# Transformative potential of Living Educational Theory Research as Continuing Professional Development for Building Bridges and Making Connections in Education with the Hope of Contributing to the Creation of a Better world.

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## ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the transformative potential of Living Educational Theory Research as continuing professional development. We provide the evidence to justify the claim that this approach to continual professional development can build bridges and make connections in education with the hope of contributing to the creation of a better world. The bridges include connecting education policies from UNESCO to the values-laden, educational practices in the continuing professional development of educators and teacher-educators. They include establishing and sustaining relationships and co-operative activities with teachers and teacher-educators throughout the world in the generation of their living-educational-theories. These theories are legitimated and validated in universities throughout the world, including those in the Republic of Ireland and supported by the Network Educational Action Research Ireland.

## Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the transformative potential of Living Educational Theory Research as professional development. We provide the evidence to justify the claim that this approach can build bridges and make connections in education with the hope of contributing to the creation of a better world. The bridges include, connecting education policies from UNESCO (2016) and the EU (Dublin Declaration, 2022) to the values-laden, educational practices and the continual professional development of educators and teacher-educators. These connections include establishing and sustaining relationships and co-operative activities with teachers and teacher-educators throughout the world in the generation of living-educational-theories. These theories are legitimated and validated in universities throughout the world, including those in the Republic of Ireland and supported by the Network Educational Action Research Ireland. We have organised the paper in terms of:

1. Background and context
2. Research aims
3. Methodology, Methods and Data Collection
4. Data Analysis
5. Findings and discussion
6. Significance and conclusions

We understand the responsibilities of a professional-practitioner to include accepting responsibility for the values-laden consequences of one's own practice, and holding self to account with values of human flourishing, by researching to understand and improve it and contributing the validated, values-laden knowledge generated in the process to a global knowledgebase all can benefit from. Living Educational Theory Research is a form of professional-practitioner educational research. As such it provides an invaluable aspect of any professional-practitioners' continual professional development programme to realise their values-laden responsibilities.

## 1. Background and context

We have both worked in, for and with various organisations and institutions of Education throughout our adult lives to improve the *educational* quality of the learning they offer and promote. Training and transmission of knowledge, skills, and expertise are important but comprise only part of what constitutes 'Education'. However, we have found that the educational purpose of 'Education' is often only mentioned, or not explicated at all, by those influential in the development of educational practice, theory and provision. This has led to a great deal of talk at cross purposes, which is unproductive at best, and counter-productive at worse, which Ginott illustrates:

> On the first day of the new school year, all the teachers in one private school received the following note from their principal.
>
> > Dear Teacher,
> > I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:
> > Gas chambers built by *learned* engineers.
> > Children poisoned by *educated* physicians.
> > Infants killed by *trained* nurses.
> > Women and babies shot and burned by *high school* and *college* graduates.
> >
> > So, I am suspicious of education. My request is: help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.
>
> Reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human. (Ginott, 1972, p.317)

So, to be clear, we see Education to be a life-long, life-wide values-laden process of people learning to live humanely, personally satisfying, and socially productive and worthwhile lives, helping others to do so too, and contributing to humans flourishing as a benign presence in the world. It follows that the purpose of organisations and institutions of Education, and of professional educators, such as teachers, is to provide educational opportunities and support for people to develop the confidence and competences necessary. There can be inherent tensions experienced by educators in the course of

realising their responsibilities to the organisation within which they practice and to themselves as professional-practitioners. How Living Educational Theory Research can enable professional educators to identify and work productively when faced with these tensions and contradictions will be clarifies later in the methodology and methods section.

We agree with UNESCO (2016) and Education 2030 (2015) that "education has the most transformational potential to shape just and sustainable futures" (Reimagining our Futures Together, 2021, p.1). In our research we hold ourselves accountable for contributing to ensuring inclusive and equitable, quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. This includes the values of human flourishing, implied by *Ensure quality education for all: Sustainable Development Goal 4* (UNESCO, 2016, p. 12). Like UNESCO, we see teaching and teacher education as transformative and universal in addressing global and national challenges in education and provide the evidence to justify our claim that our work reflects these principles (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2024a&b). We also share a, "... humanistic vision of education and development based on human rights and dignity; social justice; inclusion; protection; cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity; and shared responsibility and accountability." (UNESCO, 2016, p.7)

