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Why has critical realism not been used more in educational leadership and management research? A critical realist exploration.

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Biographical note

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Abstract

Critical realism is an established post-positivist philosophy applied by researchers in a number of fields and yet it is little used in educational leadership and management (ELM) research. This article responds to calls from the field for a more critical approach to educational leadership and management research by offering critical realism as a way to address these concerns and it explores why critical realism has not featured more in the field, particularly as it could provide that more critical approach. The use of critical realism as analytical approach as well as a content enables the linkage of the calls from ELM to critical realist features and then to some constraints upon its use in the field. Theory around the application of critical realism is advanced providing insights for researchers in its use, though no claim is made that critical realism is the only way to do so.

Keywords: Critical realism, education, leadership, management, research.

Introduction

Critical realism is an established post-positivist philosophy applied by researchers in a number of fields and contexts related to the social sciences (Price and Martin 2018) and yet it is little used in educational leadership and management (ELM) research (Thorpe 2019). This article responds to calls from the field for a more critical approach to educational leadership and management research by offering critical realism as a way to address these concerns and it explores why critical realism has not featured more in the field, particularly as it could provide that more critical approach. The understanding of the application of critical realism is advanced providing insights for researchers in its use, though no claim is made that critical realism is the only way to do so.

Critical realism is deployed in the article as an analytical approach for this exploration as well as being part of the content explored. This dual approach encourages a reflexive attitude

recognising that this exploration arises from my experience in UK universities with their particular concerns, content and outlook drawing largely on Australasian, British, Irish, and North American literature. These settings are English speaking countries with developed higher education sectors including systems for research and its funding from state and private sources, where neo-liberal reforms have tended to dominate. My experience would not necessarily be the same as others in different contexts.

The next section outlines calls from researchers for more critical approaches to the ELM field. A knowledge of these calls informs the section that follows exploring how aspects of critical realism could respond to them. The penultimate section continues the critical realist approach by suggesting what may be constraining its use in the fieldⁱ before concluding with some implications and next steps for research. The article does not seek to provide a comprehensive overview of either critical realism or ELM but outlines the aspects most relevant to pursuing its aim.

Calls from within the field for a more critical approach to educational leadership and management research.

A relative newcomer, educational leadership and management (ELM) is a contested field 'still trying to prove its heritage and utility, still developing, still finding its way' (Torrance and Humes 2015, 804). A number of works outline a story of educational administration becoming educational management and then educational leadership with debates about whether these are either simply new labels for the same thing or else quite distinct entities (Bush 2008; Gronn 2007; Gunter 2004; Oplatka 2010; Thorpe 2014). The use of the phrase educational leadership and management (ELM) in this article reflects usage in the field that recognises some of these complexities (Bush, 2018).

Some advocate that ELM research should focus on promoting greater efficiency and effectiveness to address a perceived lack of impact resulting from a failure to build on

previous 'evidenced based' and 'what works' research (Beycioglu 2011; Brown and Zhang 2017). Others call for a more critical approach that problematizes and offers alternatives to dominant ideas in theory and practice (Capper and Young 2014; Eacott 2015; Gunter 2016; Santamaria and Santamaria 2012) such as the following five calls that are addressed in more detail below:

- to reject new managerialism,
- to re-evaluate what counts as leadership,
- for a broadening of participation in practice,
- for a greater recognition of wider influences on individual agency,
- and, to identify ways to promote social justice.

There are calls to reject new managerialism in education organizations and systems including its disguise of educational leadership. Critics claim new managerialism (sometimes referred to as New Public Management) involves the application to the public sector of Taylorist managerialist presumptions about the inevitability of progress through economic production and technological innovation which requires workers to be compliant and managers to have power to control them (Enteman 1993; Lynch et al. 2012; Thrupp and Willmott 2003). Critics also voice the concern that ELM research is too accepting of, and acquiescent to, the language of neo-liberalismⁱⁱ promoted by government and commercial forces, which privileges profit and investment whilst characterising caring as wasteful and burdensome leading to the reconstruction of ELM practitioners (Grummell et al. 2009; Gunter 2011; Lynch et al. 2012). They call for research that defies attempts to present simplistic technical solutions to what are complex social problems (Capper and Young 2014; Eacott 2015; Gronn 2007; Santamaria and Santamaria 2012) by, instead, addressing wider matters in education concerned with social justice, democracy and equity (Bogotch and Shields 2014; Gunter 2016).

