

Using living theories to measure effectiveness

JACK WHITEHEAD introduces an evidence-based approach to enhancing the learning of educational leaders.

THE emphasis on accountability in many school systems throughout the world has particular significance for school leaders in Australasia as they respond to demands for evidence of their effectiveness. This brief paper outlines an approach to judging the effectiveness of a school leader with the living educational theories of learning produced by themselves, their staff and pupils.

A living educational theory is an individual's explanation of educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which they live and work (Whitehead, 1989, 2008).

In developing an evidence-based approach for school leaders, I need to make distinctions between school leaders and educational leaders, and learning and educational influences in learning. I think it is clear that an individual can be a school leader without having an educational influence in the learning of staff and pupils. I think it is clear that much learning can happen without that learning being educational. Individuals can learn to do things that harm others and that are destructive to the good order of a community. For me, an educational influence in learning does not include learning to do harm to others or learning to destroy the good order of a community. Hence, my emphasis on educational influences in learning.

I have another reason for focusing on the idea of influence. While I can claim to be educating myself and to take responsibility for my choice as to which learning counts as educational, I cannot claim to have educated anyone else. I can only claim to have influenced the learning of others. I mean this in the sense that whatever I do with others has to be mediated through their creativity and imaginations into their own learning, in order for me to recognise my influence as 'educational'.

In advocating an evidence-based approach to enhancing the educational influences in learning of educational

leaders by using living educational theories, I do not want to simply speculate about the educational influence of this approach. I want to direct your attention to where you can access the evidence of this approach working in practice, with educational leaders in schools.

Students conducting action research

Joy Mounter is an educational leader of learning in a primary school in the United Kingdom. Researching with her six-year-old pupils, Ms Mounter has provided evidence on how an educational leader can open up an educational space in a way that stimulates the creativity and learning of students. She has done this in her enquiry titled 'Can children carry out action research about learning, creating their own learning theory?' (see: <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/joymounterull.htm>).

Much of the evidence that shows the meanings of the expressions of embodied values of educational leaders in their educational relationships cannot be carried on words in pages of text. Hence, my use of visual narratives that include video data and evidence of the educational influences in learning of school leaders. If this brief paper does nothing more than encourage you to read the above account and view the streaming video clips, I think that it will have served its purpose. If you wish to see more evidence-based accounts showing the educational influences of leaders in learning in schools, you can find these at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/mastermod.shtml>.

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If you are interested in evidence-based accounts by school leaders of their systemic educational influences

in learning, you could access Jacqueline Delong's writings. Jacqueline Delong's doctoral inquiry examines her educational influence as a leader on a school board in Ontario. You can access this evidence-based account in the living theory section of: <http://www.actionresearch.net>. The seven volumes of *Passion in professional practice* she has co-edited with her colleagues provide evidence, in the teachers' own voices, of her educational influence in supporting the development of the living theories of the teacher-researchers who are providing evidence of their educational influences in the learning of their students (see the 'passion' menu at: <http://www.actionresearch.ca/>).

For school leaders to provide educational leadership in enabling staff and students to create their own living theories of the educational influences in their learning, it is likely to be necessary, as Kevin Eames points out, to 'grow your own'. Details of how to do this as an educational leader in a school can be found in Chapter 6 of his thesis on 'Action research as a form of professional knowledge in a whole-school setting'. This can be accessed at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/KEVIN-PHD/kechap6.pdf>, with details of the whole inquiry at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/kevin.shtml>.

Join British colleagues

If educational leaders in Australia wish to develop these ideas, they could join the British Educational Research Association practitioner-researcher e-seminar, which can be found in the 'What's new?' section of: <http://www.actionresearch.net>. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

References

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Switching off the 'stress gene'

The February 2009 issue of *Nature Neuroscience* reminds educators that bullying and violence, both at home and at school, can have a lethal long-term effect on some children.

CHILDHOOD abuse can change the expression of a 'stress gene' and increase the risk of suicide later in life, new research reveals. Reporting in the February issue of *Nature Neuroscience*, Canadian researchers looked at the combined effect of childhood abuse and a stress hormone-related gene on the hippocampus, the part of the brain involved in memory and learning. The brains of 12 suicide victims with a history of childhood abuse were examined and compared with the brains of suicide victims who had no history of child abuse. Both were then compared with the brains from a control group, where people had died from other causes. The result was that researchers found significant differences in stress-related hormone receptors in those who had committed suicide and had been abused, compared with the others. They also found evidence that parts of the 'stress gene' had been 'switched off', resulting in an abnormal stress response in adulthood. The executive director of the Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation at Queensland University of Technology, Professor Ross Young, said that childhood abuse appeared to interact with a stress hormone-related gene as one potential path to suicide. 'It reinforces the fundamental importance of the development of effective public policy and interventions to prevent child abuse so that this combined environmental and genetic risk can be dealt with', he said. 'We also need to ensure that we have effective interventions that assist adults who have been abused in childhood to respond effectively to stress.'

The study showed how the reduced expression of the gene led to an increase in hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal response to stressful situations. Such heightened hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal responses have previously been linked to an increased risk of suicide, mood disorders and schizophrenia. Early childhood experience has been shown to cause long-term genetic changes in the stress response pathway in rats, but this is the first evidence that the same thing happens in humans. Professor Young said that the research also underscored how 'being raised in a stable and safe environment as a child helps us deal with stress in adulthood'.