

# EMERGENT PARADIGM: CRITICAL REALISM AND TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper explores the prospects of using critical realism as a guiding philosophy for critical inquiry in the field of educational administration. A relatively recent philosophy in the social sciences, critical realism offers an alternative framework for researchers engaged in empirical work that is aimed at transforming undesirable social realities. As a philosophical framework, critical realism recognizes the importance of agency in research and sees social transformation as an essential outcome of research in the human sciences.

**LE PARADIGME EMERGEANT :**

**RÉALISME CRITIQUE ET RECHERCHES TRANSFORMATIVES EN ADMINISTRATION SCOLAIRE.**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Ce document explore les possibilités de l'utilisation du réalisme critique comme une philosophie conductrice pour une interrogation critique dans le secteur de l'administration en éducation. Une philosophie récente en science sociale, le réalisme critique offre une alternative de démarche de travail pour des chercheurs engagés dans un travail empirique qui est destiné à transformer des réalités sociales indésirables. Comme démarche philosophique, le réalisme critique reconnaît les agencements en recherche et voit les transformations sociales comme des résultats de recherche essentiels en sciences humaines.

Discourses in the social sciences continue to present competing views of how research should be done as various paradigms vie to establish their legitimacy. While much of the debate centres around opposing views of empiricist/positivist methods of knowing, more progressive paradigms such as interpretivist, constructivist, critical, and postmodern theories have their ardent supporters as well as equally avid critics (Razik and Swanson, 2001). Like other disciplines in the social sciences, educational administration has not escaped the polemic (see for instance Donmoyer et. al., 1995; Evers & Lakomski, 1991; Foster, 1986; Greenfield, 1986; Ribbins, 1999; Riehl et. al., 2000; 1995; Willower, 1993). More recently, framed by epistemic interests, some writers have tried to chart a future course for scholars and practitioners in the discipline (e.g., Gunter, 2005; Gunter & Ribbins, 2003; Heck & Hallinger

2005; Sackney & Mitchell, 2002; Shields, 2004). What seems to be lacking in the debates, however, is a coherent guiding philosophy that directs research in the discipline as a distinct field of study. Critical realism, a philosophy of the human sciences recently advanced by British philosopher Roy Bhaskar, provides such a framework and offers a philosophical “compass” to researchers engaged in critical social scientific inquiry that is more cognisant of the altruistic, subjective and moral aspects of knowledge production. A combination of two of his previously advanced theoretical views – transcendental realism and critical naturalism (one for the sciences and the other for the social sciences) – critical realism transcends surface appearances and aims to reveal enduring social structures that ratify special interests and the status quo in society. But what makes critical realism particularly attractive as a philosophical guide for research in educational administration is the fact that it offers a *mélange* of Deweyan pragmatism, which links research to educational theory and practice (Simpson, 2001), and postmodern fluidity, interfaced with Greenfield’s humanistic approach.

In an era of globalization where rapid change is the only predictable social phenomenon, educational administrators – policy makers, practitioners and scholars alike – cannot justifiably continue to adopt dogmatic stances in matters that are related to schools and society as social systems (Egbo, 2003; Ryan, 1988). Unfortunately, until recently research in educational administration has focused on seeking regularities in educational organizations as if schools were closed, absolutely hierarchical systems where predictable patterns of behaviour are the norm rather than the exception. Indeed, while a complex web of variables impinges on interpersonal relations, it is safe to argue that fluidity and unpredictability are (and have probably always been) the hallmarks of behaviour in educational organizations. Juxtaposed with unprecedented demographic shifts that have ushered in new social arrangements (along with the peripheral status of some groups), it seems logical that new directions in research in the discipline should point towards alternative paradigms that aim to simultaneously critique orthodox approaches as well as give voice to the silent and marginalized stakeholders in the education arena. For this reason alone, critical realism deserves attention in research in educational administration, particularly given the vicissitudes that educational systems have undergone and continue to undergo in recent years in Canada and elsewhere.

This paper explores the idea of using critical realism as a philosophical foundation for transformative research in educational administration. To set the stage, I briefly sketch some traditional research practices in the social sciences as well as in the discipline. This is followed by a discussion of the ways critical realism and research in educational administration intersect. For the purposes of this analysis, the word transformative is conceived of in terms of a profound change in consciousness in both the researcher and the

researched, in the sense it is used by Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1990). Such a change would of necessity involve critical reflection, probing, questioning, and finally some realignment of perspectives which should, in turn, act as a mediating force to social praxis. A key stance adopted in the paper is that within the context of current socio-global realities, research in educational administration and education more generally can no longer be conducted in ways that seek to uncover immutable universal truths (Arhar et al., 2001), as is the case with orthodox empirical inquiry.

