

2024

Critical Pragmatism as a Theoretical Pathway to Educational Change

Tachier M. Rezac, Lincoln Public Schools, trezac@lps.org

Nicholas E. Husbye, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, nhusbye2@unl.edu

Recommended Citation:

Rezac, T.M. & Husbye, N.E. (2024). Critical pragmatism as a theoretical pathway to educational change. *Midwest Journal of Education*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.1.1.3>

Connecting Theory to Practice

Critical Pragmatism as a Theoretical Pathway to Educational Change

Midwest Journal of Education

23-32

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.1.1.3>
<https://www.williamwoods.edu/academics/mje>**Tachier M. Rezac¹ and Nicholas E. Husbye²****Abstract**

This article positions critical pragmatism as an essential theoretical framework for educational change, bridging the gap between research and classroom practice. Grounded in the intellectual lineage of Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, it extends pragmatism by weaving in ethical considerations, advocating for systemic reform in education. Critical pragmatism, presented as a demanding yet flexible approach, encourages researchers to become change agents, focusing on actionable research questions. This framework's integration of ethical insights from critical social theory positions it as a crucial tool for educational researchers pursuing justice and equity. Through engaging in rich descriptions of the impact of critical pragmatism on the dissertation in practice, we call for increased engagement with critical pragmatism in the educational research community, underscoring its potential to foster equitable and just educational environments through transformative research practices.

Keywords

critical pragmatism, pragmatism, critical theory, theoretical perspectives, educational research

¹ Lincoln Public Schools

² University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Corresponding Author:

Tachier M. Rezac, District Assessment Coordinator, Lincoln Public Schools District Office, 5905 "O" Street Lincoln, Nebraska 68510. USA

Email: trezac@lps.org

Introduction

There are an increasing number of theoretical frames available to educational researchers as they seek to understand the multitude of experiences within and challenges facing educational institutions. There does, however, continue to be a disconnect between research and classroom practice (Cain, 2016; Dagenais et al., 2012; Kaestle, 1993; Lagemann, 2003) and, if we are to make inroads in improving the educational experiences of students and the working lives of educators and educational administrators, there is a need to align theory in particular ways with what is being studied. In this article, we argue for critical pragmatism as a theoretical perspective from which educational change can be built. Rather than a catch-all theory, we argue for critical pragmatism as a rigorous and demanding perspective that forces researchers to work as change agents within the contexts within which they are working.

This article is an extension of the in-depth discussions and collaborative thinking of Tachier, first author and newly minted Doctor of Education, and Nicholas, second author and her advisor, undertaken through the process of Tachier's Dissertation in Practice. Throughout our work together, we have been pushed to revise our thinking around pragmatism, refining our understandings of its critical aspects and applicability in practitioner research that seeks to generate and sustain systemic change. We propose critical pragmatism not as a universal solution, but as a theoretical framework that may be of particular use to those in EdD programs. Taking up a critical pragmatist lens demands rigorous, action-oriented approaches, empowering researchers to become change agents when change is pursued as the result of the work (Husbye et al., 2024). While unable to completely distill the nuance, connections, and contradictions within a year's worth of intense coffee shop meetings, frantic text messages on both ends, and ponderous emails, we seek to provide an overview of how we are collectively thinking about critical pragmatism as a robust and impactful framework for practitioner researchers, enabling them to address local challenges with nuanced and effective strategies.

With that aim in mind, the goals of this article are twofold: to lay out our collective understanding of pragmatism and how it became critical, work that will be identified by the pronoun *we*, as well as detailing the opportunities and challenges Tachier experienced while working to live with theory, which will be identified by the pronoun *I*.

Towards Critical Pragmatism

The intellectual tradition of pragmatism, most closely tied to and developed by scholars Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey in the 19th century, represents a foundational shift towards practical implications for philosophical inquiry. These philosophers collectively laid the groundwork for a movement that emphasized the importance of applying theoretical insights to tackle real-world challenges. Pragmatism emerged as a response to the abstract and often impractical tendencies of prevailing philosophical discourse, aiming instead to root theory in the fertile ground of lived existence.

Peirce's contributions to pragmatism - or *pragmaticism*, as he would later term it to distinguish his personal framing - focused on the principle that meaning and truth of ideas are inherently tied to their observable practical effects (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). This perspective was instrumental in

establishing pragmatism's core premise: ideas must be evaluated based upon their capacity to address and solve real-world problems. James, expanding on Peirce's foundation, advocated for pragmatism as a method that regards truth as provisional, asserting that beliefs are valid as far as they prove useful in navigating life's complexities (Ulrich, 2006). Dewey further broadened pragmatism's scope, applying it to societal reform movements, particularly in education where he saw its potential to foster significant social improvement (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Despite its innovative approach, traditional conceptions of pragmatism have been critiqued for a perceived lack of a robust ethical framework, leading to concerns it would inadvertently reify the status quo rather than challenge systemic injustices (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). This critique underscores a perceived vulnerability in pragmatism: without a strong ethical foundation, the framework risks being perceived as opportunistic, prioritizing utility over principles.

