



'A Realist Conceptual Methodology for Qualitative Educational Research: A Modest Proposal'

Megan Lourie¹ · Graham McPhail² 

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Abstract

This article explains and illustrates an approach to the design of qualitative inquiry in education using a conceptual methodology informed by a realist ontology. It is written with research novices in mind, based on two observations we have made while supervising postgraduate students. The first is that the methodology literature education students often engage with tends to focus on interpretivist-constructivist approaches. The second observation is that it can be challenging for students to find appealing and accessible material which employs realist informed methodology. To counter this we offer a general introduction to undertaking educational research informed by a realist ontology drawing on a simplified account of critical realism (CR). We illustrate the key concepts of this approach using examples from post-graduate studies in education. It is our hope that this article may stimulate wider discussion about the possibilities, development, and use of realist approaches.

Keywords Realism · Conceptual methodology · Disciplinary concepts · Educational research

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✉ Graham McPhail
g.mcphail@auckland.ac.nz
Megan Lourie
megan.lourie@aut.ac.nz

¹ Faculty of Culture and Society, Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street, East Auckland City, New Zealand

² The Faculty of Education and Social Work, The University of Auckland, 34 Princes Street, Auckland CBDAuckland 1010, New Zealand

Introduction

This article explains and illustrates the design of qualitative inquiry in education using a conceptual methodology informed by a realist ontology. We believe that realism is useful for analysing social problems because of its focus on explanation and causal analysis. These two key aspects can be especially useful in education research where they can offer a way to tease out the different components of a complex social phenomenon and offer an explanation of causal relationships. Being able to identify causal mechanisms creates opportunities to offer solutions.

To begin, we note that when we use the term realism, we are not referring to the traditional empirical realist or positivist stance. Instead we use realism as an umbrella term for approaches that are influenced by the critical realism associated with Bhaskar ([1975]/2008), [1979]/2015). While acknowledging that there is debate both within and between different realist approaches¹ (Wheelahan, 2023), the aim of this article is not to engage with these variants but instead to offer a more general introduction to undertaking educational research informed by a realist ontology, focusing on the design of what we term a conceptual methodology. To this end we draw on a simplified account of critical realism (Danermark et al., 2002; Fletcher, 2017; Maxwell, 2012; Sayer, 2000)

We write particularly with postgraduate students in mind, having observed the frustration some students experience when they are unable to find a research approach that fits with the issue they are interested in. Previously we have argued that realism is not widely acknowledged or used in educational research (McPhail & Lourie, 2017) and this continues to be the case. The research methodology literature that students often engage with tends to focus on interpretivist-constructivist approaches (McPhail & Lourie, 2017) and it can be challenging for students to find appealing and accessible material which employs realist informed methodology (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014). While there is a large body of literature which explores the philosophical underpinnings of realism, there are fewer examples of realist informed social science research which give a detailed description of the research methodology employed (Fletcher, 2017). This article aims to contribute to a body of accessible literature by focusing on the way a realist conceptual methodology can be designed and developed.

The article begins with a brief explanation of the ontological and epistemological basis of realism and highlights the usefulness of employing realism in educational research. This is followed by a discussion about the way disciplinary concepts are understood within realism and how they are put to work to create a conceptual methodology. The latter part of the article draws on Fletcher's (2017) work to illustrate and explain the design of conceptual methodology and includes examples from postgraduate research studies informed by realism that were undertaken in New Zealand and that we are familiar with.

¹ See for example social realism (Young, 2008, Maton and Moore, 2010, Moore, 2013, Muller, 2000, Wheelahan, 2010), Archer's (1995, 2000) morphogenetic realist social theory, and transactional realism (Biesta, 2014; Carlgren, 2020), scientific realism (Nola, 1997, 2001; Matthews, 2000).

Realism

The meaning of realism as we use it here can be encapsulated by three propositions. The first is that the real world exists independently of our knowledge of it; second, our knowledge of the real world is fallible; and third, there are grounds for judging some accounts as better or more ‘truthful’ than others (Bhaskar, [1975]/2008). The first of these propositions establishes the ontological basis of realism. Ontological realism is the view that there is a mind-independent reality that can be known. That is, “entities exist independently of being perceived, or independently of our theories about them” (Phillips, 1987, p. 205). While this may be a straightforward proposition when considering the physical and natural world, that is, we can accept the existence of a tree whether we perceive that tree or what our theories about trees are, it is a more difficult proposition to understand when we consider social phenomena. Social realists accept that societies, capitalism, nations, class, and conspiracy theories also exist regardless of whether we believe they exist (Wheelahan, 2023). In the case of social phenomena, reality “refers to whatever it is in the universe (i.e., forces, structures and so on) that causes the phenomena we perceive with our senses” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 133).