#### ORTHODOXY AND RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

Since the publication of Thomas Kuhn's (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the idea of absolute objectivity in social science research has lost some of its luster. Arguing that researchers sometimes deviate from the norm even in the natural sciences, Kuhn (1970) advanced the notion of 'paradigm clashes', suggesting that the adoption of a paradigm is inherent in the choice of the subject of inquiry and that researchers sometimes think outside the box (Arhar et al., 2001). Following Kuhn's interrogation of the then dominant view, claims of irrefutable knowledge in the social sciences now face challenges from many quarters. As a consequence, there have been ongoing propositions of alternative paradigms which cohere around differing assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the social world, and empirical inquiry. For instance, Bernstein (1976) talks about positivist, interpretive, and critical paradigms, Lather (1992) examines feminist and post-structural perspectives, Guba et al. (1990) discuss postpositivist, constructivist, and critical alternatives, while Burrell and Morgan (1979) propose two opposing paradigms. In particular, Burrell and Morgan's conceptualization of social scientific thought in terms of the relationship between two broad views or dimensions of society located at the extreme end of one continuum – objectivism and subjectivism – further energized the debate. When both dimensions are counterposed in a rectangular form (Skrtic, 1990), they further produce four distinct and mutually exclusive paradigms: the functionalist (objective order), the interpretivist (subjective order), the radical humanist (subjective conflict) and the radical structuralist (objective conflict), each of which represents a social-scientific reality (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Skrtic, 1990). Each paradigm produces a unique form of knowledge and according to Burrell and Morgan, to be situated within a particular paradigm "is to view the world in a particular way" (p. 24).

We do not necessarily have to see the world in restrictive absolute terms or in epistemic dichotomies as Burrell and Morgan suggest if we adopt as a starting point a philosophical stance that recognizes that meaning-making is an individual and context-mediated process. Undoubtedly, this perspective is gaining some much deserved recognition since research currents have been gradually shifting towards nonpositivist paradigms and methods

of knowing in recent years (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). In the field of educational administration, the tide appears to be moving towards diversity in methodologies as well as towards increased acceptance of humanistic and ideology-embedded perspectives (Heck and Hallinger, 2005). Despite these developments, the fact remains that rational approaches that make generalized knowledge claims still retain their traditional prestige position. Indeed, there are scholars who argue that much of the research in the field of educational administration continues to be dominated by orthodox paradigms that ascribe primacy to scientific methodologies. For example, Razik and Swanson (2001) believe that:

Educational inquiry is still largely committed to the scientific approach. From textbook issues to graduate programs that still resonate with methodological courses that are largely quantitatively focussed, the scientific method is still firmly entrenched. *In educational administration . . . the scientific method is viewed as the right way to do things* [italics added] (2001, p. 211).

A possible explanation for the enduring appeal of “scientifically detached” methods in research in the field is that it is much easier to influence policies or convince policy makers to adopt policies that are based on quantitative evidence, and we know that ultimately, educational administration has much to do with interpreting, implementing and analyzing policies, new and existing ones alike, at both the macro and micro levels of educational systems. But quantitative evidence aside, orthodoxy also persists because the idea of changing paradigms can be quite an unsettling venture. No matter on what side of the paradigm debate one is situated, it seems logical that researchers in educational administration, an applied discipline, should recognize the fluid and emergent nature of contemporary social systems of which schools are an integral part. In effect, unwavering adherence to canonical knowledge or grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984) which results in orthodox approaches to doing research in the discipline is no longer the logical option.

No other social site is as contested as the school where various stakeholders compete for control of education and public knowledge. While a discussion of how education is implicated in the marginal social status of some groups in society is beyond the scope of this paper, it has been argued that the worldviews, language, and curricula that are disseminated in schools reproduce existing class structures (see for instance Bourdieu, 1991; Cummins, 2000; Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 2002). Thus, schools simultaneously reflect and reinforce the prevailing social and economic order in wider society (Egbo, 2003). Problematically, traditional research in educational administration does not often engage the social and political contexts within which educational policies and practices are embedded nor does it provide frameworks for praxis. Proponents of alternative and more progressive paradigms see this negligence as a major flaw in orthodox approaches. Because research that is grounded in critical realism seeks to change the social world through the

identification and deconstruction of operational social structures, including attitudes, values, ideologies, and discursive practices that oppress people (Corson, 1997, 1991), it has considerable potential for research that is geared towards improving educational policies and administrative practices at all levels of the educational system.