The rejection of new managerialism is related to calls for a re-evaluation of what counts as leadership in education and the unmasking of the current leadership turn in the sector as neither neutral nor accidental. Instead, it is a politically and ideologically motivated turn to the promotion of the concept of the individual leader to divert attention from the commercial and value shift in the education sector (Morley 2013). There was considerable initial optimism about the capacity of educational leadership in the UK to challenge the dominant technical, social efficiency thinking of educational administration by privileging the moral, professional and democratic aspects of practice (Corson 2000; Grace 1995). However, the New Labour government refashioned educational leadership as a tool for new managerialist public reforms which has led to education becoming privatised, in as much as it is publically funded but under private control, justified by claims to quantifiable indicators of improvement (Glatter 2006; Gunter and Thomson 2009; Torrance and Humes 2015). Rejecting the trope of the heroic and unbounded individual leader frees research to consider a critical, collaborative and democratic social practice of leadership concerned with the aims of education (Capper and Young 2014; Gronn 2010; Santamaria and Santamaria 2012; Wood and Roberts 2018).

There are calls for research that will broaden participation in practice by recognising the different ways power can operate to limit who is allowed to participate, whose knowledge is accepted and who the field benefits particularly in terms of gender and race/ethnicity (Blackmore 2010; Johnson 2017; Lynch et al. 2012). Such calls include those to promote greater diversity amongst those postholders in the upper echelons of educational organizations, including women and other underrepresented groups, as well as ways to begin dismantling the hierarchy (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011; Santamaria and Gaetane 2014). Morley (2013) identifies how, despite the presence of women leaders, there remains misrecognition and gender bias in the managerial university reinforcing masculine constructions and hegemonies (see also Lynch et al. 2012).

A further problem of the heroic, single leader trope with its over emphasis on individual agency is how it leads to the decontextualization of ELM (Glatter 2006). There are calls within the field for a greater recognition of wider influences on individual agency through a return to the consideration of organization that puts the context back into ELM research (Close and Raynor 2010). Some argue that this research must neither ignore nor relegate the effects of context but, instead, lead to a better understanding of how to respond and adapt within these contexts (Hallinger 2018).

A frustration at the lack of emancipatory progress leads to calls for ways to promote social justice by developing concepts and tools to disrupt and provide alternatives to those idealisations of leadership that hinder justice (Blackmore 2010; Niesche and Keddie 2011; Wilkinson and Eacott 2013). There are further appeals for ways to go beyond seeking psychological feelings or understandings, which often appear to dominate research in the field, to reach something that will lead to change rather than simply giving voice to frustrations however keenly they are felt (Lynch et al. 2012).

Some features of critical realism relevant to educational leadership and management research.

A post-positivist philosophy of science, critical realism is a loose movement or meta-theoretical position encompassing different versions and phases developed by Roy Bhaskar (1944-2014) amongst others (for helpful introductions and some key readings see Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000; Archer et al. 1998; Archer et al. 2016; Edwards et al. 2014; Gorski 2013). It has been applied in a number of research fields and contexts in the social sciences including general education (Price and Martin 2018; Shipway 2011) but less so in ELM research (Thorpe 2019). This section seeks to establish a prima facie case for critical realism's helpfulness to address the calls, outlined in the previous section, for a more critical approach to ELM research by exploring the implications of the following four aspects:

- a transcendental realist ontology,

- generative mechanisms and structures in the social world,
- absence and change,
- and an emancipatory axiology.

A transcendental realist ontology

Critical realism holds a transcendental realist ontology that views reality as both multi-layered (laminated) and independent (transcendent) of the human mind whilst critically conceiving science as a human activity. This ontology has implications for ELM research, not least, that ontology must be distinguished from epistemology to avoid the epistemological fallacy that reduces existence to only the empirical knowable (Shipway 2011). Repudiating that fallacy enables the contextual nature of ELM practice to be recognised rather than decontextualised.