Responding to these critiques, the concept of critical pragmatism emerged as an evolution of these more traditional conceptions of pragmatism, aiming to integrate a more pronounced ethical dimension into its framework. Ulrich (2006) has been pivotal in advocating a version of pragmatism that does not shy away from the normative implications of research and inquiry. He argues that adopting a pragmatist perspective necessitates a critical examination of "the normative content of our claims to knowledge and understanding" (Ulrich, 2007, p. 1110). This approach seeks to imbue pragmatism with a critical consciousness, emphasizing the importance of reflective practice that is attuned to ethical considerations and the broader impacts of research on society.

The ethical enrichment of pragmatism through critical social theory is a key feature of critical pragmatism. This approach draws heavily on the insights of critical theorists who have long emphasized the need to uncover and dismantle the societal constraints imposed by factors such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. Creswell and Poth (2018) highlighted how critical theories provide tools for empowerment by identifying and challenging the barriers to access and equity within society. Incorporating these insights extends critical pragmatism beyond a simple concern for practical outcomes to infuse it with a deliberate focus on ethical considerations and social justice.

Critical theory, as Crotty (1998) explained, seeks to reveal the hegemonic structures that perpetuate oppression and inequality. It provides a framework for questioning the assumptions that underlie dominant power relations and for advocating changes that promote greater freedom and justice. This commitment to uncovering and challenging injustices is echoed in critical pragmatism's emphasis on ethical inquiry and action. Critical pragmatism thus positions itself as a framework that not only seeks to solve practical problems but also aims to do so in a manner that is ethically responsible and aligned with the pursuit of justice.

Critical pragmatism offers a nuanced approach to research-practitioners concerned with the ethical implications of their work and the broader societal impact of their research. By integrating the practical focus of traditional pragmatism with the ethical and critical insights of critical social theory, critical pragmatism presents a comprehensive framework that addresses both the how and the why of research. It encourages a reflective practice that is not only concerned with outcomes but also with the processes by which knowledge is generated and applied. This emphasis on ethical

reflection and action is particularly relevant in fields where research has direct implications for social policy, education, healthcare, and community development.

The discourse of critical pragmatism, as Forester (2013) articulated, encompasses a broad range of tinnitus, including an emphasis on both processes and outcomes, recognition of the fallibility of knowledge claims, appreciation for diverse practice processes, and a commitment to fostering creative and inventive approaches to problem-solving. These principles underscore critical pragmatism's utility in navigating the complex power dynamics and ideological challenges that researchers encounter in their work. Furthermore, by advocating for a transition from deconstructive skepticism to reconstructive imagination, critical pragmatism encourages a proactive stance towards co-generated problem-solving, emphasizing the role of creativity, dialogue, and collaboration in addressing societal issues.

Critical pragmatism represents a significant evolution of the pragmatic tradition, one that responds to the call for a more ethically grounded and critically aware research practice. By weaving together, the practical sensibilities of traditional pragmatism with the emancipatory aims of critical social theory, critical pragmatism offers a rich and robust framework for addressing the multifaceted challenges of contemporary society. It reaffirms the relevance of pragmatism as a philosophical and methodological approach, highlighting its potential to contribute not only to the resolution of practical problems but also to the advancement of a more just and equitable world.

As the discourse around critical pragmatism continues to evolve, it is imperative for researcher-practitioners to engage deeply with its principles, critically reflecting on their own practices and the societal implications of their work. In doing so, they can contribute to the ongoing development of a framework that is not only responsive to the demands of the present but also capable of shaping the contours of future research practice in ways that are ethically informed, socially responsible, and deeply transformative.

Living Critical Pragmatism

In the fall of the 2019-2020 school year, I (Tachier) was directed to write new curriculum and instructional materials for middle school reading intervention students and teachers and have it in place by the fall of the 2020-2021 school year. As a veteran educator and new-ish (2nd year) district teacher leader, I was eager to respond to the needs of teachers and students. I had over 30 years of experience working with struggling readers from kindergarten through eighth grade, and I was desperate to give teachers on my team the support I craved as a classroom teacher. The curriculum needed to support teachers who lacked formal training in teaching literacy, support students who had a history of reading struggles, and promote two years or more growth in one school year.

