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### **Focus of my work**

I have worked in educational contexts for over 30 years as teacher, educational/school psychologist and lecturer/researcher from pre-school to higher education and my interest is in professional and student learning, leadership, applied psychology, and systems analysis and change processes in educational settings. The complex and collaborative nature of educational psychology (EP) practice in the UK, together with the training of EPs, can be denoted by its central role within and across children's services. Professional activity is often defined and limited by differing roles, tools and resources, and policy/ethical frameworks, all of which may present challenges for practice. I use CHAT to research these areas because it provides a coherent research framework that is analytical and interventionist to better theorize how education professionals and leaders work within and between systems to improve outcomes for learners.

As a lecturer in educational psychology, the alignment of CHAT with robust and established psychological theory in the critical, dialectical tradition is appealing with its focus upon culturally mediated collective activity. It also offers a more nuanced understanding of systemic problems and how to enable transformational change in work and education contexts via collaborative research and professional learning. My work focuses upon 'archaeological digs' in complex educational systems to identify systemic contradictions (often referred to as 'wicked problems'), and via Developmental Work Research (DWR) methodology. I engage in collective activity with others to consider the potential for change. The unique role of the researcher in CHAT/DWR is useful to research practitioners such as educational psychologists who often explore potential for systemic change across networks of interacting systems that characterizes much of interprofessional collaboration across children's services. Understanding contested objects of activity in such contexts is a key aspect of my work using concepts such as relational agency, transformational agency and distributed expertise.

### **Promoting and teaching about CHAT**

I also teach my students about CHAT highlighting its usefulness to them as they develop as research practitioners and educational consultants working at the individual, school and system levels to improve learning and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people. Several students have gone on to use a CHAT-based approach in their theses, some of whom have presented their work at conferences and published in journals. I am currently

supervising a Ph.D student using CHAT. I have an interest in promoting the usefulness of CHAT in educational contexts, bringing it to a broader audience of academics and EP practitioners, inspired by Engeström and his colleagues via the CRADLE network. For example, I convened, moderated and presented at the first CHAT-based educational research conference in Scotland which drew an international audience of 85 delegates from different disciplines. I also had a guest editor role of a special issue of a peer-reviewed journal the focus of which was CHAT-based studies in educational contexts.

### **My research**

1. I used DWR interventionist methodology in my two-phase longitudinal research study with senior managers and leaders of children's services who were responsible for a Scottish local authority decision-making process (DMP) for the allocation of specialist resources for children with complex educational needs. Phase one focused upon intervention to mediate senior managers' learning around reconceptualization of the DMP using CHAT/DWR theoretical concepts and epistemological principles (expansive learning, dual stimulation, collective ZPD, transformative agency, and generativity). Activity in the 'change labs' involved CHAT analysis of systemic contradictions in the DMP and its potential for change. Participants' learning was expanded via four key turning points in their thinking as they used CHAT based concepts to deepen systemic and theoretical understandings of the systems that they manage. For example, an initial focus on problems with, and then improvement of, the DMP shifted to a re-configuration of children's services leading to the generation of a new model for meeting children's needs in mainstream school settings. Phase two focused upon implementation of the new model over an 18-month period, the evaluation of which demonstrated success of the intervention as a change process framework with measurable impact on both strategic and operational changes in policy and practice. I concluded that CHAT-based interventions can support the development of organisational change processes and new ways of learning, leadership and working to enable public services to improve outcomes for children and families, highlighting the theoretical and practical relevance of CHAT for professionals who engage in collaborative real-world research.
2. I co-authored a conceptual paper that considered enrichment of the Educational Psychologist's (EP) research identity and role in collaborative research using the theoretical application of CHAT that challenged the dominant, yet limiting, discourse about the nature of EP research locating it, instead, in the broader discourse of interdisciplinary research in practice and in the academy. Highlighting the complex skills and spectrum of EP research activity, we argued that there is a need to enhance the role of research-practitioners to effect changes in the systems within which they work via critique and transformation of professional practice to improve outcomes for children and families. CHAT prioritizes the need for analysis of how historical processes shape present and future practice, acknowledging the dialectical process whereby individuals and groups shape social activity but are also shaped by it in turn. We concluded that CHAT enables a more nuanced articulation of the research-practitioner identity in complex work settings such as children's services.
3. Another research study with a colleague at University of Dundee drew draw on second-generation CHAT and activity system analysis to consider the organisational, political, cultural and historical factors that have influenced the current training programme and how it impacts on EP trainee learning and development. CHAT analysis of the views of six stakeholder groups highlighted the sophisticated understanding of trainees, lecturers and practitioners concerning the dialogic, relational and collaborative aspects of trainee learning on placement and at university. The timing of the study also enabled a CHAT analysis of the impact of remote learning during the pandemic that led to a permanent blended approach on the programme. Using CHAT as an analytical tool enabled us to focus attention on the dialectical nature of various parts of the EP training programme as an activity system in terms of how people and institutional processes shape and are shaped by each other in complex, evolving ways. However, a key finding was the emphasis across all six stakeholder groups of the need to move to a three-year doctoral programme. To explain this, we included an interesting analysis of the primary contradiction in EP training in relation to cost/benefits for each stakeholder group invested in the training partnership. We concluded our paper with the suggestion that previous unsuccessful attempts to develop a doctoral programme in Scotland can be better understood using a CHAT analysis of systemic contradictions within the current model and in so doing may have supported the partnership to consider development of a new training programme. Key stakeholders in the training partnership, including the profession, the University of Dundee and the Scottish Government approved

development of a three-year doctoral programme in December, 2023 with the first cohort due to start in Autumn, 2025.

#### **New research**

- Collaborative research with educational psychologists in Fife, Scotland and Copenhagen, Denmark using CHAT to compare and contrast how current policy/practice/legislation in the two settings supports advocacy of the voice of the child, their rights and participation in matters that affect them
- PhD student's study using CHAT to consider EP identity as practitioner, researcher and lecturer in terms of student and professional learning

#### **Some references**

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