At the most fundamental level, educational administration involves some form of *leading* where typically one individual is able to influence decision-making processes for the purposes of achieving organizational goals, a situation that confers significant power which can either be put to positive use or lead to injustices against less powerful subordinates (e.g. students and other educators). It is no wonder that during the past decade much of the discourse on educational leadership has centred around developing inclusive, ameliorative and facilitative approaches. For example, Corson (2000) proposes emancipatory leadership which would shift administrators' focus away from protecting sectional interests to a participatory and power-sharing model of leadership. Sackney and Mitchel (2002) argue for postmodern leadership that empowers as well as "honors localized thinking yet moves people beyond it to see multiple possibilities, multiple influences, and multiple perspectives" p. 909). The burgeoning literature on transformational leadership which emphasizes vision, change, and collaborative and participatory decision-making (Leithwood et al. 1996) as an alternative way of doing educational leadership is also testimony to the persistent search for empowering ways of administering educational organizations. What all of this amounts to is that in the final analysis, research in the field of educational administration not only needs to be grounded in progressive paradigms, but it also has to be underwritten by critical philosophical perspectives that provide the ideological basis for the inquiry in the first place.

#### CRITICAL REALISM AND KNOWLEDGE GENERATION

At its core, critical realism rests on the assumption that the accounts of research participants are valid social scientific data that can lead to consequential social transformation if properly interpreted. Under this arrangement, positive social transformation begins with policies that acknowledge the views, values, and intentions of social actors as presented in their own accounts.

Critical realism sets a relevant course for research in educational administration because of the priority it assigns to agency, voice, and real-life experiences. Bhaskar presents a perspective on the philosophy of the social sciences that focuses on the dialectical relationship between social structures and individuals on the one hand, and on the importance of the accounts of those individuals in interpreting their world on the other. More importantly, he attributes *a priori* reality to the accounts and reasons people use in

explaining their experiences since those reports are ontologically real, and therefore, constitute valid data that are not subordinate to those acquired in the natural sciences. Most critical researchers would no doubt agree that structural, contextual and ideological factors significantly influence individual perceptions of reality. As a result, individual accounts are important in the generation of theory if praxis is the goal of the inquiry. In critical realist philosophy, the interpretation of the reports of agents is not an end in itself but rather a starting point for transformative action. Thus, in Bhaskar's conception of emancipatory knowledge, social scientific research should lead to the transformation of undesirable practices into more desirable ones. Implicitly, researchers in the human sciences are morally compelled to use the findings of context-based inquiry to change the social world in such a way as to bridge the gap between "knowing" and "doing", which should, in turn, lead to emancipation. This kind of emancipation, Bhaskar asserts:

consists in the *transformation*, in "self-emancipation" by the agent or agents concerned, *from an unwanted to a wanted source of determination* . . . that . . . can only be effected in *practice* (emphasis in original). (1989, p. 90)

While Bhaskar's concern with critical realism in social science research has its origin in the natural sciences, he does not seem to align himself with any particular philosophical school of thought (Corson, 1991). However, the importance he assigns to the accounts of human agents, his dialectical analysis of social structures, and his advocacy for critical reflective knowledge that is grounded in the voices of research participants make his views somewhat congruent with the thoughts of critical theorists, for example Jurgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci, all of whom link power and social institutions to the human condition (Peters et al., 2003). In the context of the discussion here, Habermas' proposal for a reconciliation of the opposition between theory and practice, his democratic values as well as his third orientation to knowledge as emancipatory knowledge (the other two being technical and practical knowledge [Habermas, 1978]) closely aligns with Bhaskar's conception of liberatory knowledge. As Corson (1997) argues

If some ideal society were to follow either theorist's conception of discovery, both of the basic requirements of democracy would be met: everyone's point of view and interpretation of the world would be consulted; and everyone's interests would be taken into account when shaping dominant narratives. . . . (p.171)

