

A Critical Realist Methodology for Examining Alternative Schooling Programs for Youth at Risk

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a critical realist explanatory critique of alternative schooling programs for youth at risk, taking place at three case study sites. Through this critique the author pursues the question, "Are alternative provisions of schooling working for youth at risk? Are they working academically? Are they working socially?" Academics here is viewed through the lens of literacy learning and associated pedagogies. Social outcomes are posited as positive social behaviours and continued engagement in learning.

A four phased analysis, drawing not only on critical realism but also on interpretive and subject specific theories is used to elicit an explanatory answer to the above question. An overall framework is a critical realist methodology as set out in *Explaining Society* (Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). Consequently in phase one: the author firstly, *describes* the phenomena of alternative schooling programs taking place at three case study sites through staff narratives; secondly, *resolves* staff narratives into imaginable historical causal components of 'generative events', 'prior schooling structures', 'models of alternative schooling', 'purpose', 'individual agency', and 'relations with linked community organisations'; and thirdly, by posing *transcendental questions* about each component uses *retroduction* to uncover structures, underlying mechanisms and powers, and individual agency. In the second phase the researcher uses grounded theory to *theoretically redescribe* causal categories. A transcendental question is then applied to this redescription. In the third phase, the research phenomena are again *theoretically redescribed* this time using three theories associated with literacy and literacy pedagogies. This redescription is again questioned as to the necessary components. The final phase makes an explanatory critique by *comparing and critiquing* all previous explanations, *recontextualising* them in a wider macro reality of alternative schooling.

Through this critical realist explanatory critiquing process, an answer emerges not only to *whether* alternative provisions of schooling are working, but also *how* and *why* they are *not* working, with realistically based implications for improvement.

PURSUING THE RESEARCH QUESTION – CRITICAL REALISM, A PHILOSOPHICAL & METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

To pursue the question, “Are alternative provisions of schooling working academically and socially for youth at risk?” the author sought an appropriate ontology and epistemology on which to base her doctoral study of literacy learning for youth at risk, at three alternative schooling sites in Queensland, Australia. Many previous studies in the area of alternative education for youth at risk seemed to concentrate on *what* happened at these sites, rather than on *why* and *how* they happened, or on *what* participants said with little or no analysis of the complexity of social, cultural and individual contexts underlying participant narrations. Critical realism seemed applicable. It provided both a philosophical and a methodological framework. Philosophically critical realism allowed for building an epistemology in very fluid open learning systems (Bhaskar, 1979), namely alternative schooling for youth at risk; while nevertheless acknowledging the reality of those systems, a reality that existed apart from students, teachers and administrators perceptions and narrations. Critical realism by avoiding conflating *reality* and *knowledge about reality*, but rather perceiving them as two dimensions allowed for an explanatory analysis that acknowledged an independent depth ontology of *Real* structures and mechanisms (Danermark et al., 2002), and an epistemology independent of *Experience* such as the number of times something was experienced or observed (Sayer, 2004). As Moren and Blom (2003, p. 41) stressed this understanding of “the dual character of reality”, or as Bhaskar posited of the “intransitive” and “transitive objects of knowledge” (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 16), is what facilitates a causal explanation of the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of social phenomena.

Also informing the explanatory analysis of the reality of this case study phenomena is the way critical realists have expanded on Bhaskar’s (1979) original conceiving of emergence in the social sciences. Cruickshank reports how Archer (1995) “makes a distinction between structural emergent properties (SEPs) such as the relations of capitalism, cultural emergent properties (CEPs) [such as Catholicism], and people’s emergent properties” (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 112). This study this paper is based on has conceived of emergent properties as proceeding from the interaction of individuals, structures and mechanisms; individuals: students and teachers; structures: a variety of organizational bodies; mechanisms: the processes and products of both individuals and structures that trigger emergent properties (Table 1). It has also noted that the ability to trigger an emergent property depends on the inherent agency or power of the structures, individuals and mechanisms.