The real, actual and empirical are the three levels or domains of a stratified reality. Barnett (2013) uses the example of universities to illustrate laminated reality. The empirical level comprises our experiences of what happens in the world such as what an individual experiences at a university within a specific geo-historical context. The actual contains the events occurring in the world both those we experience as well as those we do not. The example within this level would be the immediate forms that universities have taken in the world which may, or may not, be experienced by an individual. The real level encompasses the underlying, deep structures in which, for example, universities have their being. This is the particularly hard to access level of mechanisms and structures existing independently of our experience with the potential for the events they may, or may not, generate (Shipway 2011). The difficulty in assessing the real level leads critical realism to assert the fallibility of human knowledge through recognising a distinction between the transitive and the intransitive dimensions. The intransitive dimension contains the world as it really is including casually efficacious structures with powers and tendencies. Those historical and cultural

theories which attempt to explain the real through provisional and fallible concepts form the transitive dimension (Shipway, 2011).

The empirical is the most accessible level so critical realist research approaches begin with surface level experiences and events but the exploration can then move to identifying the underlying structures and mechanisms that generate these experiences within specific contexts. Therefore, the calls for ELM research to go beyond seeking psychological feelings or understandings, which are often the concerns of constructivist research (Lynch et al. 2012), are answered by critical realism's potential for providing a way to understand how similar feelings re-occur in different contexts or at different times. This similarity emerges from either the underlining structures remaining the same or else, even where change has happened, there can be new complexities that thwart progress (O'Mahoney et al. 2018; Shipway 2011). Stylianou and Zembylas (2019) use critical realism as a conceptual tool that can identify head teachers' spiritual actions in their efforts to include ethnic minority students because they say it enables a more holistic and multi-dimensional view, which is 'complex, emergent and interdependent' (p. 12).

The recognition of the epistemological fallacy helps to explain the decontextualization of ELM research as existing positivist theory and research in ELM act to narrow its focus to assessment and league tables to the exclusion of matters of social justice and democracy (Bogotch and Shields 2014; Gunter and Thompson 2009). Instead of positing a set of objective techniques for ELM, a critical realist ontology brings a fuller understanding of its contextual nature as a social practice which addresses calls for a re-evaluation of what counts as leadership by unmasking the reductionism of new managerialism and heroic leadership. Critical realism shows that ELM is not a social practice constructed only by individuals without constraint but sits inimically connected to social structure, being influenced by and influencing social structure, as set forth by Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA) (Bhaskar 1979; 2016). This theory of person/society

connection illuminates how social artefacts such as ELM are produced by the interaction of both individual agents and social structures such as organisations, networks, policies and resources. Therefore, abstracting the former (the individual agent) misses out the latter (the social structure) leading to reductionism.

Egbo (2005), from her context of educational administration in Canada, used critical realism to outline how ELM comprises a distinctive set of geo-historical events and phenomena accessible first through the empirical level. She reaffirms Bhaskar's TMSA by showing how the social world consists of both agents and structures with separate powers and tendencies. Drawing on Egbo's work, these elements of the social world cannot be subsumed within a teleology of student achievement or decontextualized by a discourse of generic leadership theory and skills, notwithstanding the existence of some similarities between contexts. The implications are that ELM practitioners' accounts constitute basic social science evidence due to the casual efficacy of those reasons within those accounts. It is critical realism's consideration of people's accounts as valid research data and its pluralist methodology that attracted Egbo (2005) along with its attention to promoting social justice through that research.

The current dominant ELM discourses of new managerialism and overemphasis on individual agency contribute to the decontextualizing of theory and practice from the education organizations and situations in which it is practiced but this can be countered by critical realist approaches. Critical realism's application can show more clearly the reductionism at work in the leadership turn and new managerialism that act to dehumanise human relations by reducing ELM practice to a set of prescribed technological procedures and methods. O'Reilly and Reed (2010) use critical realism to identify 'leaderism' as a disguise of new managerialism that offers leadership as an 'organisational panacea'. They outline the neo-liberal re-orientation of public services towards the consumer-citizen through the appropriation and reconstitution of leadership as a social and organisational technology.

This 'leaderism' creates new structures for what it is to be a leader and it is through identifying and examining these new structures that calls from the ELM field for a rejection of new managerialism can be addressed.