Our work reflects the principles of the report from UNESCO (2021) on *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*:

> Any new social contract must build on the broad principles that underpin human rights: inclusion and equity, cooperation, and solidarity, as well as collective responsibility and interconnectedness – and be governed by the following two foundational principles:
>
> > **Assuring the right to quality education throughout life**…. [which] include the right to quality education throughout life. It must also encompass the right to information, culture and science – as well as the right to access and contribute to the knowledge commons, the collective knowledge resources of humanity that have been accumulated over generations and are continuously transforming.
> >
> > **Strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good**…. [which] builds common purposes and enables individuals and communities to flourish together… include a society-wide commitment to include everyone in public discussions about education. This emphasis on participation is what strengthens education as a common good – a form of shared well-being that is chosen and achieved together.

Our work also reflects the principals of ESAI, "… the violations of humanitarian values in our present contexts require the reaffirmation of commitment to the principles of democracy, equality, and care that form the bedrock of all forms of education." (ESAI, 2024)

As well as being clear about 'Education' as a values-laden process, it is also important that we are clear about our meaning of 'professional' in relation to educators' responsibilities for developing practice, theory and provision with values of human flourishing. Being accepted

as a 'professional' an educator is expected to abide by a code of ethics. They are also expected to develop skills, knowledge and expertise to help their pupils/students to successfully progress through a curriculum given by the organisation/institution, which forms the context of the practice. However, *more* is required of a professional-practitioner. 'Professional' is used with various meanings in the literature. We make a distinction between professionalism and being a professional-practitioner. We use the term 'professionalism' to refer to a practitioner meeting the standards for membership of a 'profession'. *Being* a professional-practitioner involves accepting a responsibility for one's own professional development in the generation and contributing their valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanations for their educational influences in learning with values of human flourishing to a global knowledgebase all can benefit from.

Living Educational Theory Research is a type of professional-practitioner educational research used to answer questions of the form, 'how can I improve the educational quality of the learning opportunities and experiences provided by the education institution, which is the context of my practice?' We take what is 'educational' to be a primary constituent of a life-long, life-wide process of learning to live humanely a personally satisfying and socially productive and worthwhile life, helping others to do so too, and contributing to humans flourishing as a benign presence in the world. Engaging in Living Educational Theory Research, as continual professional development, enables an educator to realise their professional, values-laden responsibilities as fully as possible. These responsibilities include researching their educational, values-laden practice to understand and improve it and generate contributions to a global knowledgebase in the form of valid accounts of their living-educational-theories. This reflects a foundational principle of UNESCO (2015), "**the right to access and contribute to** the knowledge commons, the collective knowledge resources of humanity that have been accumulated over generations and are continuously transforming. (our emphasis)"

Whitehead (1987) coined the term living-educational-theory for an explanation a practitioner generates for their educational influence in their own learning, the learning of others and the learning of the social formation, which is the context of their practice. In the course of the research a practitioner clarifies their embodied values, which give their practice meaning and purpose, and form the evaluative standards of their practice and explanatory principles in accounts of their living-educational-theories.

Lastly the historical and cultural contexts of our research have been influenced by the hegemonic influences of education research. The distinction we draw between educational research and education research is central to our argument. We define educational research as research that generates valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanations for educational influences in learning. We define education research as research that contributes to the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of the forms and fields of education, such as the philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, economics and politics of education.  Living Educational Theory Research is part of the process of transcending this hegemony

In many research organisations no distinction is made between Education Research and Educational Research. We think that this is a mistake because it has resulted in Education

Research created by, for example, sociologists, psychologist and philosophisers of education to exercise a colonising influence over Education*al* Research, which has inhibited the development of education as a values-laden process. We understand Education Research to be research carried out within, or making original contributions to, the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of forms and fields of inquiry such as the philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, politics, economics, leadership and administration of education. We understand Educational Research to be research undertaken by professional-practitioners that is generating valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanations for their educational influences in the learning of the organisation/institution that is the context of the practice to realise its productive and values-laden raisons d'être, the learning of those who comprise it, and in their own with values of human flourishing. Whitehead, coined the term 'living-educational-theory' for these explanations.

