

Practice knowledge and teacher mentoring: what can realism teach us about professional learning? [abstract only]

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Practice knowledge and teacher mentoring: what can realism teach us about professional learning?

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Research into professional learning (PL) is often hampered by an unhelpful dichotomy between subjective and objective understandings of practice and how it develops. On the one hand approaches focus on the personal and interpersonal, valorising qualitative, highly context-specific research, while, on the other, highly generalizable and decontextualised studies that prioritise experimental, large scale designs. The first of these leads to problems in explaining pattern in the social world; the second provides little in the way of understanding why, how and under what circumstances the 'impacts' found occur.

So, while much of the literature on professional learning focuses on the context and conditions for professional learning the practice knowledge itself is often obscured. This, we argue, reflects two distinct traditions: first, the 'subjectivist doxa' that dominates much education research in which knowledge is typically views knowledge as 'comprising states of mind or dispositions to act', in which the external realisation of professional learning is ontologically social (Maton, 2014). Second, large scale positivist approaches (e.g. Desimone, 2009) that under-theorise learning and knowledge practices (Boylan et al, 2018).

Realist approaches provide an alternative by understanding the social world to be complex and layered; yet patterned and explicable by reference to underlying generative causal mechanisms. In this paper we address the question 'what insights can realism provide to enhance research into professional learning?'. We examine this problematic in order to consider a possible conceptual integration of ontological and epistemological beliefs in educational research (Schraw, 2013).

Central to the analysis is the notion of knowledge practices that take place in professional contexts, such as those practised by teachers. We explore one case of professional practice, teachers' mentoring, as a form of social practice, and its emergence. Our aim is to elaborate a conceptual/theoretical model that is transferable to other contexts. Critical realism provides the ontological basis for this by providing that there is a reality that may not be possible to know, and which is differentiated, structured and stratified. Social realism explores the sociological implications of critical realism for education and the ways in which 'the sociology of knowledge in the sociology of education can have as an 'object' the socially organised ways in which such knowledge is systematically produced and transformed (rather than simply 'constructed' and reproduced)' (Moore, 2013: 339). This methodological insight is important in examining the underlying basis of PL.

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