As ELM is only discernible in context rather than abstracted normative propositions and prescriptions, critical realism can help ELM research to address calls to re-evaluate what counts as leadership and to broaden participation in ELM practice. One way is to choose to concentrate upon and reveal contextualised accounts of practitioners as valid research data rather than traditional heroic stories of mainly male chief executives. In this way, practitioner accounts need not be ignored or concealed as ELM emerges as an entity through specific geo-historical contexts, in other words, through the lived lives of practitioners (Kempster and Parry 2011; Thorpe 2019).

Holding a transcendental realist ontology in tandem with a relativist epistemology promotes methodological pluralism, in that critical realism rejects positivist and interpretivist assumptions but does not reject their research methodologies wholesale (Kempster and Parry 2011; Scott 2011). The transitive and intransitive distinction at work within critical realism's ontological view has led some writers to argue for an epistemology stance which is usually more associated with qualitative and social constructivist research approaches rather than seeing it as a way to simply rehabilitate quantitative methodologies (Al-Amoudi & Willmott 2011).

Starting with a 'description' of the problem, critical realism seeks to explain what is going on within a context because people's accounts constitute basic evidence due to the casual efficacy of the reasons within those accounts. Critical realism speaks of 'the interaction of a real environment with the casually efficacious interior world of the individual agent' (Shipway 2011, 176) because actions are related to people making decisions based on reasons, knowledge and values however fallible these might be. Yet research does not stop at this

point because the realist but fallibilist ontological stance enables researchers to seek out the presence and effects of causal or generative mechanisms rather than, or in addition to, seeking multivariate correlations (Miller and Tsang 2010).

Generative mechanisms and structures in the social world

Critical realist researchers seek to identify the generative mechanisms and structures in the social world. This identification enables a rebalancing of the relationship between agency and structure creating a new focus of research that can address calls from the ELM research field, such as, those appeals for the recognition of the wider influences on individual agency including organizational structures (Close and Raynor 2010; Glatter 2006; Hallinger 2018). In rejecting the idea that the individual is able to fully control his or her situation with unfettered agency, critical realism does not discount individual agency but recognises the complex interplay of agency and structure within the specific contexts of institutions (Miller 2015).

Emergence takes on a specific meaning in critical realism within the agency and structure interplay at different levels of the laminated ontology. These structures are real in the physical and social world rather than simply human constructs as they 'endure and operate independently of our knowledge, our experience and the conditions which allow us to assess them' (Bhaskar 1978, 25). Writers adopting critical realism can appear to use the terms structures and mechanisms interchangeably. However, Gorski (2013) writes of a more recent preference for structures as mechanisms can mislead a reader into assuming critical realism is positing a static and repetitious understanding. Instead of some fixed number of Platonic-like forms, there are new and old mechanisms and structures operating in fluid ways arising from complex interactions at various levels (O'Mahoney et al. 2018). However, the use of the phrase generative mechanisms remains popular to signal the emergent activity within and between levels (Gorski 2013).

The awareness of historical and other perspectives includes being alive to the re-orientations of ideas and the production of retro-ideas such as new managerialism with its positivist, social-efficiency roots. Archer (1995, 1997) developed the morphogenetic approach to explore and understand centralised and decentralised educational systems. It is a historical form of analysis involving 'a given structure...which conditions but does not determine' and 'social interaction' leading to 'structural elaboration or modification' (Archer 1995, 91).

An idea arising from the morphogenetic approach is that knowledge and ideas may be active or asleep awaiting to be activated at a later date. In other words, the structures do not cease to exist even though they may not be generative mechanisms. Enabling structures from the past to be drawn upon presents ways to be liberated from claims of those in power that there is only one logical, technical direction for the development of its practice and the type of research that should be conducted. The understanding of enduring structures of education organizations and society and how they both enable and limit agency opens new ways to explore practice and what it might become. Yet the use of the morphogenetic approach must be accompanied by an acknowledgement of the difficulties of identifying and describing specifics of structures (Archer et al. 2016).