Although much of Bourdieu's work (unlike Bhaskar's), pays only cursory attention to human agency, his analysis of how institutional and discursive practices simultaneously constrain and shape the production, distribution, and control of knowledge through symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) provides

an explanatory critique of society similar to Bhaskar's. In the same vein, Foucault's (1980) conceptualization of the link between power, knowledge, and discourse is congruent with Bhaskar's dialectical view of social reality as well as his concern with dialogue in theory building. Moreover, both theorists ascribe considerable importance to language as a powerful technology of communication which can either be an arbiter of oppression or empowerment through various forms of discourse practices, including those that are associated with inquiry. The overall importance Bhaskar assigns to language in research in the social sciences is particularly evident in the following statement " language . . . stands to the conceptual aspect of social sciences as geometry stands to physics" (1998b, p. 226). Finally, Gramsci's dialectical conception of power and social control (hegemony), his rejection of the idea of uncontested wholesale domination, and the primacy he ascribes to agency (Gramsci, 1971) offer optimism for social transformation – as do the ideas that inform critical realism. For example, by arguing for social transformation through inquiry that aims to ameliorate the lives of its subjects, Bhaskar also sees redemptive possibilities in social structures. Thus, while structures can be oppressive, in a critical realist account of social phenomena, they also hold the potential for change.

In the field of educational administration, the now familiar work of two theorists, Thomas Greenfield and William Foster, bears some resemblance (fortuitously perhaps) to the theoretical postulates of critical realism. Greenfield's critique of the dominance of positivist ways of knowing, which he believed could not adequately explain life in educational organizations (Ryan 1997) and his advocacy for a constructivist and humane approach to administration continue to serve as catalysts for action for scholars and researchers working towards change in the discipline. William Foster's work, which is substantively influenced by critical theory (see for instance Foster, 1986), represents critical administrative theory that is founded on the idea of change. In making a case for a transformative turn in educational administration, Foster proposes a framework that is "oriented to the idea of change, change accomplished through a critical and educative dimension" (p. 90). Like the other theorists cited above, Foster's account of administration which clearly rejects orthodoxy is also reminiscent of some of propositions of critical realism.

As a "democratic" socialist, Bhaskar's philosophy encourages the treatment of social actors as ends in themselves and not as means to an end. In other words, peoples' accounts from their own understanding rather than what is called "objective" data are also important determinants of theory. The goal of a researcher under critical realism is not simply the accumulation of knowledge that may not be put to good use or, in worse case scenarios, may actually reify the condition of the subjects. Rather, research that is grounded

philosophically in critical realism should seek to empower the participants by legitimizing their voices and subsequently developing theory through the data that were generated from those voices.

Similar strands of the above argument are found in the works of other critical writers. Lather (1986), for instance, outlines what praxis-oriented research should accomplish. First, it should reject scientific norms in research in the human sciences. Second, it should generate emancipatory knowledge. Third, it should empower the researched. In sum:

For praxis to be possible, not only must theory illuminate the lived experience of progressive social groups; it must also be illuminated by their struggles. Theory . . . must be open-ended, nondogmatic, informing, and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life; and, moreover, it must be premised on a deep respect for the intellectual and political capacities of the dispossessed ( Lather, 1986, p. 262).

Lather's emphasis on "praxis" (like other so called subjectivist theorists) calls to attention issues such as the purposes of research, the extent and nature of the relationship between the researcher and his or her informants, the political intentions of the researcher as well as the thorny issue of the researcher as a situated "self". Subjectivity both on the part of the inquirer and the inquiree, is, of course, the major critique against the use of non-positivist approaches in social science research. However, Hughes, (1990) justifies the possible intrusion of subjective views pointing out that social scientists engaged in studying social phenomena are not preoccupied with the "realities" of "thing-like" objects but rather are preoccupied with the realities that are intersubjectively constituted by individuals relating to one another. Other writers adopt a similar posture as Hughes arguing that neutrality in applied disciplines is an elusive and illusory phenomenon (Corson, 1997; Ryan, 1988; Greenfield, 1986). Even so, the emphasis critical realism places on the relationship between social scientific discovery and agency raises questions about the intrusion of values in the research process. To Bhaskar however, values are an inherent part of critical inquiry:

Human sciences are necessarily non-neutral; . . . are intrinsically critical (both in beliefs and their objects) and self-critical; . . . accounts of social reality are not only value-impregnated but value-impregnating, not only practically-imbued but practically-imbuing; and. . . in particular they both causally motivate and logically entail evaluative and practical judgements *ceteris paribus*. (Bhaskar, 1998a, p. 409)

Within the specific context of educational administration, Greenfield (1986) asserts that "values " . . . bespeak the human condition and serve as springs to action both in everyday life and in administration" (p. 57). Similarly, Sergiovanni et al., (2004) see an inalienable connection between values and practices in the discipline arguing that as an ethical science, the field is "*immersed in values, idea, aspirations and hopes*" [italics in original] (p. 140).

