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PHENOMENOLOGICALLY UNPACKING TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR 'BEST' TEACHING EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

This article reports on phenomenological research which explored meanings and understandings that were taken for granted within teachers self-selected best teaching experiences. The research occurred within a pre-service Early Childhood Education teacher education course. This research was designed to understand teacher's perceptions of their best teaching experience, having previously used Appreciative inquiry to ascertain students' perceptions of their best experiences within the course (Giles & Kung, 2014). In this inquiry, the research sought deeper ontological understandings of being in these 'best moments'. The analysis enabled four phenomenological themes to be identified: the preparation for relationships, the privileging of experiential pedagogies, the priority of experiences as foundational to teaching and the life of genuine engagement. Teacher's perceptions of their best experiences related to their preparation and readiness for teaching, along with an ongoing concern of aligning practice to a clearly articulated teaching approach.

Keywords: Phenomenology; teaching experience; ontology

Introduction

What is the nature of those moments when teachers perceive their practice to be at its best? Some of these moments are captured as follows:

The teacher has to be 'present' in the classroom, in every sense ... It's about 'being there'! Totally, completely and absolutely! And, it's completely exhausting. But when you're there – they're there. ... So, it's a very intense kind of thing. The teacher has to be there! ... YOU have to be there! ... all of you. ... I've learned that every single thing I am, teaches! And that's when ... I realised that ... I am who I am.

I always watch my students carefully to see if they're still comfortable. There are always one or two in a class that have really expressive faces and I watch them constantly to see how they're feeling about the class, to see if they're still understanding, if they're still engaged, if they're "getting it".

Being a teacher is about giving them the power to feel able to present from their perspective, rather than from the textbook or wherever it is from out of the system. It's when it's from them – I think that's what brings the passion.

Immediately apparent in these stories is the teacher's attunement to the relational nature of their teaching as well as the movement, or flow, of the unfolding learning experiences. In contrast, in contemporary education under neoliberal education policy, the 'quality' of teaching is considered in an objectified manner, privileging easy to administer quantitative surveys. Certainly, quantitative surveys are one means of obtaining feedback on teachers' practices alongside the measurement of generic pedagogical, curriculum and assessment aspects of a course of study (Zander & Zander, 2000). What we can lose sight of here, is that quantitative measures are limited in their scope, are typically related to a teacher's behaviour and knowledge and tend to focus on effectiveness and efficiencies (Boud, 1992; Hattie, 2002). Qualitative measures for analysing teachers' perceptions of their best teaching performance are few in number. In addition, qualitative measures are seen as lacking in

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Pages 53-59

terms of their reliability, validity and manageability in terms of scaling up the assessment measure in the busyness of educational organisations. (Hattie, 2002).

What appears to be missing from the debate on teacher quality are measures that can explore teachers' perceptions of their best practice within a programme of study (van Manen, 1990). For example, what is the phenomenological nature of teacher's self-selected best teaching experiences? Phenomenological inquiries invariably show the embodied, holistic and experiential nature of teaching and learning. Similarly, phenomenological findings can identify taken for granted, subliminal meanings and understandings that are integral to the process of learning. The opportunity for teachers here is to deeply explore perceptions of their best teaching practices within highly contextual and complex learning environments. This article reports on the experience of applying a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Giles, 2008) to explore teacher's perceptions of their best teaching practices.

Methodology

The research question for this inquiry was:

What is the phenomenological nature of teachers' best teaching experiences within a capstone topic in the final year of an Early Childhood Education Teacher Education course?

Hermeneutic phenomenology

The purpose of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to bring to light and reflect upon the lived meaning of our experiences. As Goble and Yin (2014) note in hermeneutic phenomenology, the most fundamental experience of the world is already full of meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 2006; van Manen, 2014). We are enmeshed in our world and immediately experience our world as meaningful because our world precedes any attempt on our part to understand or explain it. The role of the researcher is to attempt to "describe phenomena as they appear in everyday life *before* they have been theorized, interpreted, explained, and otherwise abstracted, while knowing that any attempt to do this is always tentative, contingent, and never complete" (Goble & Yin, 2014, p. 1).