An implication of the morphogenetic approach in ELM research would be to provide multi-level descriptions as critical realism's stratified and differentiated reality enables a focus on underlying structures and mechanisms. Researchers seek the generative mechanisms within the practice context rather than transferring assumptions from another time or place. Structures and mechanisms help to explain the enablements and constraints in ELM practice such as in Naicher, Grant and Pillay's (2016) case study of leadership practice in the context of a disadvantaged South African school in which practitioners appeared to remain resilient. They apply Archer's insights to explain how the historical practice within the school limited current post holders but did not wholly constrain new structures and practices so leading to a re-evaluation of leadership in a more collaborative form (Naicher et al. 2016).

Elonga Mboyo (2019) also draws on critical realism to offer a nuanced approach to educational policy and practice development involving the redefinition of the nature of head teachers' and teachers' agency as they implement but also formulate policy within a complex network of stakeholders. His use of Bhaskar's laminated ontology and Archer's understanding of structures uncovers the agency that these practitioners do have in their local contexts.

Social systems are open ones because entities emerge at different levels from complex relationships between multiple agents and structures where powers and tendencies are both actualised and not (Archer et al. 2016; Gorski 2013; Shipway 2011). The mis-alignment of the levels of reality explains the apparent absurdity that ELM practitioners can report feeling both enabled and restricted in what they do practice. These layers are often 'out of phase' in our experience.

The quest for the critical realist researcher becomes that of uncovering the tendencies and powers of entities rather than, as positivism does, seeking regulatory laws for events (Gorski 2013). Bhaskar (1978, 95) gives an example when he says, 'It is true that the path of my pen does not violate any laws of physics. But it is not determined by any either'. For example, calls to broaden participation in practice are often thwarted by the tension between agency and structure, including who is offered leadership development opportunities and what those opportunities are with implications for who is successful in obtaining more senior posts in educational organizations (Thorpe 2019).

The morphogenetic approach is used by Clegg (2016) in a way that could help to address concerns around the lack of diversity in senior positions in educational organizations particularly where race and gender intersect. She considers agency and ontology within intersectional analysis by offering Archer's approach to reconceptualise such analysis whilst

recognising the commonalities with poststructuralist uses. She shows how Archer 'neither reduces society to individual experience, nor experience to society' (Clegg 2016, 508) so enabling the articulation of human agency and historical emergence that can lead to meaningful research for change.

The multi-layered reality can help to address calls to reject new managerialism as Willmott (2002) uses the morphogenetic approach to look at the tensions between new managerialism and child-centred philosophy in primary school case studies. He focuses on primary school teachers by exploring how the tensions within the particular school contexts lead them to acting against their beliefs, in part, when they do not exercise the agency that they have in the cause of resistance (Willmott 2002).

The critical realist laminated ontology allied with the understanding that structures are not solid explains how a leadership turn in education can take place. New managerialism's disguise of leaderism can be real and powerful as the decontextualized practice in the public sector changes the structures which give rise to leadership events and experiences (Morley 2013; O'Reilly and Reed's 2010). These structures are independent of, and not wholly contingent upon, the people involved in ELM practice as new managerialism involves leaders promoting the neo-liberal project so repositioning education as a 'marketable service' acting as both willing (and also coerced) but also constrained (but also enabled) agents (Lynch et al. 2012).

Absence and change

The concept of absence and change are linked. The former is an ontological reality rather than the non-existence of something, whilst the latter is contrasted with difference. Both absence and absencing are synonymous with negativity, representing ills that entail falsehoods and constraints that lead to change and not simply a different arrangement with little or no transformative or redetermination (Shipway 2011). For example, in childhood

studies, Alderson's (2013, 2015) two volume work deploys these understandings of structures, absence and change to uncover the theoretical fallacies and empirical overgeneralizations used by adults to absent the real experiences, capabilities and interests of children so they can pursue their own theories, policies and goals.

Critical realism can be used for 'crap detection' (Corson 1995) as its explanatory critique can reveal the lineage and the effects of constraining structures and mechanisms at each level of a stratified reality, for example, how and why new managerialism absences ideas of carefulness (see Lynch et al. 2012). Critical realism can ask what missing mechanisms are involved in the absence of marginalized groups in senior leadership roles addressing calls to broaden participation and the absence of ways to promote social justice. Absence drives the emergence of an agenda of change through the endeavours of 'constraining constraints' and 'absenting absences' (Shipway 2011, 183). These absences help to explain why things as they are now but also contain the potential for the future hence 'subversive and transformational' purposes and its emancipatory endeavour bringing change not just difference (Shipway 2011).