This was the third major change for middle school reading intervention classes in six years. I felt the weight of this change, and desperately wanted to ensure I was leading my team in a direction aligned with research. Many of the teachers leading reading intervention courses lacked formal literacy training, so I designed robust, prescriptive curricula to support both the literacy development of students and the literacy knowledge of the teachers. This was a major pedagogical

shift for my team and for me, and I had to figure out how to support teacher learning considering what I was learning about working with adults.

Equally important, I wanted to know if the changes were having positive impacts on our students. I felt responsible for the 1,200 students served in our middle school reading intervention courses each year and their teachers, and I was keenly aware of the ticking clock as students moved into high school and beyond reading below expectations. And so, I asked the question: Is this working? This question led me on a three-year journey of discovery, reflection, and change.

My quest to meaningfully measure the outcomes of the intervention I designed led me back to school, and I dove into my EdD coursework with the same urgency I brought to my classroom. As I worked through my classes, gaining an appreciation for the complexity of determining whether a particular intervention is working, I continued to examine and refine my problem of practice. I needed an intimate understanding of systems — the systems that are intentionally and overtly in play, as well as the systems that are less obvious, but equally important. I unpacked the systems of hierarchy within my district. In doing so, I learned how systems interact to create problems and the ways they can be leveraged to solve those same problems.

To identify whether the changes we were making were positively impacting student outcomes, I needed student data. I struggled to imagine how I would gather data for the students when some schools did not roster their students to an intervention course. I mapped out a system showing a set of significant changes I had to initiate to address my problem of practice (Perry et al., 2020) and partnered with district assessment professionals to create a compelling reason to roster students, allowing us to accurately gather and track data. This was the first of many systems-level changes I would initiate. In addressing this problem, I developed an awareness of the different decisions administrators were making, how many of those decisions were informed by feelings and emotion rather than data, and the inequitable consequences of those decisions.

One of these decisions was the adoption of a reading lab model for intervention, where students were given 50% of the time for intervention compared to students in the traditional model. This was happening in 25% of the district's middle schools, all identified as Title-1 buildings. I recognized the implementation of two different models introduced another layer of complexity and knew we had to understand the outcomes of these different models before I could determine what additional changes, if any, were needed to support our reading intervention students and teachers.

Determining the metric of value was complicated. How would I know if the intervention was working? Would any positive outcomes be immediately visible, or might a long-term study better uncover them? I also needed to understand the scope of limitations inherent in standardized assessments, and carefully consider what was being assessed and how those results were reported and interpreted.

Practically, I had to determine how to measure the impact of an intervention when all students were not given equal doses, when all teachers were not prepared to enact the curriculum, when all students were not participating in the intervention to the best of their abilities, and when standardized assessments are inherently flawed. The clock continued to tick its warning that our students were running out of time.

The systems within a large school district includes many layers and I was acutely aware of my place in the hierarchy. I held a position with great responsibility, but little actual power. I was accountable for the outcomes while having little control over how curricular changes were enacted. This created additional complexity as I struggled to design research that would interrogate the impact of the curriculum I designed.

Both my coursework and my advisor, Nicholas, pushed my thinking. Over and over, I unpacked my problem of practice, examining it from many different perspectives, until I was finally able to reassemble it into a project both doable and worth doing, I needed to know how the different models of reading intervention were working for our students. Conceptually I understood I could address this one part of the larger problem, which allowed me to move forward and pursue the larger goal of addressing the needs of middle school reading intervention students and teachers. I focused my dissertation on the efficacy of the two models of reading intervention.

Theoretical Application to PoP and Method

Theoretical frameworks can feel abstract or unimportant in the early phases of defining a problem of practice (PoP), especially to a novice researcher (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). However, once the problem of practice is well-defined, the theoretical framework becomes the next most crucial decision to make, as it sets the stage for a cascade of decisions that shape the study.

Critical pragmatism served as my anchor throughout the dissertation process. The strength of this theoretical perspective is the focus on the questions that are posed and the action one aspires to initiate. Critical pragmatism, a theory that is at once utilitarian and novel, allowed me to consider the myriad layers of complexity situated within my problem of practice while recognizing my goal of interrogating differences inherent in the models of reading intervention used in my district, to better identify and interrupt any inequities. Once I identified critical pragmatism as my theoretical perspective, I could freely concentrate on the research questions. This is an expectation of critical pragmatism, and this focus on the research questions was my anchor.

I relied on critical pragmatism to help me structure my literature review. I continued to focus on my question: what was the impact of these two models? Critical pragmatism taught me to focus on that question, in turn focusing my efforts and helping me define the relevant topics within the literature that would inform my research. Everything included in the literature review had to inform my research question.