Critical realism has also provided a methodological framework for an explanatory analysis. The “[6] Stages of explanatory research based on critical realism” as elaborated by Danermark et al. (2002, p. 109) was woven into a four phased analysis of case study data. Prior to analysis, data collected from the three case study sites used interpretive methods of triangulation for building “thick descriptions” of the research phenomena (Anderson, 1989;

Eisenhardt, 2002). Data collection methods consisted of interviews, observations, a questionnaire and artefact collection. This was done over a one year period between 2004 and 2005 with a 3 Visit program consisting of several days at each site per visit. Additionally follow up phone calls continued until 2007 to clarify transcription and analysis. Teachers all filled in a questionnaire to elicit their understandings of literacy and literacy pedagogies. Interviews were conducted using three question proformas, but also allowed for wide ranging extrapolations. The first proforma collected information from those most knowledgeable about the overall running and development of each site, the coordinators and teaching staff; three staff members per site. Questions on the second and third proformas mirrored each other, in that four students from each site were interviewed using one proforma, and the teacher directly involved with their literacy learning was interviewed using a second proforma, with the same questions but phrased differently to glean a teacher's perspective. As Wainright indicates this interview technique was based on a critical ethnographic model of interpretivism where questions were informed by "insights gleaned from social critique" (1997, para.11). Artefacts collected included various student work samples (computer screens, computer generated, paper generated and 3D artworks), workbooks, assessment items, school reports, and curriculum materials. Data thus collected was analysed differently employing Danermark et al.'s six stage process of a critical realist explanatory research (2002, p. 109).

CRITICAL REALIST EXPLANATORY STAGES & FOUR PHASED ANALYSIS

Stage One: Description making use of the "everyday concepts" and "interpretations of persons involved" (ibid., pp.109-110) consisted of a pure description of the three alternative schooling programs. This was provided through staff narratives. Apart from being divided into 'history', 'people' and 'programs', these narratives were uncritiqued. Thus three case study profiles were outlined before an analysis took place. To summarize, each alternative case study site represented a different model of non mainstream, alternative schooling. The first case study site followed the Flexi School Model, which allowed for either teacher or non teacher staffing. The second case study model, a rural Alternative Education Centre was one of five trial annexes established by Queensland's State Education Department. The third case study model was an ongoing one year program designed for youth at risk, called *Certificate I in Vocational Access for Youth At Risk*, which took place at a Brisbane suburban Technical and Further Education College (TAFE).

PHASE ONE: Analytical Resolution & Retrodution

Once a descriptive profile was compiled, Danermark et al.'s remaining stages were then inculcated into four distinct phases of data analysis. It should be noted Danermark and associates (ibid.) admitted these stages of critical realist explanatory research are not set in hierarchal concrete, but can be applied somewhat fluidly, albeit in a forward progressing

momentum. In phase one, *Stage Two: Analytical Resolution* staff narratives were resolved into imaginable historical causal components of 'generative events', 'prior schooling structures', 'models of alternative schooling', 'purpose', 'individual agency', and 'relations with linked community organisations'. To interrogate each of these causal components *Stage Four: Retroduction* transcendental questions were posed as to the necessary structures/mechanisms/agency inherent in each historical component. An overarching question for this phase was, "What are the necessary conditions that brought each alternative schooling site into being, and that made it possible for their continued existence?" Responses to retroductive questioning for each historical component combined to provide an explanation to this overarching transcendental question. To summarize this was a needed "different" teaching and administrative approach for youth at risk.

PHASES TWO & THREE: Abduction, Theoretical Redescription and Retroduction

The second and third phases employed Danermark et al.'s *Stage Three: Abduction and Theoretical Redescription* and *Stage Four: Retroduction*. In the second phase the researcher first used grounded theory to scrutinize all interviewed students' and teachers' lay narratives and abduct causal categories and subcategories underlying teaching and administrative approaches at the case study sites. Once causal categories or components were abducted, they were again interrogated through retroduction as to the necessary components of a "needed different teaching and administrative approach"; the latter question having emerged from the previous transcendental critique of phase one. The "different" approach needed was found to be "individual and relational" as opposed to technician and functional approaches of mainstream schooling organisations, which tended to be rule focussed and inflexible.