We have presented validated, evidence-based and values-laden arguments for a Living Educational Theory approach to continual professional development in publications and presentations over the years. These form part of the historical and cultural contexts of this presentation as we move our research forward. The following provide a snapshot:

i)     'Why a focus on 'what is educational?' matters so much in reconstructing education?' published in the journal, Irish Educational Studies (Whitehead, & Huxtable, 2023).

ii)    'Living Educational Theory Research as an Epistemology for Practice: The Role of Values in Practitioners' Professional Development', a monograph published by Routledge (Whitehead, & Huxtable, 2024a).

iii)   'Developing, Sustaining and Thriving Transformative Living Educational Theory Research and Practice in Challenging Times and Contexts', published by the Journal of Transformative Praxis. (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2024b).

## 2. Research aims

One of our general aims is to contribute to the realisation of the primary aim of ESAI, which is: "…to ensure educational discussions… are informed by educational research and educational policies at all levels are guided by educational sound arguments." The research aims of this paper are focussed on those of ESAI: breaking down of barriers to explore and nurture the relationships that can emerge when we break down barriers:

- Between researchers and practitioners in diverse settings.

- Between theory and practice, teaching and learning, the conceptual and the applied, thinking and acting.

- Among academics, practitioners, policymakers, and communities.

- Between the vulnerable and the empowered, the marginalised and the mainstream.

- Across time to connect past wisdoms with present challenges to shape a better future. (ESAI, 2024)

### 3. Methodology, Methods and Data Collection

Methodology and Methods

'Methodology' and 'methods' are used interchangeably in the literature. Here we use the term 'methodology' to refer to the general principles for explaining how the research was carried out. A 'method' refers to a particular technique used in the gathering of data or its analysis.

We make the following distinction between Living Educational Theory Research and other methodologies, such as Action Research. A key aspect of Living Educational Theory Research is that the researcher periodically pauses, critically and creatively reflects on what they are doing to realise their responsibilities as professional-practitioners. This includes creating a valid account of their Living Educational Theory Research and the living-educational-theory generated, and contributing the knowledge to a global educational knowledgebase for the benefit of all. In contrast other methodologies, such as Action Research, Narrative Inquiry and Auto-ethnography, do not require the generation by the practitioner of a valid, values-laden explanation for their educational influence in learning. Rather than applying a methodology at the beginning of the research, a Living Educational Theory Researcher generates, clarifies and communities their own methodology in the course of generating their valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanation of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which the practice is located.

A range of methods are used to enable data to be gathered to make an evidence-based judgement on the question, 'How do I justify my claim to have had an educational influence in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which my practice is located, with values of human flourishing?'. A variety of methods are also used to clarify and communicate the practitioner's embodied meaning of the values of human flourishing that give their practice significance and direction. Methods from other research paradigms are used where appropriate. For example, when faced with the practical problems of improving an aspect of practice many Living Educational Theory Researchers find action-reflection cycles helpful. They then draw on accounts of their Action Research as data when evaluating the effectiveness of their practice and generating valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanations for their educational influences in learning. These explanations contain the evidence to justify our claims that Living Educational Theory Research has a transformative potential to contribute to bringing into being a more just, inclusive and harmonious world.

'Empathetic resonance' (Whitehead, 2010), was developed for clarifying and communicating the meanings of the embodied values the practitioner uses as explanatory principles. Because of the importance of values, as explanatory principles in explanations for educational influences in learning. We emphasise the importance of clarifying and communicating the meanings of the embodied values that an educator uses to explain their

educational influences in learning. This clarification and communication is not easy because it requires both lexical and ostensive meanings. Lexical meanings involve the communication of the meanings of words in terms of other words. For example, punishment could be defined as, the intentional infliction of pain by someone in authority on someone who has broken a rule. Ostensive expressions of the meanings of embodied values are not as easy to define or communicate. Whitehead found it necessary to develop a method of empathetic resonance for clarifying and communicating these ostensive meanings (Whitehead, 2010). This method uses digital visual data of practice and the movement of a cursor along the visual data to a point of the greatest empathetic resonance evoked by the meaning the practitioner is expressing of their embodied value that is serving as their evaluative standard and explanatory principle in their account of their living-educational-theory. For example, Naidoo's (2005) uses the method of 'empathetic resonance' to clarify and communicate her meaning of her value as a 'passion for compassion'.