Realism distinguishes clearly between our knowledge about the world and the world to which our theories and concepts refer (critical realists refer to these worlds as the transitive and intransitive dimension respectively). Humans produce *transitive* knowledge about *intransitive* phenomena. In the case of social science, intransitive phenomena include social processes and structures that we are unable to know directly, although we can perceive the effects of the phenomena. For example, we cannot directly know racism as a social phenomenon with our senses but we can see the *effects* of racism in the words and actions of people either as individuals or as members of groups or institutions. Importantly, in contrast to strong social constructionism, the phenomena to which our concepts and theories refer is neither a product of, nor constituted by, our theories about it (Carter & New, 2004).

The second of the three propositions acknowledges that our knowledge of the real is fallible. This is one of the markers that separates realism from positivism. Perhaps ironically, it is the “evident fallibility of our knowledge— the experience of getting things wrong, of having our expectations confounded, and of crashing into things—that justifies us in believing that the world exists regardless of what we happen to think about it” (Sayer, 2000, p. 2). Most importantly, our knowledge of the world is concept-dependent, that is, we use concepts to make sense of the world. These concepts in part, shape what we see and how we understand what we see (Wheelahan, 2023). This explains why, for realists, our knowledge is considered fallible and provisional. Our experience is shaped by our theories (Sayer, 1992) so “we ‘see’ the world through our conceptual lenses. For example, “two teachers, each with contrasting understandings about class and disadvantage, may view the same group of students differently and respond to them differently” (Wheelahan, 2023, p. 88).

This takes us to the third proposition, that there are grounds for judging some explanations of the social world to be better than others. This is sometimes referred to as judgmental rationality (Moore, 2013). While our attempts at explanation are always considered fallible, processes such as public scrutiny of knowledge produc-

tion (academic peer review for example) help us to progress towards understandings and explanations that are closer to the ‘truth’ than others. While our theories are not a mirror of the world, we can, at any point in time, suggest a good fit between theory and empirical data (Nola, 2001). Realist approaches aim to find the best explanation of reality through engagement with existing (fallible) theories about that reality.

How is Critical Realism Different from Other Approaches or Paradigms?

This is the question that those new to research paradigms often ask. Here we offer some responses to that question in relation to two other paradigms that social science research methodology literature suggests are favoured in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018; Doyle & Loveridge, 2023; Merriam, 1998). The first is what can be referred to as the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2012). Researchers working in this paradigm are interested in finding out how individuals and groups construct meanings of experiences through interaction with others and their environments. From the interpretivist-constructivist world view, reality is constructed through our human interactions with others. If a researcher wants to understand the social world, they must try to understand the processes through which meanings have been or are being constructed. Those working from a critical realist paradigm are also interested in explaining the social meaning of a phenomenon but want to go beyond a focus on the meaning of participants to explaining the phenomenon itself and its causes. Sayer (2000), for example, notes that one limitation of interpretivism is that it tends to “reduce social life wholly to the level of meaning, ignoring material change and what happens to people regardless of their understanding” (p. 6).

The other broad paradigm commonly used in social science research is the critical paradigm (Doyle & Loveridge, 2023). In common with critical realism the critical paradigm assumes that there is a real world that exists independently of our beliefs and constructions, and that this real world makes a material difference to peoples’ lives. However, broadly speaking, researchers working within this paradigm want to uncover or reveal the power relations embedded in social structures and relationships. They are particularly interested in explaining inequality and oppression in society and how individuals and groups might be empowered to challenge social groups and structures (Doyle & Loveridge, 2023). Critical realism shares the same view of reality and a similar interest in exploring processes that might be obscured within a phenomenon. However, critical realism differs from critical theory in that critical theory tends to advance a perspective that research should operate within a framework of political assumptions and should be geared towards serving political goals of emancipation (Hammersley & Campbell, 2012). While not wanting to claim that CR is ‘apolitical’, the design of a CR study does not by necessity begin by establishing a framework of political assumptions.