The process of theoretical redescription and retroduction was repeated in the third phase, only employing different theoretical models to examine different aspects of the research phenomena. Three subject specific theoretical models for literacy learning and teaching were applied to the teaching and learning practices extent at each site. The data informing these practices came through observations, artefacts and interviews as described above. Theoretical literacy models employed were the National Reporting System (Coates, Fitzpatrick, McKenna, & Makin, 1996), a hierarchical literacy standard utilized in adult literacy programs at TAFEs across Australia, and the Four Resources Model (Freebody, 2004; Luke & Freebody, 1999) a set of critical literacy resources needed to decode, make meaning from and critique any given text. A final theoretical teaching model utilized was Productive Pedagogies (Education Queensland, 2001-2003), which outlines four sets of teaching practices to facilitate learning. The first model was utilized to determine the literacy levels of two students at each alternative schooling site. The latter two models were utilized as a discussion template to determine underlying social and academic structures affecting the same at risk students' engagement and outcomes. Drawing on the answer to phase two's transcendental question, positive and negative components of literacy productions and

pedagogies were interrogated by the question, “What are the necessary social and academic components that have resulted in and exemplify improved literacy outcomes?” The explanation was positive academic outcomes viewed through a literacy lens consisted of: improved literacy levels, improved functional literacy practices and the development of literacy practices that related to individual skills acquisition. However there were also negative literacy outcomes: students across all sites did not become critical practitioners of powerful discourses. Implemented Productive Pedagogies associated with positive social outcomes were: student directed and real world activities, either implicit or provided through incidental activities; teacher talk exemplified by narratives, substantive conversations, metalanguage, and explicit instruction; one on one individualized instruction, facilitated by small class sizes; and social support and recognition of difference. Positive pedagogies not utilized in the alternative schooling classrooms were: pedagogies associated with Intellectual Quality, specifically higher order thinking and knowledge as problematic; and pedagogies associated with critical thinking and critiquing knowledge. The effects of these implemented and unimplemented academic and social components were addressed by the phase four critique.

PHASE FOUR: Theories and Abstractions Compared, Concretization and Contextualization

The fourth phase included critical realist explanatory research’s *Stage Five: Theories and Abstractions Compared* whereby extraneous causal components were eliminated, which did not implicitly relate to the research question. *Stage Six: Concretization and Contextualization* resituated the necessary structures, mechanisms, individual agencies into a wider macro reality of alternative schooling, youth at risk and literacy; into a wider context of related phenomenon; and into a transformed view of the phenomenon under study. The research question “Are alternative provisions of schooling working academically and socially for youth at risk?” being reframed in critical realist terms, as firstly, “What are the necessary academic and social components of successful alternative schooling provision for youth at risk?” and secondly, “Are these necessary components being implemented in alternative schooling settings?” In this way a causal explanation based on a depth ontology was able to be obtained for a critical realist explanatory research study.

“DOING” A CRITICAL REALIST CRITIQUE – ABDUCTING CORE COMPONENTS

The following section gives a more detailed example of the “doing” of a critical realist explanatory critique, focussing on *Stage Two: Analytical Resolution* and *Stage Four: Retroduction* as briefly described above. By so doing, it is hoped to exemplify how critical realism by resolving and interrogating core research components is able to abduct a stratified social reality and thus contribute to a detailed understanding of the *how* and *why* of a research phenomena. As described above staff narratives were resolved into the

following imaginable historical causal components and then interrogated as to their necessary structures/mechanisms/agency. The following explanation ensued.

Generative Events and Prior Schooling Structures

Regarding the generative events, the genesis of each school ranged from the individual level (Flexi School) to local (Youth At Risk Program) through to state wide initiatives (Alternative Education Centre). Pre-existent schooling structures consisted of the local mainstream high schools, an innovative Senior College, as well as larger schooling structures of the State Education Department, and the Technical and Further Education College system.

Mechanisms of these various schooling structures were teaching and administrative approaches. These approaches were “too officious” for Flexi School parents and staff, generating a need for something “different” or “alternative”. Progenitors of the Youth At Risk Program drew on the combined pedagogic and andragogic (Knowles, 1980) teaching practices in place at their Senior Community College, but they also strove for something different seeking to specially modify teaching practices for youth at risk. These were mechanisms that were operating at the local or micro level. For the third Alternative Education Centre, mechanisms of its prior schooling structure, Education Queensland operated at the macro level. These generative mechanisms were policy documents (Education Queensland, 1999, 2000, April) containing ideas that triggered the establishment of the case study Alternative Education Centre as one of five trial sites. Key triggering ideas were that some segments of the schooling population who were disadvantaged or at risk were also disrupting other students learning, and so there needed to be an equitable solution. These ideas were embedded in a wider current and geo-historical social and schooling discourse. The current discourses emanating from policy reports, included concern about a growing rich/poor divide, perceived behaviour problems in schools, increasing private school numbers, and need for skilled workers in globalized marketplace. Wider geo-historical education discourses impacting the reports were the school reform movement (Education Queensland, 2000; Illich, 1971, 1973; Newmann & Associates, 1996) and global concerns about national literacy (Belanger, Winter, & Sutton, 1992; Hebrard, 1992; Pasco, 2003; Statistics Canada, 1997).

