate similar values, processes and ways of seeking evidence. Each author in this issue illustrates the centrality of 'self-study' as the starting point for making positive change. We are reminded by Joy Mounter in her citation of Ginott (1972, p. 15- 16): "I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather." Mokhele studied assessor feedback and his own way of legitimising self-study reports, alongside University documentation. Rawal studied her own practice through video records of her drama workshops with children, and their own testimonies. Mounter drew on photos which captured children's engagement and joy in their learning. Ramirez and Allison-Roan drew on reflective journals and revisited analyses of these, along with student feedback. Whilst the choice of data was specific to each author's own practice, each suggest a common belief: that study of one's own practice emerges from deep investigation of the self, drawn from any and every resource that might yield relevant information. In recognising this, new questions are opened by our authors: how can this process of self-report be measured and assessed, and according to what criteria? How can these new forms of knowledge be shown and explained? And how can we seek their legitimation by others who may not share a belief in their value? These are questions for the reader to explore in their own practice, with the inspiration of the authors in this issue who seek to answer them from their rich personal perspectives.

A second shared value is that self-study should lead to positive change and action. The authors express this core value using different language: "global influence;" practice-improvement (Mokhele); transformation (Rawal). The sphere of change might be perceived as starting locally, with one's own group of children or learners but has the potential to expand

exponentially in order to influence wider communities. Rawal offers us the metaphor of Sanskrit drama ending with a prayer of wellbeing and has mapped this beside her work with children who are given new hopes for their future as a result of her work with them. Mounter has sought resolution between her own values as a primary head and government policy; Ramirez and Allison-Roan have sought integration into their new workplace and shown us an approach to induction; Mokhele has sought appreciation of his core research approach by University committees and examiners. In each case, as with the Sanskrit play, the action research cycle ends with change, or hope for change.

A third shared value is that we as individuals connect with others, and change is driven, supported, and manifested through and with others. Ubuntu – “I am because you are” – lies implicitly or explicitly behind each of the testimonies in this issue. The authors each show us the value of learning from others through collaboration; in ‘alongside’ approaches to learning; through ‘seeing oneself from the outside’ from the feedback of others. Different language is used to describe these communities but each represent ways in which learning cannot happen in isolation: validation group; collaboration (Ramirez and Allison-Roan); love (Rawal). Noffke, in a stance of criticism, describes this as “collective agency” (Noffke, 1997, p. 329). Yet it is not only the supportive community that our authors are learning from and contributing to.

The papers show us how we might learn through the questions of others- what do others find interesting or puzzling? What do we learn about ourselves in articulating our views? How might it help us to reveal our values to those who do not share them? What opportunity can we find for negotiating a common ground so we do understand one another? Ramirez and Allison-Roan, for example show us how student feedback illuminated consistencies and contradictions between the stories they told themselves and perceptions of their students. Joy Mounter refers in her paper to the idea of ‘decentring’ as a process of ‘talking to the other.’ “Decentring is a vital idea. It is the achievement whereby I learn what it is that you need to hear or experience in order to share what is in my mind” (Quinn, 1997, p. 86). Whilst the authors each express this in different ways, each is learning from, and speaking to others inside and outside their own field of knowledge and belief, making their own values transparent and finding a common ground with others.

A fourth common thread is that each author is seeking a practice that is congruent with values in spite of constraints, external pressures and demands. All the authors in this issue describe challenges to their values and settings which are potentially threatening or undermining. They each, in varying ways, show us the ‘deep structures’ for resolving their ‘living contradictions’ – the principles which drive them, the ways they seek evidence for this, the support they value, and the possibilities for resolution.

## Why does it matter?

The articles in this journal are critically important for researchers and leaders of research, teachers and teacher educators. They address those who work with vulnerable children, assessors and those who manage assessment, school leaders and those who lead change for children. They provide insights for those making transitions between phases and stages of their work setting, and those supporting this change as mentor, line manager, co-

worker, supervisor. There can be few working roles which are not included in this list. But perhaps even more importantly than this, the articles are critically important for those who are seeking an approach to their own practice informed by a deep sense of one's unique contribution and its capacity to empower positive change. The authors in this journal issue offer us examples of these organic and unique research processes: how they formulate the first question that triggers investigation; how they gather data that is uniquely fitted to their setting to answer it; how they analyse the data in ways that have most meaning and application; how they use it to move forward. Apart from all else, these articles are a lesson in research into the living process of seeing oneself more fully, for the good of others.

What this journal issue illustrates abundantly is that we are generating not a monolithic Living Theory with top-down definitions of quality and a corporate set of concerns and approaches, but a climate of rich diversity in which individuals in multiple work settings formulate living theories for themselves. Moira Laidlaw describes this in the metaphor of music: "No voice subsumes another, all voices are equal, each voice is cogent, significant and different, yet each contributes to an overall harmony and dynamic that enables the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts." (Laidlaw, 2013, p. vii) The authors of these articles show us that these living-theories emerge organically from their own practice: that this emergence allows each of them to recognize the unique quality they bring to their work and the core values which drive them; and that such a recognition gives them the power and sustaining energy to change their working world for the better.

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