The Explanatory Power of Realism

Now that we have set out the ontological and epistemological propositions associated with critical realism, we move on to discuss the usefulness of realism. We agree with

Maxwell (2012) who notes that realism is not the “correct” or “right” paradigm for qualitative research, but that it can be “a *useful* perspective for qualitative researchers, one that provides insights and strategies that other perspectives ignore or misrepresent” (p. ix, italics in original). Put very simply, realism enables the researcher to explain the meaning that participants make of their social world *and* identify possible or likely causes of the phenomenon under investigation. This is because realist approaches draw on a ‘depth’ ontology. Bhaskar (2008) identifies three levels of reality in the natural and social worlds; the domain of the real, which consists of structures and generative mechanisms, the domain of the actual, in which events take place, and the domain of the empirical where experiences occur. The domain of the real shapes the domain of the actual. This depth ontology allows realists to examine the interplay between different objects with a focus on causal analysis.

Because of its focus on explanation and causal analysis, realism is useful for analysing social problems and offering solutions for social change (Fletcher, 2017). Many of the educational research projects undertaken by postgraduate students in education seem to favour approaches that aim to contribute to a better understanding of how individuals or groups experience and understand a particular issue or challenge in education. Realism offers a way to investigate the *causes* of those issues or challenges and to offer solutions. Realism does not look for a positivist version of causation, that is realists do not look for laws, but rather tendencies (Danermark et al., 2002). Realist explanations “depend on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions” (Sayer, 2000, p. 14).

One of the challenges in undertaking educational research is that schools and classrooms exist in open and complex systems in which it can be difficult to isolate components for analysis (Sayer, 2000). Realism addresses this challenge by making use of disciplinary concepts as a means of abstracting from the particular. Realist approaches

rely on abstraction and careful conceptualization, on attempting to abstract out the various components or influences in our heads, and only when we have done this and considered how they combine and interact can we expect to return to the concrete, one-sided object and make sense of it (Sayer, 2000, p. 19).

A realist methodology often includes empirical data in the form of participants’ accounts of their social world. Realists take participants’ experiences and explanations of reality as a point from which they can begin to identify structures and mechanisms in people’s lives (Shipway, 2011). In some cases, participant’s explanations may prove the most accurate in explaining the phenomenon (Fletcher, 2017) but researchers acknowledge that in other cases participants’ accounts may be limited in terms of their explanatory power or they may reflect an inaccurate understanding of the causes of the phenomenon. This is because for realists, “how things are in reality is a different question from how people take them to be” (Carter & New, 2004, p. 6). However, it is worth remembering at this point that for realists, all explanations of reality, including the explanations of both theorists and research participants, are regarded as fallible (Bhaskar, 1979).

Concepts and Conceptual Frameworks

When using realism, concepts guide the entire research process, starting from the identification of the problem or phenomenon to investigate, as well as being used as analytical and explanatory tools (Sayer, 2000). Carey (2009) defines concepts as “units of thought”, “mental representations”, and “the constituents of beliefs and theories...” (p. 5). Swanwick (1988) suggests that concepts provide the means for us to “cluster, classify and categorize experience, seeing certain things as similar or different in a particular way. Conceptualization is the beginning of theoretical description and organization” (p. 146).

Here we want to clarify that we are referring to disciplinary concepts, that is, concepts developed in the disciplines which are likely to be a part of wider conceptual systems of meaning or an epistemic structure; “epistemic structure refers to the system of meaning generated by the interrelationship of abstract concepts in a disciplinary domain” McPhail, 2023. The utilisation of a concept will often require the understanding of other related concepts possibly by from one theorist or across a discipline’s conceptual webs, or both. Generally, these are concepts within theories that will have stood the test of critique and that have been found to be useful in their explanatory power, for example the concepts of structure and agency from sociology. Disciplinary concepts are essential to a realist analysis because they are used to identify and explain causation. Most of the time causal mechanisms are not observable and can only be ‘known’ through their effects. Therefore, specialised concepts developed in the disciplines are needed to do theoretical and explanatory work for the researcher (Rata, 2012). Concepts can also be regarded as real as they have effects in the world (Barrett, 2024; Popper, 1978, 1981). For example once the concept of women’s rights gained universal currency its effects in the world could be seen. This is an example of transitive knowledge having ‘real’ effects on the intransitive domain of social processes. The examples we use below in our discussion below are realist in the sense that the use disciplinary concepts in central to the methodology.

