

Using Critical Realist Grounded Theory for Educational Research

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This paper develops the critical realist approach to grounded theory methodology (Looker, Vickers and Kington, 2021), and discusses its potential within educational research. The methodological framework for this grounded theory diverges from the popular constructivist approach and is, instead, heavily influenced by the classic, Glaserian approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2001). It is developed to be situated in a critical realist philosophy (Bhaskar, 1978), emphasising the importance of the emancipatory goal of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978, 1986, 2002; Belfrage & Hauf, 2016) in relation to educational research. A brief discussion on each of the dominant three families of grounded theory methodology will precede the exploration of the epistemological and ontological dilemmas faced when applying a critical realist philosophy in place of those already established. This discussion is used as justification why a critical realist approach must rely heavily on classic grounded theory methods and why it is particularly suited for research in education. Critical realism, which has been criticised as a philosophy without a methodology (Yeung, 1997; Fletcher, 2016) is shown as being able to handle the iterative approach of grounded theory methodology. A key outcome of this is to open discourse into how Glaser's emergence of theory (1992) can be intertwined with the emergent properties of reality explored in Bhaskar's critical realism. Focus is given to Bhaskar's (1978) description of the 'real' domain of reality and the subsequent emergence of empirically observable actions through a generative property. It is argued that these processes take place in open systems and as such can be researched using a grounded theory methodology.

This approach has been developed for a study which examined alienation of secondary school pupils from their learning and how teacher-pupil relationships are integral to developing and sustaining pupil engagement in secondary education. Pupil participants from the study have, during their time at secondary school, become known by senior leaders for repeated reports by staff as displaying disruptive behaviour. Subsequently, they have often struggled to form effective relationships with some of their teachers. Quantitative data were collected using Pianta's student-teacher relationship scale (2001) to analyse teachers' perspectives of negative relationships. This was triangulated with qualitative data gathered from interviews with both pupils and teachers. Participants were asked to explore their perspectives of their relationships, both positive and negative, in order to develop an understanding of the experience of both actors in reciprocal relationships.

The illustrative examples given throughout this paper will demonstrate how the research adapted grounded theory coding methods and comparative analysis to generate a substantive understanding of the area using a critical realist paradigm. The data collected are used to demonstrate a new coding framework which employs a retroductive technique (Belfrage and Hauf, 2016; Looker, Vickers and Kington, 2021) rather than an inductive approach for analysing empirical observations. Step by step details of how a critical realist lens allows the researcher to begin to identify underlying realities which have led to observed phenomena are shared and used to demonstrate how the constant comparison method has been adapted. The emancipatory objective of critical realism is examined in context of the participants, showcasing how this grounded theory methodology can give voice to subjugated or alienated pupils. The amended process of constant comparison is explored, showing how it can be used alongside critical realism's generative property of emergence to ensure that all data is reduced, as far as possible, to its causative concepts. These causative concepts are then considered as a means of identifying the reality experienced by alienated secondary school pupils, providing a platform for conclusions to be drawn from. Details are presented, using examples, to demonstrate how the outlined steps of analysis lead to conclusions and how these can be used an opportunity to suggest practical approaches which can be employed either on a micro or macro level to address the identified cause of alienation. The emancipatory objective of critical realism combined with the substantive theory produced by grounded theory allows for a discussion of the findings which are relevant for both researchers and practitioners.

The findings and identified substantive theory of pupil alienation are then situated in extant literature to demonstrate how the voices of the participants position the discussion in data and provide a platform to contribute to the limited discourse surrounding retrodution in grounded theory whilst simultaneously providing findings to address the researched inequities in education.

References

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