Emancipatory axiology

Axiology is the study of value and what is valued above another. An emancipatory axiology is related to change as critical realism values emancipation and freedom as the ends of research. Critical realism's adherence to judgemental rationality and a cautious ethical naturalism means that all criteria for accounts of the world are not equal but some ideas might well be better than others to promote human flourishing whilst taking care to reject simplistic moves from 'is' to 'ought' (Archer et al. 2016; Gorski 2013).

Linked to ideas of change involving absenting oppressive constraints, this emancipatory axiology promotes agency whilst acknowledging its limits by distinguishing as in TMSA (Bhaskar 2016) between agency and structure so it can steer clear of assuming the

domination of one by the other, whilst recognising they are always in tension. Shipway (2011) uses critical realism's emancipatory potential to illuminate educational theory and critique the enterprise of education, whilst Egbo (2005) is drawn to critical realism for ELM because it shows how emancipation and social transformation are the legitimate ends of research in this and other fields.

Critical realist tools of emancipation provide ways to identify what is empowering in ELM through revealing what is constraining and what supports the emancipation of those involved. In other words, the idea of the possibilities of being reproductive of existing structures but also emancipatory. Tuominen and Lehtonen (2018) use critical realism to examine the transformative agency of the collective and the individual within professional service firms. In the context of digital entrepreneurship, Martinez Dy, Martin and Marlow (2018) identify the enabling conditions needed for this area of work to become emancipatory for the women involved in their research. These approaches could be adopted in ELM research.

Corson (2000) puts forward an argument for a form of emancipatory leadership in education by implicitly drawing on ideas of structures and absence from his previous overtly critical realist writings (1991, 1998). His analysis of a specific case from a school in New Zealand, illustrates what he had explained in one of those earlier publications when he wrote that, 'We can change or remove structures or we can strengthen them by the things we say and do in local settings' (Corson 1998, 4). From a critical realist viewpoint, the way people talk about events and their views both reflects and influences the real. Though there should be no underestimation of the difficulties in changing social reality, a critical realist emancipatory axiology suggests not only how the structures of new managerialism in educational leadership are generated and maintained but also that they can be challenged. Therefore, there can be a real change in language which has an impact on behaviour and reality so that, for example, the turn to leadership in education can itself be turned creating a more

collaborative and democratic form of leadership in the sector which critical approaches to ELM seek to establish.

To illustrate how research also contributes to changing or removing of structures, Clegg (2005) deploys critical realism to critique systematic reviews in education revealing how evidence-based practice can undermine professional autonomy but that the methodology could be transformed into something critical and emancipatory. She outlines how such reviews 'are being used to reposition practitioner knowledge as inferior and to govern practice in new ways' (Clegg 2005, 426) before going on to explain how researchers can maintain their critical stance towards its use.

Calls from the ELM researchers for ways to promote social justice can be addressed by equipping researchers and practitioners with critical realist tools to unmask theoretical fallacies, empirical overgeneralizations and absences as Alderson (2013, 2015) provides for the field of childhood studies. Shipway (2011) argues that school teachers must be involved in their own emancipation before seeking to emancipate others. In order to engage in this emancipatory activity, they need to be equipped with tools for self-emancipation, not least so they are enabled to discern those aspects that enable and those which constrain human flourishing. The tools of reflection, evaluation, self-criticism and collegiality that Shipway identifies can be equally valuable for ELM researchers and practitioners. Barnett (2013) offers critical realist enabled imagining as a way to realise the potential of universities for human flourishing rather than being trapped within discourses of despair. He sees the task of leadership as being to enable new imaginings and convert these into policies and practices with an emancipatory axiology.

In summary, critical realism provides insights to address calls from the ELM field for a more critical approach to research. Its realist ontological position and relativist epistemological stance can illuminate the structures and mechanisms operating at different levels (real and

actual) starting with identifying observable experiences and the actual events which those mechanisms have generated. This task is undertaken within the context of its emancipatory axiology and urgency for change to cultivate human flourishing.

Constraints upon critical realism's use in educational leadership and management research.