Alternative School Models – Structures & Mechanisms

Triggering mechanisms in play at all three centres resulted in their choice of alternative school model. Consequently at the macro level, for the Alternative Education Centre, Education Queensland had chosen a similar model in operation in the United Kingdom that of school annexes (Grunsell, 1980; Mitchell, 1996; Normington, 1996), either on site or off site. In the 1980s these annexes in the United Kingdom had come to be known colloquially as “sin bins”, long term dumping grounds for disruptive students. Later under Margaret Thatcher they were called “Pupil Referral Units” with a goal of “remediating” students and returning them to an accepting state school (Normington, 1996; Stephenson, 1996). The

goal of Education Queensland's annexes was for both long and short term stays (Currie, 2000). The intrinsic structures were hierarchical administration by Education Queensland personnel devolving down to the local level, and site based teacher developed curriculums for each individual student. So although the Alternative Education Centre was part of a macro level initiative, this model had variable substructures based on localized administrations. This meant components such as location, funding, resources and administration were configured differently at each of the five trial sites. As explained below the agency of staff at each site was an important factor in the level of success of these five trial alternative centres.

Triggered by the desire of obtaining a "different" form of schooling, but constrained by state legislation, parents at the rural township had chosen the Flexi School model and utilized curriculum materials from the Brisbane School of Distance Education. The structure of the model utilized at this case study site evolved. It became an emergent structure administrated by the local high school, instead of being administrated by a parent/community management committee as was conceived in the original model. The social context impacting on parent agency was an exponential increase in insurance premiums for community organisations. As parents did not have sufficient access to funding networks, funding became a final barrier to their participation. Full administrative responsibility was then passed to the local participating high school. However in their interviews staff expressed strong concern that the Flexi School was now being pushed administratively in the direction of becoming too similar to mainstream high schooling, rather than something "different".

Structures and mechanisms that the Youth At Risk Program model drew on were TAFE administration and curriculums, as well as the unique teaching practices developed at the Senior Community College (which later became a TAFE) where the program was located. However those existent teaching practices were modified by staff from the literacy unit, responsible for the overall direction of the program. The modified approach allowed for more student input, more student support and care, and flexibility in teacher approaches. In their interviews this core staff expressed concerns that this specialized teaching approach for youth at risk was not being implemented across the program, particularly in the vocational units, and that there was a "dispirit approach" to teaching which was confusing for their students.

To summarize, for these last two alternative education models, the Youth At Risk Program and the Flexi school, staff intimately involved with the teaching of youth at risk perceived that "different" or "alternative" teaching and also administrative practices were needed. However, they also had the view that administrative personnel (in the case of the Flexi school) or colleagues (in the case of the Youth At Risk Program) did not support "alternative" practices needed.

Purpose linked to Necessary *Relations* with Organisations and Individual Agency

Apart from being triggered by schooling structures that pre-dated the school, each model of alternative schooling was tied implicitly to its purpose. The continuance and success of each school greatly depended on the agency of staff in fulfilling that purpose.

For staff at the Alternative Education Centre their perceived central purpose was to develop a one on one relationship with their students. A mechanism for doing this was applying the Glasser philosophy (Glasser, 2000, 2001) to help fulfil students' emotional needs. As one of two coordinators, Mrs T put it, "Behind that behaviour is a damaged unhappy little person ... And you go back to the Glasser, and I'm more convinced than ever that the only thing I can work with, with this kid is the one on one relationship" (2 Coordinators Interview, 13/9/04, 22.46 mins, 60.00 mins). So although there was a slight disjunction of core purposes with their sponsoring organisation, Education Queensland, this staff's purposes and teaching practices fulfilled the core objective of Education Queensland that of providing a learning venue for disruptive students. That students attended, their behavioural problems were greatly mitigated and some learning took place, fitted well within the state schooling authority's stated parameters. Further enhancing the school's functioning was the combined agency of the two coordinators, who tapped into their personal and professional schooling networks. As individuals this couple's agency also depended on external and internal factors; their 25 year relationships built with students, parents and schooling personnel, and their dispositional qualities of personality and wide and varied teaching experiences and skills developed. Because of their agency Mr and Mrs T were able to fully utilize schooling structures for the continuation and benefit of their alternative school.