Unlike some other qualitative methodologies, hermeneutic phenomenology has no set method (van Manen, 1990, 2014). The 'how' must be found anew with each study (van Manen 2014), making phenomenological researchers "perpetual beginners" (Merleau-Ponty, 2006). This is not to say, however, that phenomenology is not a rigorous approach. Instead, no one approach is suitable for all phenomena. What is common to all phenomenological research, however, is its sensibility (Henriksson & Saevi, 2009) and a very specific kind of engagement with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2006; van Manen, 2014).

The challenge for phenomenological researchers is that for;

any study to be successful, researchers must develop a "phenomenological eye" through which they can see the uniqueness of the phenomenon in all of its complexity and strangeness, as well as a strong "phenomenological pen" through which they can re-voke and illuminate the phenomenon in their text (Goble & Yin, 2014, p. 1).

This article reports on research where the inquiry explores a particular phenomenon, teachers' perceptions of their best teaching experiences.

Gathering and working with the experiential stories

Each participant was interviewed in a single, semi-structured interview. The question that initiated the dialogue, "can you tell me about a time teaching this topic when you felt you were at your best as a teacher". A hermeneutic analysis followed a process previously articulated in Giles (2008). Ethical approval for this research inquiry was gained in 2016 from the Manukau Institute of Technology's Ethics Committee, Auckland, New Zealand.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, four phenomenological themes are described with excerpts from particular stories.

THEME 1: The preparation for relationships

[A teacher said,] so ... when I go into a classroom for the first time with a new group of students that I perhaps haven't worked with before, I find that it's really important that we spend the time getting to know each other. That's aside from classroom content that actually we spend time ... to get to know each other. And for them to get to know me. And, I talk about this with students as well, that in terms of relationship, I can't just know about them; they have to know about me too. And it's that reciprocity – that actually I want to know about them. For a genuine relationship, they have to know a little bit about me. I don't share my entire life, but I share a little bit.

Teachers in this research deliberately construct a place and space for students that has a home-ly feel. The place and space teachers and students inhabit needs to be safe and respectful. Participants spoke of an emotional environment that needs to be built in the first few sessions of a course, given the need to acknowledge the students' prior knowledge,

I think the emotional environment is ... most important – that they feel the classroom is somewhere where they are safe. I'm not going to walk out of the classroom and talk about their stories ever in an unethical way.

Another teacher noted,

One of the things that I try to do is NOT feel like I'm the person with all of the knowledge ... I also respect the fact that students have incredible knowledge that they bring with them.

The preparation for being with students extends from initial relationships established between the teacher and students, to the relationships between the students themselves. There is a planned reciprocity of engagement that is as important as the initial course content. In their best experiences teachers don't justify the time given to an interactive opening of a course as they have seen the relational significance of these activities and recognize the patterns of success that result. These planned activities appear to influence the mood of the place and space. Participants noted that,

When students have a sense of belonging. ... that comes out very strongly in their ... dialogue ... about ... belonging to their group. ..., I think as teachers we are part of that too. ... the things that come up most frequently in the students' feedback are about relationships. And that's not just with the teacher, but also with the rest of their peers ... Because once they feel like they are part of the group and they belong, ... (they're) teaching and learning for each other.

The students' need for a sense of belonging as a group was a high priority. The sense of belonging is the anticipated outcome of 'getting to know you' activities. While there are many pedagogical strategies for assisting teachers and students to 'get to know one another', a recurring strategy involves the use of small group conversations. Teachers described their deliberate preparation, organisation and pedagogical intentions for group work as follows,

I ... need to consider *how* I get them to participate. ... So, by getting students involved in group work, I find that participation is high. The group size varies. In a class of maybe 28 students, we'll have maybe five in each group and then we'll get the other ones to split off into the other groups. Then we'll get the groups smaller. Group size does matter. They do feel safer in a bigger group. Of course, there are some in groups that contribute more than others. In big groups you're able to 'hide'. But in smaller groups, there's no hiding at all. So, you have to contribute to get through the work or the task that's been given. They *all* have to contribute. Trust is essential to these initial activities.

There has to be an element of trust. So, trust is built from the very first sessions they have with me. What I do is I get them into pairs, and one blindfolds the other, and then we go for a walk around Campus. It's about communication – how they communicate

and make sure that their partner is safe. And, then we end up back at the beginning and we swap places. We walk everywhere.