On the possibility of the misinterpretation and limited scrutiny of information generated through research, Bhaskar urges an interactional relationship between the researcher and the researched and the need for critical analysis of agents' accounts by the researcher:

agents' accounts are more than just evidence; they are an internally related aspect of what they are about. Thus any resolution of . . . [the] problem must be two-way: the social investigator must avoid both the extremes of arrogant dismissal of and of fawning assent to first person accounts. (1989, p. 98)

Part of the appeal of Bhaskar's philosophy lies in this kind of pragmatism that overcomes the utopic tendencies of other ameliorative approaches to inquiry in the social sciences. With regards to research, the main propositions of critical realism include the following:

- research participants' reasons and accounts constitute valid scientific data and, when such reports are available for consultation, people's worldviews and the non-human entities that create influential structural forces in their lives become evident
- because of the human capacity for reflexive self-monitoring, people's accounts and reasons also reveal what they believe about those worldviews
- using people's accounts as prime data exposes not only what they value but also things that oppress them
- in exposing oppressive social structures, researchers are morally compelled to use evidence from the data to replace undesirable social practices with more desirable ones
- emancipation (resulting from critical consciousness) should be the goal of social scientific inquiry
- we can only understand and transform the social world if we are able to identify the structures that impact on peoples lives

In a critical realist philosophy, the task of understanding human behaviour is through empathy and interpretation, not friction and control; in short, seeing and interpreting things through the lenses of the agents under study. In transformative research then, the relationship between the participant and the researcher should be one of co-participation, which has methodological implications for the research process.

#### METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Applied to research, critical realism is not a research methodology *per se*; rather, it is a philosophical framework (although some may argue that it is

both) that underpins the purpose, the nature, and the methodology of a given inquiry. The question then arises as to the kinds of research methods that are congruent with its tenets and therefore more likely to produce desired results. As previously mentioned, research in educational administration has until recently been partial to quantitative methods. But, quantitative methods, however rigorous, may not be a good fit with research that is informed by critical realism and is intended to initiate social change. Indeed, from the perspective of the social sciences, Bhaskar is partial to subjective methods as he argues in the following:

. . . the *conceptual* [italics in original] aspect of the subject-matter of the social sciences circumscribes the possibility of measurement in . . . [a] way. For meanings cannot be measured, only understood. Hypotheses about them must be expressed in language, and confirmed in dialogue. (1998b, p. 226)

However, while Bhaskar is tentative about quantitative methods, in my view, given its foundation in the sciences, critical realism does offer a middle ground for quantitative and qualitative researchers, allowing for the possibility of paradigmatic border-crossings. Besides, contextual exigencies and the phenomenon under inquiry sometimes necessitate the hybridization of methods. The overall argument here is that the most productive techniques for research that is geared towards transformation are those that incorporate and directly represent the views (voices) of the agents under study. Such research ought to be a form of praxis-oriented explanatory critique, simultaneously exposing unjust educational policies and practices while providing a framework for action.

In practice, this translates into the use of qualitative and interpretive methods such as critical ethnography, philo-ethnography, participant observation, discourse analysis and participatory action research (PAR). Taken together, these approaches are useful because they advocate inclusive, democratic and context-based understandings of phenomena in which everyone's views are consulted as opposed to searching for universal "truths" (or refutations of such as the case may be), which is typically the goal of doctrinal perspectives. Critical ethnography is a promising approach to doing research that is informed by critical realism, particularly research that deals with, broadly speaking, administrative practices, e.g., studying the impact of specific leadership strategies on the lives of a group of students or teachers. Philo-ethnography, which is an offshoot of critical ethnography, offers yet another perspective. In philo-ethnographic inquiry, the researcher acknowledges up front the linkages between the deep philosophical and ideological grounding of the research, participants' narratives and the ethnographic method that is used (Egbo, 2004). Philo-ethnographic inquiry is also useful in transformative research because it addresses some of the practical concerns of progressive

theorists in its emphasis on the relationship between knowledge generation and agency, participation, collaboration, and individual construction of knowledge.