Researchers often group concepts together to form a framework that is bespoke for their study. Concepts can be drawn from disparate sources or a key concept might infer others more related to a main concept. For example, Bernstein’s (2000) concept of recontextualisation infers the concept of ‘recontextualising fields’, the symbolic spaces in which in which the process occurs. While the use of a conceptual framework is certainly not unique to realism, it arguably plays a more significant role than it does in other approaches. Realism requires a researcher to draw appropriate concepts together to enable a theoretical explanation of the social meaning participants make of events *and* to provide a means of exploring possible or likely causes and processes obscured or less obvious within the phenomenon being investigated. Each researcher’s conceptual framework is unique, because it is the result of the selection of the concepts that are most apposite to explain the object of inquiry. A study employing a conceptual methodology cannot be done by replicating a particular analysis in a different context (Couch, 2020).

Developing a Conceptual Methodology

In this section we move away from a general discussion to illustrate and explain the way a conceptual methodology could be developed. We draw on the work of social scientist Fletcher (2017) who provides an excellent exemplar for researchers wishing to employ critical realism (CR) in their work. We include some insights and examples from her article but primarily we offer examples from realist informed postgraduate studies in education. We have tried to avoid using the more specialised vocabulary associated with CR to offer an accessible introduction to a realist methodology focusing on the role that concepts play throughout the research process. We begin by explaining the different parts of a conceptual methodology and illustrate these using a range of different postgraduate studies. After explaining and illustrating each of the ‘parts’, we offer a summary of one ‘whole’ study.

Identifying Social Phenomenon and Explaining them with Disciplinary Concepts

Like many researchers, realists are drawn to problems or questions related to social phenomenon. Realists usually begin by identifying initial disciplinary concepts that may appear to explain the phenomenon. These initial concepts may be modified or rejected later in the analysis stage as the researcher attempts to find the most accurate explanation of reality that the theory offers. In other words, throughout their analysis researchers aim to find a good fit between an empirical phenomenon and the disciplinary concepts used to explain it. Initial concepts or theories are identified by the researcher as they engage with academic literature guided by their own hunches and experiences as described in the examples below.

Fletcher’s (2017) research investigated how farm women in Saskatchewan were being affected by major changes in agricultural policy and their responses to those changes. The social phenomenon in this case was the changing nature of farm women’s work in Saskatchewan. Fletcher engaged with literature about trends in Canadian farm women’s work patterns, in particular their off-farm employment. She was especially interested in the changing political-economic context of family farming and changes to farm women’s work. The concepts of gender and political economy are brought together in feminist political economy theory which is a theory Fletcher was familiar with. She used this theory to guide her initial research design because it offered a way to explore the gender dimensions of political-economic structures affecting farm work in Canada.

Sometimes the initial concepts a researcher uses may be fairly self-evident, or already part of an established theory as in the case above. In other cases identifying initial explanatory concepts may be more challenging as in Tian’s (2021) doctoral study in education which was concerned with why and how the Core Socialist Values (CSV) of the Chinese government are included in school curriculum. After engaging with literature, Tian identified an ideological tension between market socialism and the development of individualistic and materialistic values in Chinese society and began to think about how the CSV might be theorised as a response to that ideological tension. Durkheim’s sociological concept of collective representations (Durkheim, [1912]/2001), which refers to the “collective ideas, values, and senti-

ments” (Durkheim, [1912]/2001, p. 18) of a group, appeared to be a good way to begin explaining the government’s aims for the CSV. Tian noted that collective representations can also be a mechanism for creating ideology. Here he found Althusser’s (2001) conceptualisation of ideology useful. Althusser (2001) describes ideology as a structured “configuration” (p. 119) hidden deep in the thoughts and consciousness of individuals, which allows a “ruling ideology” (p. 112) to be realised. These two concepts, ideology and collective representations, provided Tian with a way to begin to explain why the CSV are included in the school curriculum in China.

Data Collection

In the section above we have shown how concepts assist with both the identification of the phenomenon as well as its possible explanation. Data from the empirical level of reality, which is the realm of events as we experience them (Fletcher, 2017), provides evidence of the effects of the social phenomena under investigation. Data is often in the form of interview material but may also include relevant statistics - which might indicate a widespread trend - or policies, and in the case of educational research, curriculum documents.

