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Title: A critical realist review of Singapore's core research program (2003-2013)
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Abstract

This study adopts methodology-as-philosophy acknowledging the role of philosophical assumptions in research and considering relevant arguments related to these assumptions. Philosophy is used to derive and refine concepts and reasoning, and guide their application in research practice. Methodology-as-technique, in contrast, sees research practice as adopting scientific methods and procedures without acknowledging the assumptions that inform these practices. These assumptions have historically been and are being contested with unsettled implications (Hammersley, 2006).

This thesis reviews, from a critical realist perspective, a selection of research reports produced by the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) between 2003 and 2013. Parts one and two, address issues relating to meta-theoretical frameworks and refines the realist evaluation framework for research practice. Part 3 applies methods informed by critical realism, and reviews reports of educational research.

Part 1 presents a theoretical review of western research methodologies in social science research. Theoretical reviews explore how philosophy or meta-theories shape research practice. The review responds to Deng and Gopinathan’s (2001) proposition that alternative paradigms need to coexist in present-day complex educational environments. This review introduces positivism, social constructionism, pragmatism, critical social science, and Luke and Hogan’s critical realist approach to evidence – outlining the ontology, epistemology, limitations, and social theorising implied in each perspective.

Next, the scientific psychological paradigm that dominated Singapore’s educational research from 1968-1999 (Deng and Gopinathan, 2001) and arguably still does so, is addressed. Concerns of indigenous social psychologists are highlighted. The section interprets Roy Bhaskar’s critical realism arguing that the framework, underexplored in Singapore and South-East Asian contexts, is compatible to Asian philosophical perspectives and responsive to concerns indigenous social psychologists have about agency, culture, context and society justifying its adoption in indigenous research practice.

Part 2 critiques the interpretation of critical realism applied in Realistic Evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This part highlights how evaluation strategies
can accommodate realist and critical realist inquiries. It explains how realist social theory responds to concerns raised in Marchal et al.’s (2012) review of issues arising from the application of realist evaluation in practice. These concerns revolved around the Context-Mechanism-Outcome configuration (CMOc) which are explanatory components in realist evaluation. Part 2 elaborates the CMOc, deriving conceptual and theoretical guidance from Archer’s realist social theory. The elaboration of CMOc is adopted in part 3.

**Part 3** conducts a critical realist review of the large-scale educational research programme. It combines a theoretical and historical review of educational restructuring in Singapore. The review examines research reports stemming from the large-scale educational research programme in Singapore. The programme theory - influenced by Newmann and Associates’ (1996a, 1996b) Authentic Achievement and the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (1998-2000) - aims to inform, track and evaluate educational policy and practice, and the results of educational restructuring efforts. A historical review of the ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’ (TSLN) and ‘Teach Less, Learn More’ (TLLM) initiatives then follows. It critiques how the received model of school restructuring is hindering a more comprehensive understanding of educational restructuring in Singapore and the outcomes of these attempts.