Different but related to methodological issues is the problem of the dichotomization of the discipline into scholars and practitioners – those who produce knowledge and those who consume the knowledge respectively (Gunter, 2005; Gunter & Ribbins, 2003; Heck & Hallinger, 2005; Riehl et. al., 2000). In their critique of such binary distinctions, Riehl et. al. make a compelling case for why researcher-practitioner collaborations are desirable:

The practice of scholarship is shared by both communities either in latent or manifest form. If that practice were owned more explicitly by both academics and practitioners, it could form a single emergent community in which research is a common focus and knowledge grows exponentially. . . . Creating a joint community of practice or a community of scholarship that includes both practitioners and researchers has the potential to transform both. (2000, pp. 409–410).

A dominant framework for explaining the limited dialogue between the producers and consumers of educational and social scientific knowledge more generally, is the two culture thesis which posits that there is a cultural divide between both knowledge communities. Although some writers have argued that the wedge between theory and practice is inevitable, at least in the field of education (Entwistle, 2001), Ginsburg and Gorostiaga (2003) have raised important questions about the two cultures premise, arguing that the assumed cultural distance between theorists/researchers on the one hand, and practitioners/policymakers on the other, is artificial and paints a homogenous portrait of each group. In place of such a binary perspective, they present an alternative account that recognizes intra-group heterogeneity, inter-group border-crossings, and the political nature of knowledge production and consumption which, following Habermas (1978), is framed by human interests. This is not to say that differences do not exist between both communities. Clearly, both groups differ in some respects. The differential uses of research data by each community comes to mind as a major difference as do the purposes of each group's engagement with inquiry. Nevertheless, as an applied field (and from a critical realist perspective), practitioners and scholars in educational administration have much to gain from working collaboratively, particularly given that there is *or should be* an interface between practice and theory generated from educational inquiry for the purposes of effecting change – influencing policies and improving practice as figure 1 shows.

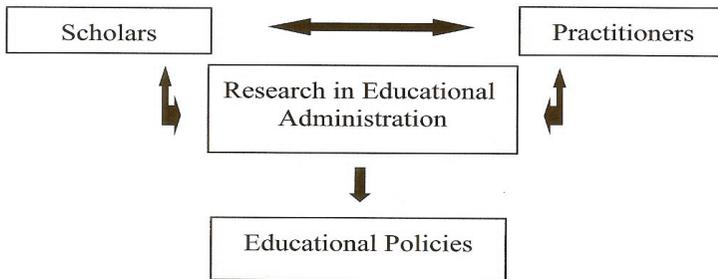


FIGURE 1: Researcher/ Practitioner Relationship and Research in Educational Administration

In practice, research that is informed by critical realism is concerned with transforming both macro- and micro-level structures. At the macro-level, researchers can work towards exposing and critiquing dominant policies that support oppressive social structures as well as use the knowledge generated to engender far-reaching reforms. With reference to the micro-level, practitioners have much to gain from studying their own work, including the values and attitudes that undergird their everyday decisions and actions, with the intent of constructing new knowledge and improving practice from their own stance as key participants in education (Arhar et al., 2001, Tricoglus, 2001). Also, as Starratt (2003) advises, educational administration needs to reinstate the humanistic values of education moving from practices that reinforce the status-quo to those that are context-based, interactive, and dialogic. This means that in current contexts, success in managing educational systems depends on the degree to which educational administrators are committed to self-study, self-reflection, and critique, as well as to the understanding of the broader socio-political contexts within which their professional activities are embedded. In short, the adoption of reflective and transformative practices is the key to empowerment in educational administration. Research is one way of improving practice, and critical realism, with its focus on agency, inclusion and change, provides a useful framework for such inquiry. Examples of critical questions researchers (scholars, policy makers, and practitioners) in educational administration should ask themselves include, but are not limited, to the following:

- What epistemic tradition informs my inquiry?
- What are the ethical implications of traditional administrative practices?
- How do administrators' daily practices enhance or impede meaningful school experiences for all stakeholders, especially students and teachers?