Personal agency of the original parent committee and staff at the Flexi School tied to its purpose to be "different" was also important for its continuance. Their agency was an exemplification of both personal and rural networks. It was dependent on: their ability to liaise with community members and organisations, being well known and liked in the town, and networks formed from holding a variety of positions in the town. Apart from their constant battle to maintain their difference, crucial for the ongoing operation of the Flexi School were its links with the town's community and service organisations. It was through these links that necessary accommodation and funding were provided.

Thus at two alternative sites, the Flexi school and the Alternative Education Centre agency of individuals was a key factor in each site's continuance and resourcing. This was in spite of the fact that individual agency at the two sites were tied to different networks: a rural/personal network and an organisational/professional/ personal network.

For the Youth At Risk Program the core purpose had been "to fulfil a community need", the need to reengaged students who had dropped out of school but who wanted to re-enter

and complete Year 11 and 12 at the Senior Community College and gain employable skills. Literacy staff interviewed had related a subsidiary purpose: to build student confidence and resilience. This was built into their teaching practices as noted above. As the Community College where the program was embedded changed its structure, and came under the auspices of TAFE, the purpose for the program remained the same, with employable skills and a Year 10 equivalent certificate remaining the goal. However the student cohort expanded from those in the local area wanting to enter this particular Senior College, to at risk students from across the entire metropolitan area. TAFE networks were used by the program coordinator and administrative personnel to promote the program, contacting high school principals, the media and local businesses. However individual agency of those staff members spearheading the program was constrained within the TAFE organisational network. As a result staff's individual agency only seemed to have a significant bearing on teaching practices within their unit, impacting the literacy and personal development components of the course.

So unlike the Alternative Education Centre, also part of a larger educational structure, the Youth At Risk Program was constrained by more powerful structures within the larger TAFE system, particularly the vocational education sector with its expectations of responsible, self directed, adult learner behaviour. As perceived by staff this sector was not open to alternative approaches to facilitate engagement and learning for youth at risk. When alternative TAFE based programs became available in the area, administrators at the TAFE decided to suspend the Youth At Risk Program. Involved staff did not have the agency to prevent this suspension. The difference between the two larger education bodies, is that compared to the TAFE sector, Education Queensland presently allows for localized administration and more autonomy for teacher developed curriculums and teaching practices in its schools. Whereas the TAFE sector has strict outcomes based curriculum packages. Hence for coordinators at the Education Queensland sponsored alternative school, their agency was enabled, while for the staff of TAFE's alternative program their agency was blocked.

Conclusion – Explanation of *Historical* Transcendental Question:

What were the necessary conditions that brought each alternative schooling site into being, and that made it possible for their continued existence?

Thus it would seem that whatever the first cause or generative event initiating the establishment of the three alternative schools, it was the at risk student cohort which was at the centre of concern for each centre. Staff at all three centres thought this cohort needed a “different” teaching and administrative approach. That is a different approach to mainstream schools' teacher directed pedagogic practices, and a different approach to TAFE's adult based andragogic practices. Additionally vital to the successful continuance of

each program were educational structures that enabled staff agency. Staff or involved parents needed to have sufficient community networks, and dispositional characteristics to afford them agency, as well as a commitment to “different” teaching approaches needed for youth at risk.

These were the causal components distilled through repeated retroductive questioning, which supplied a foundation for ongoing explanatory analysis, and grappled with the sometimes contentious issues of defining mechanisms and emergent properties.

ADDENDUM

So to answer the revised critical realist doctoral question, “What are the key academic and social components for successful alternative schooling provision for youth at risk?” that this explanatory research elucidated? It *is* the **individual attention**, the fine grained individual appreciation of each student’s life context. It *is* the **relationships** built between students and staff, epitomized by trust and negotiation rather than forcing or punishing. It is as named above a “different” individual and relational approach to schooling. To answer the second part of the research question, “Are these necessary components being implemented in alternative schooling settings?” the answer is “it depends”. At the case study sites it depended on the extent components of “different” academic and social practices were implemented, particularly in times of crisis.

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