Data Analysis

There are three key steps involved in data analysis when using CR. The first step is to identify *tendencies* (Danermark et al., 2002), or broad trends found in the empirical data. Demi-regularities could also include the absence of something you might reasonably predict to find (see the author example below). The next step is theoretical redescription. *Theoretical redescription* refers to the process of describing the *tendencies* found in the empirical data using disciplinary concepts. The third step, involves *identifying causal mechanisms* using a strategy of inference utilising the explanatory possibilities of available concepts (Fletcher, 2017).

Below we explain each of the three steps of the data analysis process we have just outlined using one of the author’s doctoral study in education to illustrate each step.

Identifying Tendencies

Data analysis begins with the search for *tendencies* or broad trends in the empirical data. A realist approach as we are outlining it, is open to various methods in the process of coding and data analysis although the significance of disciplinary concepts means there is likely to be a greater emphasis on deductive rather than inductive coding. However both approaches are used to determine if the chosen concepts are the best fit with the phenomenon under investigation. In summary, a flexible coding and theme development process is useful (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This involves developing codes and themes from existing theory and literature, initially drawing on the disciplinary concepts that the researcher first identified as possible explanations for the social phenomenon under investigation. Changing, eliminating, and developing new codes and themes typically happens during the process of thematic analysis. This is often an iterative process, a to-ing and fro-ing,

between what the data indicates and establishing the most apposite conceptual fit with the data.

Lourie's (2013) doctoral study explored the effects of ambiguity in education policy about the purpose of Māori language education in secondary schools for non-Māori students and provides an example of the identification of tendencies in the data. Lourie had noted that while non-Māori students learning Māori language at secondary school was small, there was almost no available research about their beliefs and experiences. New Zealand education policy espoused a commitment to biculturalism² (Ministry of Education, 2007) but there appeared to be an ambivalence about the purpose of Māori language learning for non-Māori students. Lourie was curious about why non-Māori students were engaged in Māori language learning at school. One of her initial concepts when thinking about this phenomenon was *biculturalism* which she thought could potentially explain why some non-Māori students had chosen to learn te reo Māori. Lourie's empirical data consisted of interviews and one of her questions to participants was why they had chosen to learn te reo Māori. When she began coding the data, she expected to find frequent references to wanting to learn to communicate in another language in some form or another. However, this was a *tendency* that was almost entirely absent from the data. She used a range of codes using the words and phrases that *were* frequently appearing. These included "care", "respect", "appropriate", "nice", and "breaking stereotypes". Longer descriptions also seemed to be related to these initial codes. For example, one participant said learning Māori was a way to "be more respectful and we'll bond more". Lourie (2013) eventually decided to code these in one category which she called "relationship building". Guided by her engagement with academic literature and her understanding of her initial concept of biculturalism, she deduced that students were referring to a particular kind of relationship, a *bicultural* relationship. One tendency she identified in the data related to the concept of biculturalism and allowed her to identify a key finding in the study; that engaging in Māori language learning was a way for students to be *bicultural*.

Theoretical Redescription

Theoretical redescription is a key part of the realist process where the main empirical findings are interpreted and re-described using disciplinary concepts. Theoretical redescription 'gets below the surface' of social experience and is a way of identifying something 'real' going on, that cannot be seen, although its effects can be seen. In Lourie's study, thinking about how students were responding to ideas about biculturalism led her to consider the concepts of ideology and ideological effects in the theoretical redescription stage of her analysis. She theorised that a particular ideology was affecting the way students were viewing the purpose of Māori language learning. Having a concept or theory, to explain an effect helps identify causation (which is the final step in the process). If, as in this case, a group of people are identified as

² In New Zealand the term biculturalism refers to a partnership between Māori and non-Māori people which was established when the Treaty of Waitangi was signed by Māori and the British Crown in 1840.

experiencing ideological effects, the next question is, what is the mechanism that enables this to happen?

Identification of Causal Mechanisms

In this stage of the analysis the aim is to identify what social conditions caused the trends observed in the empirical data to appear as they do. This involves a reasoning process that moves back and forward between the empirical and a “deeper” level of reality. Disciplinary concepts are needed to contribute to a (fallible) explanation of the relationship between the social phenomena as it is experienced by the research participants and the ‘real’ structures and mechanisms that shape that experience. It is difficult to describe this step in detail because it involves a strategy of inference unique to each research phenomenon and researcher. This reasoning process requires the researcher to be able to utilise the explanatory possibilities of a concept or groups of concepts. As explained earlier, groups of concepts might be part of an existing theory, or they might be drawn from across a discipline’s conceptual web.