Data Collection

We draw on data that is freely accessible. This includes data from an archive of doctorates and masters, available from https://actionresearch.net/ and papers published in the Educational Journal of Living Theories, (a peer-reviewed, free access and publishing journal) available from https://ejolts.net/. We also draw on living-posters. 'Living-posters' have been used to serve various purposes over the years. One purpose is as a method for data collection as illustrated by the living-posters that can be accessed from the homepage of living-posters (figure 1.)
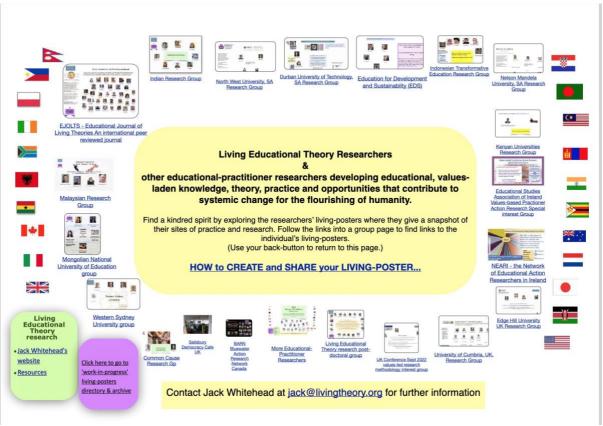


Figure 1 Living-posters: Homepage. https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/homepage2023.pdf

These posters are not intended to serve the same purpose as academic posters. The initial intention was to enable people to be 'present', contribute to and benefit from a conference, which they could not be physically present at, and make connections with like-minded practitioner-researchers as indicated by the instructions on how to create a living-poster (https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/livingposterletterA.pdf). The idea has subsequently been used as a research method. The instructions deliberately focus on the use of commonly available software:

> Creating a living-poster is easy! Create your poster as a single slide using a common programme, such as PowerPoint. (You can create a page in a document using a programme like WORD if you prefer).

> A living-poster is intended as an opportunity to bring attention to your sites of practice and your research passions and interests and help you connect with people with similar research passions and interests.

> Use images and minimal text to quickly communicate the essence of your sites of practice; interests; the values that motivate you and give your life meaning and purpose; research passions. Please use 'insert' (not copy and paste) and use low resolution images otherwise your file becomes huge!

> Helps if you add:

> • A photo of you, a few details of your context (e.g. where you are based) and your email address,
> • A couple of your key publications,
> • The url to your website if you have one and the url to your 2-3 minute video clip on YouTube of you communicating the essentials of: your context, interests, research passions, practice and values as the explanatory principles and living standards of judgment to which you hold yourself accountable in your practice.

## 4. Data Analysis

The data sources, analysed and used as evidence in a living-educational-theory, include over 50 Living Educational Theory doctorates that have made original contributions to educational knowledge. These can be freely accessed, for public criticism and for use as data, from https://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml. Each thesis has been validated and legitimated as an original contribution to knowledge, by a university. For example, four of the founder members of NEARI received their doctorates for their Living Educational Theory Research Theses in 2006–7 from Limerick University, Ireland:

> Glenn, M. (2006) *Working with collaborative projects: my living theory of a holistic educational practice.*

McDonagh, C. (2007) *My living theory of learning to teach for social justice: How do I enable primary school children with specific learning disability (dyslexia) and myself as their teacher to realise our learning potentials?*

Roche, M. (2007) *Towards a living theory of caring pedagogy: interrogating my practice to nurture a critical, emancipatory and just community of enquiry.*

Sullivan, B. (2006) *A living theory of a practice of social justice: Realising the right of Traveller Children to educational equality.*