Having presented a prima facie case for relevance for critical realism's use in ELM research, it appears that a lack of relevance to some of the concerns expressed in the field does not explain the low level of awareness. This section continues the critical realist approach by suggesting five possible constraints upon its use in the field, which are:

- the dominance and re-assertion of the epistemological fallacy,
- economic and regulatory structural expectations,
- the overlooking of differences between critical realism and other critical theories,
- fear of an emancipatory axiology,
- and the implicit use of critical realism in research.

The dominance and re-assertion of the epistemological fallacy in ELM research continues to constrain critical realism's use. This may be reinforced by the continued influence of technical, social efficiency thinking upon education policy but also through the ELM field's perception of itself as a relative newcomer seeking recognition through positivism, allied to new managerialist concerns, with its promise of certainty (Torrance and Humes 2015). The emerging field subject status syndrome is something Alderson (2013) identifies for critical realism and childhood studies with O'Mahoney et al. (2018, 580) presenting critical realism as a 'victim of its relative newness'. In addition, much of the research conducted in the field, especially outside of the UK, draws on management theory and research, initially from the United States, that was concerned with commercial businesses and was firmly placed in the

positivism paradigm so being open to the epistemological fallacy. It is not the use of quantitative methodology or methods that critical realism rejects but the positivism often assumed explicitly or implicitly in such research (Miller and Tsang 2010).

Economic and regulatory structural expectations, often linked to neo-liberal and new managerialist approaches, such as leadership programmes, research funding mechanisms, student research grants and teaching can all act as constraints on critical realism's use in the field (Alderson 2013). The mechanisms of achievements in doctoral work can also constrain the use of critical realism. A doctoral candidate, writes about the hostility she faced and the lack of space to discuss critical realism as a possible approach as well as the warning she received about the negative repercussions on her career (de Bernardi 2018). Alderson (2013) says that with research targets in her UK based career, she feels the exploration of the use of critical realism was a luxury afforded by semi-retirement. The critical realist conception of structures as real things provides tools to see why the initiatives in ELM such as innovative leadership programmes might both enable but also thwart the use of critical realism in research (Thorpe 2019).

Another constraint is the tendency for the differences between critical realism and other critical theories to be overlooked or passed over. Whilst sharing a critical approach and post-positivist critique seeking to address theory and practice for emancipatory purposes with other critical theories, critical realism departs over matters of ontology and structures offering a transformative concept of agency and praxis based on the idea of absence (Shipway 2011). Critical realism's emancipatory potential to illuminate different explanations and possibilities is reduced when it is overlooked and disregarded. Critical realism stands apart from yet nevertheless within the stable of critical theories and this article has sought to identify a number of those distinguishing aspects of critical realism with their implications for ELM.

A fear that critical realism's emancipatory axiology will make a difference may also be operating as a constraint. As Bhaskar remarked in conversation with Hartwig,

'...any philosophy that is really going to make a difference is avoided like death. So I would say the fourth thing is the emancipatory impulse; this is the reason why critical realism is not in vogue- although it is attracting a lot of attention from those who really want to know' (Bhaskar with Hartwig 2010, 215).

Despite calls for ways to promote social justice, there is some fear of a lack of practicality with O'Mahoney et al. (2018) noting how critical realism's commitment to emancipation can be 'off putting to academics more comfortable with ambiguous narratives' (p. 580) regardless of the caveats made by critical realists in acknowledging their own fallibility.

A further constraint upon the awareness of critical realism in ELM research is its implicit or covert use in research where critical realist principles underlie or even underpin the research though mention of it is absent (see O'Mahoney et al. 2018). In an article on emancipatory leadership, Corson (2000) does not explicitly mention critical realism despite his earlier writings which openly refer to it (Corson 1991, 1995, 1998). Wilmott (2002) refers to the morphogenetic approach in his exploration of new managerialism in primary schools rather than critical realism. A number of critical realist terms such as mechanisms, enablements and constraints are used more widely than they were when Bhaskar and Archer used them (Gorski 2013). A proposition for a vision for collaborative school leadership by Woods and Roberts (2018) draws heavily on critical realist ideas of intentionality and emergence as well as citing Archer and also Bhasker but does not mention critical realism as a term. This implicit or covert use may also reflect the research methodological pluralism of critical realism, for example, where rather than proposing novel methods, researchers use a variety of established research methods within a critical realist approach (Miller and Tsang 2010).