Critical pragmatism offers flexibility in methodologies and in methods. It is not a perspective with a prescriptive menu, but one that encourages the researcher to select the best methodology to address their research question. I selected critical pragmatism due to my focus on my research question and the actions I wanted to initiate. With this freedom to select the best methodology, I chose Illuminative Evaluation, which emphasizes the researcher's role as an observer. I again relied on the flexibility of critical pragmatism to determine which methods to employ. With my focus on the research question, I knew quantitative methods would best speak to the decision-makers I wanted to influence. I wanted to use data, not feeling and emotion, to drive decisions.

Impact and Change Initiated

Critical pragmatism, beyond the emphasis on the research question, asks the researcher to consider what action will be taken once the research concludes. My dissertation project was the beginning of a process of change in my district. Through my research, I demonstrated the realized costs for students enrolled in reading intervention, and provided valid and reliable assessment data indicating our achievement gains are not as robust as our students require. We are making changes in programming, and asking questions to take us beyond what we feel to what we know about our programs and the impact on our students.

Critical pragmatism requires researchers to act. While I am not a decision maker, I continue to leverage what I have learned by bringing it to the attention of those who do make decisions. I continue to pose questions to decision makers, encouraging them to look at data as they make important choices for students. I push others to interrogate their feelings and emotions and to look for ways to use data to identify solutions. This will pave the way for positive impacts for our students and address issues of equity caused by emotional decision making.

Challenges and Opportunities

Initially, I was tentative about my choice to use critical pragmatism as the theoretical framework for my study. During my dissertation proposal meeting a committee member suggested I look for a “sexier” theory. As I dove deeper into the literature about critical theories and pragmatism and continued to discuss this with Nicholas, both my understanding of this theory and my confidence in it grew. The research data and the way it has allowed for changes to take place within my district confirms for me that critical pragmatism was the correct choice, providing both flexibility and structure.

Critical pragmatism, framed around the question and the action one hopes to take once the research is complete, offers great flexibility in the selection of a particular methodology. In framing my study, I struggled to identify a suitable methodology, further complicated by the fact that I could not control all the variables at play. I was not teaching the curriculum, I was not selecting a particular model for the intervention, and I did not control the way teachers enacted the curriculum with their students. All of this was complicated by the timing — we were in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic. I struggled to identify what action I could take when I lacked actual decision-making power. My research had to inspire change, or it would not be worth doing. Critical pragmatism allowed me to use Illuminative Evaluation (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972), which positions the researcher as an observer, addressing the first set of concerns. Additionally, critical pragmatism allowed me to bind my research to the action I wanted to initiate. This major decision allowed me to next consider the best methods to employ.

I elected to employ quantitative methods under great duress. I was much more comfortable with qualitative designs and knew my quantitative skills were less refined, lacking confidence in my ability to design and analyze quantitative data. Even knowing this, I selected quantitative methods because critical pragmatism demanded I address the action that would occur at the conclusion of the study. To influence decision makers, I had to consider what results would best speak to them. No one — neither my advisor nor anyone on my committee, expected me to make this choice. Because critical pragmatism gave me the frame to be outcome driven, I made the difficult and

uncomfortable decision to use quantitative methods. I have grown from the experience of being forced to take this more difficult path. My research is stronger and has had a more profound impact on decision makers because of this decision driven by critical pragmatism. My district is working to use the data I provided to take actionable steps in identifying appropriate models of reading intervention in our middle schools.

The flexibility of critical pragmatism is a strength of the framework; however, this may also be considered a limitation. Whereas other theoretical frameworks delineate a prescriptive methodology and data analysis, critical pragmatism does not. Novice researchers, as well as those steeped in traditional frameworks, may find this flexibility a barrier until they return to the problem they want to address and the action they hope to initiate. Then, critical pragmatism's flexibility is appreciated for the strength that it is.

Lessons and Recommendations

I appreciate the lessons I learned through my dissertation, most notably the power of a strong theoretical perspective to ground one's study. Choosing critical pragmatism paved the way for other decisions and allowed the research questions to take center stage in this project. For me, I have a better appreciation for the selection of a theoretical perspective. This is not just a formality or a checkbox for the successful completion of a dissertation. It frames the research project. Critical pragmatism allowed me to quickly evaluate the body of literature I read for the literature review section. My decision rule was simple: Does this inform my research question? Critical pragmatism also gave me flexibility as I was choosing an appropriate methodology. Since it is tightly bound to the research questions, I was able to select a methodology that best addressed those questions. Critical pragmatism challenged me to employ the methods that would best inspire action at the conclusion of my research, resulting in a much stronger study, leading to educational change within my district.