These researchers have contributed to the research aims of ESAI (2023) above in terms of breaking down many barriers such as indicated in Whitehead's (2022) presentation to the Network Educational Action Research Ireland (NEARI) meeting, 2nd April 2022. In his presentation he focused on critical reflection in educational practice, as a response to the publication, in Irish Educational Studies, on '*Exploring trans-generational and trans-institutional learning: educational action research possibilities in a virtual Environment*', by Sullivan, et al. (2022). The response explains how barriers can be broken down with Living Educational Theory Research. Those barriers may be between researchers and practitioners in diverse settings; between theory and practice, teaching and learning, the conceptual and the applied, thinking and acting, among academics, practitioners, policymakers, and communities; between the vulnerable and the empowered, the marginalised and the mainstream; across time to connect past wisdoms with present challenges to shape a better future and peer reviewed journals, such as the Educational Journal of Living Theories (https://ejolts.net ). The barriers are grounded in the traditional separation, by academic researchers, between theory and practice. There is a logical disconnection between the living contradictions experiences by practitioners as values are negated in practice, and academic theories whose logic eliminates contradictions through the application of Aristotle's law of contradiction. This stipulates that two mutually exclusive statements cannot both be true simultaneously. Contradictions however, are the nucleus of dialectical claims to knowledge.

Since the living-posters began the numbers have increased considerably and lay the basis for relationships that can emerge when we break down the barriers listed above under Research Aims. You can access the living-posters home-page from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/homepage2023.pdf and test for yourself our claim to be contributing to breaking down barriers between practitioners working in diverse cultural social contexts and fields of practice. The living-posters from the Education for Development and Sustainability (EDS) group of Bangladeshi and Norwegian researchers, from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, illustrate well how Living Educational Theory Research is helping to build bridges and make connections between the vulnerable and the empowered, the marginalised and the mainstream (Gjøtterud, 2009, Rahman, et al., 2020). The living-posters from the EDS group (figure 2) can be accessed freely from **https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/eds24.pdf**

Figure 2. EDS living-posters group page access from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/eds24.pdf

Taking Md Riaz Hawlader contribution (figure 3 below), illustrates how living-posters can be used to communicate the influence of context in the practice, especially in researching with the vulnerable and marginalised.



Figure 3 Md Riaz Hawlader's living-poster access from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/riaz221224.pdf

The data of the living-posters of the Indonesian TERG (Transformative Education Research Group) (figure 4) working on their Living Educational Theory Research is analysed in terms of the evidence of individuals and the group contributing to Transformative Educational Research and Sustainable Development and nurturing relationships that can emerge when we break down barriers. Where this is being done can be accessed from live url links in the living-posters (figure 4). See for example the poster of Susi Fitri, which can be accessed from the group poster at https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/indonesiangp23.pdf.

Access living-posters homepage from https://actionresearch.net/

Click on the names to access the individual living-posters

Indonesian TERG
(Transformative Education Research Group working on their Living Educational Theory Research)

Figure 4 Indonesian TERG group. Access from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/indonesiangp23.pdf

Having successfully presented their papers at the TERSD conference many are now working on papers to submit to the Educational Journal of Living Theories (https://ejolts.net/) to contribute to a global community to create a better world.

## 5. Findings and discussion

Our findings and discussion are focused on the transformative potential of Living Educational Theory Research as continuing professional development for professional-practitioners, which build bridges and make connections in education, with the hope of contributing to the creation of a better world. We have included in our data, the living-posters from Indonesian, Bangladeshi and Norwegian researchers and the doctoral theses and papers of researchers living and working in Ireland. This data emphasises the importance of relationally dynamic values and understandings in connected ways of knowing.

In developing these relationally dynamic ways of knowing we find useful Gregory Bateson's (1975) insight that, ''the means by which one person influences another are a part of the ecology of ideas in their relationship, and part of the larger ecological system within which that relationship exists (p. 353) and…the problem of how to transmit our ecological reasoning to those whom we wish to influence in what seems to us to be an ecologically "good" direction is itself an ecological problem. We are not outside the ecology for which we plan—we are always and inevitably a part of it.'' (p.354). In developing our relationally dynamic ways of knowing, we also find useful, Mary Catherine Bateson's insight that, ''Instead of concentration on a transcendent ideal, sustained attention to diversity and interdependence may offer a different clarity of vision, one that is sensitive to ecological complexity, to the multiple rather than the singular.'' (Bateson, 1989, p. 166)

Whilst we are just at the beginning of integrating these insights into our research, we acknowledge the original contributions to knowledge already made by professional practitioners, researching their values-laden, educational practice. They have done this by engaging in Living Educational Theory Research and providing the evidence of their

contributions to creating educational knowledge with the aim of bringing into being an inclusive and just world with values of human flourishing.