Lourie (2013) theorised that bicultural education policy was having ideological effects on the way non-Māori students viewed the purpose of learning Māori, so the policy itself was identified as the causal mechanism. This was done by drawing on Gramsci’s (1971) concept of ideology and theorising the way that policy can work ideologically to hold diverse elements of society together in a relation of consent. Ideology provided the overarching concept to explain the relationship between bicultural education policy and the experiences of non-Māori language learners in schools. However, this explanation is only made possible by utilising other related concepts. Gramsci’s view of ideology and how it works also requires an understanding of ‘hegemony’ and the ‘collective will’. The explanation also requires a particular conceptualisation of policies and how they can work to produce different kinds of relations (Shore & Wright, 1997).

An Example of a Conceptual Methodology

In the previous sections we have used different examples to illustrate the way concepts are used during different stages of a conceptual methodology. In this section we use a single research study from education to provide a complete example of the use of a conceptual methodology. The Master’s level research described below was carried out by Wang (2021) and is summarised in (Wang & McPhail, 2023).

Identifying Social Phenomenon and Explaining them with Disciplinary Concepts

Wang set out to investigate how teachers understand and utilise *Musical Futures* as an approach for developing student autonomy in classroom music teaching. Musical Futures (MF) is an internationally recognised approach to classroom music aimed at developing high levels of student autonomy and engagement through utilisation of several ‘informal music learning principles’ developed by Green (2002, 2008). The concept of student autonomy, which guided Wang’s initial research design, emerged

primarily from the aim and principles of the MF programme. These principles include students deciding what music they want to play and what instruments they want to learn. Students develop covers of songs entirely through aural means and in friendship groups with minimal instruction from the teacher (referred to as discovery learning group projects). In this way the programme flips traditional approaches to learning music so that the locus of control over what and how of learning sits with the student. This approach is underpinned by a belief that increasing student autonomy over their own learning contributes towards better student engagement and achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Data Analysis: Identifying Tendencies

Once Wang began her data analysis it became clear that some form of adaptation or change of MF had occurred and that “the New Zealand teachers were utilising an approach that they termed MF, derived from training offered in New Zealand by Musical Futures International (MFI) based in Australia” but that this “appeared to bear little resemblance to the structure developed and used by Green in her initial study” (Wang & McPhail, 2023, p.128). She found that the materials and the teachers’ descriptions of what they did in class indicated a pattern of ‘sequenced skill development’ through ‘scaffolded skill acquisition’ which was then followed by ‘class-based music making’. This was not preceded by any ‘discovery learning group projects’ which was the focus of Green’s original design.

Wang’s supervisor was familiar with the sociological concept of ‘recontextualisation’ (Bernstein, 2000) which describes the changes that occur as knowledge moves from its site of production to sites of reproduction. Recontextualisation appeared to be a good fit for explaining what was present in the data. The initial finding appeared to be a clear example of recontextualisation so it was utilised as the overarching concept for the study. In the process of recontextualisation Bernstein (2000) theorises that ideology always comes into play as new ‘recontextualisation principles’ refocus the original discourse to constitute its own, new recontextualised order. This recontextualisation goes on in various symbolic sites Bernstein terms ‘fields’, such as ministries of education where policy is made (the official recontextualising field or ORF) or more informal sites where teachers adapt knowledge themselves for teaching (the pedagogic recontextualising field or PRF). Once it was clear there was a gap between the original form of MF in the site of production (i.e. Green, 2008) and the site of reproduction being investigated (i.e. Wang’s case studies) the research task involved theorising these changes and the possible causes of the changes.

Data Analysis: Theoretical Redescription

The concept of recontextualisation enabled Wang to identify that an unexpected change had occurred. She then needed to think about what the MF programme represented in terms of educational philosophy so that she could begin to theoretically redescribe the tendencies she had noticed in the data.