While critical pragmatism was not a "sexy" or well-regarded framework when I initially discussed it with my committee, members steeped in mainstream frameworks came to appreciate critical pragmatism's strength as I defended my dissertation. Nicholas and I, and now members of my committee, hope this essay will open the dialogue and shift the research community's stance to regard critical pragmatism as a useful framework to address issues of ethics, equity, social justice, and hegemony, allowing this limitation of critical pragmatism to become obsolete.

Closing Thoughts

In closing, our journey through the philosophical underpinnings and practical applications of critical pragmatism underscores its pivotal role in bridging the chasm between educational research and classroom realities. The intellectual lineage of pragmatism, enriched by the critical dimension, provides a compelling argument for its necessity in addressing the persistent disconnect between theory and practice in education. Our collaborative exploration, fueled by a shared commitment to systemic change, advocates for critical pragmatism not as a mere theoretical choice but as a deliberate, ethical stance towards educational research and practice.

Our work, rooted in the concrete experiences of addressing educational challenges, exemplifies critical pragmatism's capacity to empower researchers and practitioners alike to function as agents

of change within their contexts. By insisting on a framework that integrates ethical reflection with practical action, we have not only navigated the complexities of educational reform but also contributed to a deeper understanding of how theory can inform and transform practice.

As we reflect on the lessons learned and the paths forged, it is evident that critical pragmatism offers more than just a theoretical lens; it represents a methodological commitment to pursue research that is both ethically grounded and pragmatically oriented towards actionable outcomes. It challenges us to remain attuned to the ethical dimensions of our inquiries, ensuring that our work contributes to the broader aim of educational equity and justice.

Therefore, we urge the educational research community to further engage with critical pragmatism, exploring its potential to inform a more reflective, responsive, and responsible research practice. Future investigations should continue to unpack the nuances of critical pragmatism, examining its application across diverse educational contexts and its impact on addressing the pressing challenges of our times. In doing so, we can collectively advance a research agenda that not only seeks to understand the world but also to change it for the better.

Our advocacy for critical pragmatism is a call to action—a reminder that the work of educational research is inseparable from the ethical imperatives of justice and equity. As we move forward, let us embrace the rigorous, reflective, and radical potential of critical pragmatism to guide our efforts towards creating educational environments that nurture the full potential of every learner. In this way, critical pragmatism becomes not just a theoretical framework, but a tool to be used for a more equitable and just educational landscape.

References

- Cain, K. (2016). Exploring the use of research in teachers' everyday work. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(2), 416–453. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315599685>
- Creswell, J., & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Crotty, M. (1998). The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process. In *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process* (First). Allen & Unwin.
- Dagenais, C., Lysenko, L., Abrami, P. C., Bernard, R. M., Ramde, J., Janosz, M., & Théorêt, M. (2012). Use of research-based information by school practitioners and determinants of use: A review of empirical research. *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice, 8*(3), 285–309. <https://doi.org/10.1332/174426412X654634>
- Forester, J. (2013). On the theory and practice of critical pragmatism: Deliberative practice and creative negotiations. *Planning Theory, 12*(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095212448750>
- Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your “house.” *Administrative Issues Journal Education Practice and Research, 4*(2), 12–26. <https://doi.org/10.5929/2014.4.2.9>

- Husbye, N. E., Rezac, T., Wessels, S., & Trainin, G. (2024). Mechanisms for Change. *Impacting Education: Journal on Transforming Professional Practice*, 9(1), 35–38.
<https://doi.org/10.5195/ie.2024.390>
- Kaestle, C. F. (1993). Research news and comment: The awful reputation of education research. *Educational Researcher*, 22(1), 23–31.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X022001023>
- Kelly, L. M., & Cordeiro, M. (2020). Three principles of pragmatism for research on organizational processes. *Methodological Innovations*, 13(2).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799120937242>
- Lagemann, E. C. (2003). *An elusive science: The troubling history of education research*. University of Chicago Press.
- Parlett, M., & Hamilton, D. (1972). Evaluation as illumination: A new approach to the study of innovatory programs. *Education Resources Information Center*.
- Perry, J., Zambo, D., & Crow, R. (2020). *The improvement science dissertation in practice*. Meyers Education Press.
- Ulrich, W. (2006, September). *Reflections on critical pragmatism, Part 1*. Ulrich's Bimonthly.
- Ulrich, W. (2007). Philosophy for professionals: Towards critical pragmatism. *Journal of the Operational Research Society*, 58(8), 1109–1113.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jors.2602336>