Our findings in relation to our research aims are as follows in contributing to the breaking down of barriers:

- Between researchers and practitioners in diverse settings.

One way we are seeking to break down barriers is through combining the work of researchers and practitioners as practitioner-researchers rather than seeing them as discrete activities. Whitehead (1989) developed a Living Educational Theory Research approach to professional development in which professionals research their learning in inquiries of the kind, 'How do I enhance the educational influences in learning of my professional practice?'. Another way of breaking down barriers is to draw insights from the writings of researchers in the generation and testing of their living-educational-theory as illustrated in many of the papers in the archive of the Educational Journal of Living Theories (https://ejolts.net/ ).

- Between theory and practice, teaching and learning, the conceptual and the applied, thinking and acting.

We are contributing to breaking down barriers across theory and practice through supporting the generation by individuals of their living-educational-theories, as illustrated by the doctorates and Masters which can be accessed from https://actionresearch.net/. As explanations for educational influences in learning, these are focused on professional practice, they include a dynamic relationship between teaching and learning. The valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanations of educational influences in educational practice, break down barriers by drawing on conceptual insights from forms and fields of educational knowledge in ways that relate conceptual understandings to the applied, thinking and acting.

- Among academics, practitioners, policymakers, and communities.

Living Educational Theory Research contributes to breaking down barriers between these groups by using the ideas from academics in the generation of a practitioner-researcher's living-educational-theory. A living-educational-theory contains an imagined possibility, for enhancing the educational influences of social formations that require the support of policy makers. This support helps to ensure that contextual influences can support the practical realisation of the imagined possibility. Community support is also required, in enhancing the support of contextual influences in realising imagined possibilities, for living values of human flourishing as fully as possible.

- Between the vulnerable and the empowered, the marginalised and the mainstream.

Living Educational Theory Research can provide a bridge between these groups. Through our work in higher education we understand our positionality in terms of belonging, at various times, to the vulnerable, the empowered, the marginalised and the mainstream.

Our understanding of our positionality, with its relationally dynamic ways of knowing helps us to identify and empathise with the issues and concerns being experiences by these groups.

- Across time to connect past wisdoms with present challenges to shape a better future.

We associate wisdom with the generation and testing of our living-educational-theories with values of human flourishing to contribute to bringing into being a world where humans flourish as a benign presence. These include explaining our present educational influences in learning, using these values as explanatory principles. These explanations include what we have learned from our past together with an intention to generate a better future, which has yet to be realised in practice.

## 6. Significance and conclusions

The significance of Living Educational Theory Research for the NEARI SIG of ESAI and for ESAI is focused on the distinctions we make between Education Research and Educational Research; Action Research and Living Educational Theory Research and; between professionalism and being a professional and education as a values-laden process. We have drawn on doctoral theses and papers in the Educational Journal of Living Theories to illustrate how Living Educational Theory Research contributes to the building of bridges and making connections between them with hope and transformation.

The focus of this paper has been on the transformative potential of Living Educational Theory Research as continuing professional development. We have provided evidence to justify the claim that this approach to continual professional development can build bridges and make connections between practitioners, fields of practice and disciplines, with the hope of contributing to the creation of a better world. The bridges included connecting international education policies, such as produced by the United Nations (UNESCO, 2016) (ref) and the European community (Dubiin Declaration, 2022), to the development of values-laden, professional educational practices of educators and teacher-educators. They include establishing and sustaining relationships and co-operative activities with teachers and teacher-educators throughout the world, and contributing to the growth of a global knowledgebase comprising validated accounts of Living Educational Theory Research and living-educational-theories, all can benefit from.

Our hope is that readers of this paper will be moved to build bridges and make connections which will help them work and research to develop their knowledge, understanding and practice of Living Educational Theory Research in good company, and so help us all to fulfil our values-laden responsibilities as professional-practitioners and educators to contribute to bringing into being a better world.

We hope that those who read this paper will feel inspired to build bridges, create connections and collaborate to enhance their knowledge, understanding and practice of Living Educational Theory Research. As they do so they help us all to meet our values-driven

responsibilities as educators and professionals and so contribute to the creation of a better world.

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