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- How can research in educational administration contribute to just social and educational policies and practices?
- In what ways do power relations between administrators and their subordinates affect learning outcomes for students?
- How can administrators recognize and subsequently engage the politically charged social environment within which their profession is embedded?
- How do power relations in the wider society intersect with the practice of educational administration at both the system and school levels?
- How does research in the field privilege dominant narratives and certain forms of administrative practices to the neglect of others?
- Whose causes are to be advanced through research in educational administration?
- In what ways can research in educational administration amplify the voices of previously silent stakeholders in education?
- Which social structures require transformation through critical inquiry?

Indeed, the overall aim of research that is grounded in critical realism is to expose injustices and ultimately change and improve the lives of those whose voices have been inaudible in society.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The intent of this paper is to propose a progressive philosophical framework for doing research in educational administration. In so doing, it is assumed that just as there is no best way to administer, there is no best way of doing research in educational administration. Standing on their own, most philosophical frameworks which underwrite educational research are replete with epistemic ambiguities. What is probably more feasible and productive is a hybrid of various methods that are, more importantly, informed by a progressive and coherent philosophy of the social sciences such as critical realism. As a practical matter, traditional research methods in education that are based solely on the notion of immutable universals are no longer justifiable given the fluid nature of the social world including educational policies, the diversity of stakeholders in education, and the collapse of absolutism in human sciences.

Applied to educational administration, critical realism challenges researchers to ask uncomfortable questions about taken-for-granted assumptions about educational policies, administrative practices, power and knowledge within the context of an emergent social order with the ultimate goal of increasing the life chances of those whom the inquiry is about. Attention to life

chances which relate to the opportunities that are available in society and are a function of two elements – options and ligatures (Darhrendorf, 1979), is of paramount importance in the context of a social world that is in a constant state of flux. While options provide choices and have significant future implications, ligatures are bonds that people develop through immersion in a social context or by virtue of their social positions and roles in society. In many parts of the world, certainly in much of the Western world, schools contribute to two types of life chances: increased life options, which means a greater range of future choices as a result of access to education, and ligatures, which are bonds that students develop with each other as a result of their mutual educational experiences. Both types of life chances are critical to the empowerment of any group, particularly those that have historically been at the sidelines of their societies. Important provisos for increased life chances in the context of the present discussion are educational policies and practices that are premised on the idea of building a just society. This means that research in the discipline that aims to empower participants (e.g. students) must shift from a focus on the processes and technical requirements for maintaining organizational stability, to a focus on people and their everyday experiences and future prospects. Attention to life chances also means that such inquiry must address issues that are related to fairness, legitimacy, impartiality, and mutual advantage vis à vis educational policy and practice (Corson, 1991). Because research that is based on the philosophy of critical realism seeks to transform the social world through the identification and deconstruction of operational societal structures (including attitudes, values and ideologies) that promote social injustices, it will be particularly useful to researchers in the discipline who are concerned with changing the status quo.

In the introduction to a special issue of *Educational Administration Quarterly* devoted to social justice matters, Marshall (2004) identifies several broad social justice challenges facing scholars and practitioners in the discipline which point to important research directions. These include the field's unpreparedness to address equality issues, the limited focus on the mismatch between the demographics of members of the profession and the clientele they serve, and the limited attention that is accorded to social justice issues in policy-making. Building on Marshall's proposals, it should be emphasized that for research in the field to lead to praxis, projects must be grounded in a deep understanding of the links between power and administrative practices on the one hand, and the broader socio-political context within which educational systems are located on the other. In short, as Bhaskar theorizes, meaningful research, which is inclusive and democratic, should be geared towards exposing structures that constrain people with the goal of improving their condition (the subjects of the inquiry) and subsequently, wider society. Moreover, as some writers have pointed out time and again, contemporary

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social realities in schools suggest the need for a research agenda that will move educational administration away from, in the words of Sackney and Mitchel (2002), “modernist . . . assumptions of leadership that are grounded in mechanistic, hierarchical, bureaucratic and patriarchal views of schooling” (p. 906). In critical realist philosophy, human interactions occur in open systems, which means that the social world is emergent as human beings continuously adapt to their environment.

Adopting critical realism as a philosophical guide will require some paradigm shifts since the practices of many researchers in the discipline are embedded in more orthodox approaches to which they have become attached. However, if we follow Kuhn’s (1970) logic, such a position is not immutable.

### NOTE

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