The linkage of the constraints upon the use of critical realism to the aspects of critical realism from the previous section and to the calls from the ELM field reveals how the generative mechanisms behind the ills of the field that leads to those calls are also those

that constrain critical realism’s use. There may well be more generative mechanisms and a caveat needs to be given about the difficulties of identifying mechanisms and/or causal powers (Gorski 2013), but there appears common purpose between critical realists and ELM researchers in seeking to absent those absences and constrain those constraints.

Conclusion

This article has responded to calls in the field for a more critical approach by offering critical realism as a way to address these concerns and has considered why it has not been used more in ELM research to date. The use of critical realism as an analytical approach as well as a content has enabled the linkage of the calls for more critical ELM research to establishing a prima facie case for the relevance of features of critical realism in addressing these and then to suggesting what may be constraining its use in the field (Table 1).

Table 1: A summary of research calls, relevant aspects of critical realism and constraints.

<i>Calls from the ELM field</i>	<i>Aspects of critical realism</i>	<i>Constraints upon its use in ELM</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calls to reject ‘new managerialism’ • Calls for a re-evaluation of what counts as leadership • Calls to broaden participation in practice • Calls for a greater recognition of wider influences on individual agency • Calls for ways to promote social justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A transcendental realist ontology • Generative mechanisms and structures in the social world • Absence and change • Emancipatory axiology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominance and re-assertion of the epistemological fallacy • Economic and regulatory structural expectations • Overlooking differences between critical realism and other critical theories • Fear of an emancipatory axiology • Implicit use of critical realism

Theory has been advanced by engaging in the under labouring around the application of critical realism within the field with implications for research practice making this a point of reference for future research. Yet there is much to be done to further explore the use and application of critical realism in the field including understanding and addressing the enablements and constraints which are the focus of the article.

Critical realism is not the only way to explore a field of study but it could be used as part of a post-positive critique to greater benefit. In line with critical realism's transitive/intransitive distinction, I make no claim that my experience would be the same for everyone and encourage others to undertake similar explorations in their contexts. With the reflexive acknowledgement of my focus on economically developed English speaking countries and specifically my own context in England, it is important for research (both theoretical and empirical) to be conducted in other contexts so broadening the base, including non-English speaking countries (Bush 2018).

A significant amount of ground has been covered in this article in line with the critical realist rejection of the reductionism that narrows and closes off avenues of thought for future research. However, more work is needed to develop these areas. First, there remains more of the under labouring to be done around the aspects of critical realism at this early stage that can address concerns within ELM showing its potential benefits as well as identifying relevant generative mechanisms. Yet the task of showing how it can be useful in ELM needs to be backed up with empirical research such as its use in critiquing dominant discourses and opening up emancipatory trajectories (Thorpe 2018) and the critical realist rereading of systematic reviews of existing work (Clegg 2005). The work by McAvoy and Butler (2018) in developing a critical realist method for applied business research could be helpfully considered in ELM not by adopting their approach wholesale but in conducting a contextually specific guide for ELM practitioner researchers because the rehumanising imperative of critical realism involves giving back agency, however constrained that might. Therefore, ELM practitioner inquiry and research with a critical realist emancipatory axiology should continue to be supported offering a way to understand the real agency of ELM practitioners lost in the overemphasis on structure and discourse as well as the romantic heroism of leaderism.

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ⁱ See Table 1 for a summary of research calls, critical realist relevant aspects and constraints.

ⁱⁱ Neo-liberalism has been conceptualized in many ways since its identification at the latter end of the 20th century though hyper-individualism and free market ideology are frequent aspects of its seemingly all-pervasive influence in a globalised world (Dundon and Rafferty 2018; Harvey 2005). The relationship between neo-liberalism and new managerialism was initially outlined by Clarke (2004a, 2004b) who noted common concerns and influences upon ideas, thoughts and practices including the reduction of the public realm and the impact upon the welfare state. Managerialism has been seen as 'a means of making material the ideology or discourse of neoliberalism' (Harlow et al. 2012, 536) though there are some differences with new managerialism's greater emphasis on the primacy of organizations and governance structures compared to a neo-liberal individualistic consumer mentality (Clarke 2004a, 2004b).