Wang used the concept of competence (Bernstein, 2000) to theoretically redescribe Green’s original design of MF. Bernstein argues that approaches to educa-

tion concerned with emancipatory ideals such as student autonomy and pedagogies that challenge traditional educational hierarchies such as discovery learning can be encapsulated within the broader concept of *competence*. The identification of MF as a competence approach enabled Wang to theorise that what she found in the case studies was *not* a competence approach but something much more systemised and structured - what Bernstein terms a *performance* mode of pedagogy. In a performance mode there is an emphasis “upon a specific output of the acquirer, upon a particular text the acquirer is expected to construct and upon the specialised skills necessary to the production of this specific output, text or product” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 44). At this stage of analysis Wang was able to identify that a *performance* interpretation of the MF programme had replaced its original *competence* approach.

Data Analysis: Identification of Causal Mechanisms

The concept of recontextualisation enabled a theoretical redescription of the change that had occurred in a musical teaching strategy, while the concepts of competence and performance helped explain the nature of the change. What remained was to theorise causation. As discussed in previous sections making determinations about causation can only ever be a process of advancing revisable propositions, since the complexities of a layered, or depth, ontology acknowledge that causal mechanisms can be hard to identify and may not always be activated (Sayer, 2000).

Thinking about the nature of the changes she had observed helped Wang explain why and how those changes were occurring. For example, (author) describe the approach taken by the teachers in the study as a “guided learning approach, where clear and achievable goals are identified and cognitive overload is avoided”. This contrasts with Green’s original ‘discovery’ approach where learning was intended to be holistic and haphazard (Green, 2008). This is a reflection of a shift away from the pure discovery learning characterised by MF at the beginning of the 20th century and several factors can be identified that appear likely to be contributing to this shift. But what is the cause of this shift?

At a deep societal level neo-liberal ideology is a major force at play effecting educational structures such as curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (author) and its effects can be theorised as influencing the changes observed by Wang. This influence is seen particularly in outcome approaches to education which have become normalised internationally (Sinnema & Aitken, 2013; Sinnema et al., 2020) and that stand in some tension with discovery type pedagogies because outcomes create compliance demands on teachers in terms of assessment. This shift towards more explicit learning outcomes is seen in the recontextualisation of the MF materials and the approach by the course designers who deliver the materials in New Zealand (MFI). The interview data with both the course designers and the teachers provide ‘clues’ for the researchers about the causal mechanisms. For example the designers wanted to create resources that could be used at lower levels of the curriculum than the original MF which they argued required a more structured approach.

There is also what might be termed ‘a knowledge strand’ in the data that indicates teachers and designers appear to be cognisant of ideas present in the educational firmament from a variety of sources (e.g. cognitive science and knowledge discourses)

that leads them to the conclusion that structured approaches are more effective than discovery modes of pedagogy. Again it was the data itself that pointed towards these deeper factors related to knowledge and learning. For example, one teacher noted:

I think that some kids like to be taught a little bit first. I do the ‘throw them in a room to do a song’ after I’ve given them some skills. I did try it the other way but it was little bit too messy, took too long. For my juniors, I didn’t have a lot of time, I want to get them playing but I needed to show them some stuff first (Wang & McPhail, 2023, p.131).

In conclusion (Wang&McPhail, 2023) suggest that the recontextualisation has occurred “through the confluence of a number of causal mechanisms ranging from the views and experiences of the particular recontextualisers themselves (i.e. the design staff at MFI), the way teachers interpret the workshops and materials provided for them, and changes in the ethos or zeitgeist about teaching and learning...” (p. 135) away from discovery learning towards a more structured approach. This research illustrates how the researchers found a good fit between concepts and the phenomenon. However, researchers using realist approaches acknowledge the fallibility of their theorising.

Conclusion

This article has offered a general introduction to undertaking research informed by a realist ontology, outlining the way that a conceptual methodology might be designed and put into action. We believe that realism is useful for analysing social problems because of its focus on explanation and causal analysis. These two aspects can be especially useful in educational research where they can offer a way to tease out the different components of a complex social phenomena and offer an explanation of causal relationships. Being able to identify causal mechanisms creates opportunities to offer solutions.

We drew on a number of examples to illustrate a series of steps (that may not always follow a linear sequence) highlighting the way disciplinary concepts are used during each of the steps. Because realist analyses rely on the explanatory power of concepts, realist approaches employ a conceptual methodology; that is, a methodology that employs a conceptual framework unique to each study that frames and guides the research process. Our hope is that other researchers find our account accessible enough to engage in using or critiquing our modest proposal for the design of CR informed conceptual methodology.

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