Some onlookers and managers may question the use of academic teaching time for these activities. These teachers point to the critical aspect of working relationally, and the opportunities and possibilities that this opens.

The key with relationships is that you ... can't force ... RELATIONSHIPS; and they take time.

While we are always, already beings-together-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1996; Nancy, 2000), the activities point to the necessity of the relational nature of learning spaces. Our being together as human beings should not be taken for granted.

Participants' stories show the breadth of their preparation for a new class beyond the content of the course. It is as if the deliberative nature of this preparation starts again with each new class. While we can carry forward some good activities, readings, and our practical wisdom of educational processes, a teacher starts afresh with the new students. Indeed, the nature of the teaching and learning processes, as understood by the participants, means that the teacher needs to find new ways to construct a relational context. Teacher's readiness involves opening themselves to yet another group of students and the relational journey into the as-yet-unknown. Further areas of personal readiness include the need to insightfully plan an engaging course of study, at least for the first session. The energy required relates to the need to remain alert to the key messages within the interactive and relational dialogue in the knowledge that the journey of teaching will involve a level of scanning and improvisation as the lesson progresses.

THEME 2: The privileging of experiential and narrative pedagogies.

The second theme points to privileging of certain teaching pedagogies.

You can see by looking around the classroom those who don't understand and those who do. And even though you've got the ones who *do*, it's about getting those people and matching them up with the other people who are unsure and having another activity built around the same thing but getting these two lots of groups interacting and collaborating together.

The teachers' pedagogical abilities were alert, tuned in and stretched throughout each scheduled class. This is evident from their initial scanning and reading of the students' comportment through to the artistry of pulling together pertinent and relevant meanings from their shared experience at the end of each session. The watchful eye of the teacher attunes to the students' way of being. When teachers recall being in a moment where their practice was at its best, they can feel students reading them in terms of their approach, sense of care, knowledge and their authenticity.

The teachers recognised that the way they are 'with' the students is felt and read. It is as if, what was felt and read opened understandings of the authenticity of the other's presence. In the next story, a participant speaks of the need to be sincere and genuinely committed to each student's success.

They know when you don't know what you're talking about. They're very good at picking up inauthenticity.

When I think about the teachers when I was at University, that made me want to learn ... , it was the teachers that *brought passion* to the classroom and also *really cared* about my success. And that's what I've tried to bring to my own teaching.

Being authentic was seen in teacher's concern, or absence of concern, in 'being there for' the students. Teachers perceive their best practice occurs when they are engaged with the students' experiences, bringing clarity to the key ideas within the unscripted classroom dialogue that unfolds. The teacher must stay attuned to the overall storyline and the key messages, while also monitoring the involvement of individual students. In the best moments, teachers show a practical wisdom for teaching that has been developed over time.

THEME 3: The priority of teacher and student experiences and stories as foundational to teaching

I tell stories. I tell stories a lot. I value stories and I try to create an environment when the students feel safe enough to tell their stories. ... They have to feel safe. My stories ... show that I know what I'm talking about, but also, I have these same experiences that they do. So, I *can* talk about what 25 years of practice has taught me. And the stories are what makes the learning deeper. Stories have become a *huge* part of my practice.

Munby and Russell (1994) coined the expression 'authority of experience'. They were advocating for greater understandings of the richness of narratives, stories and experiences for rich qualitative data. The authority of experience raises the priority to lived experiences in their particularity and local expression. The expression, authority of experience, is also a reminder of the groundedness of experiential accounts. All too often, "we don't stop to contemplate the meaning within our experiences. We had the experience but missed the meaning" (T.S. Eliot, 1963, p. 194).

What teachers perceive as being a part of their best teaching practice related to moments that were laden with stories, narratives, vignettes, and case studies. Stories shared between teachers and students provide experiential knowledge that becomes the substance of intended learning. Teachers' felt that their own stories gave credibility to their teaching as people who 'had been there' in practice. The risk for the teachers was that they needed to share their practice knowledge and their own life experiences as the basis for this credibility.

I think it's our job as teachers to pick out the elements of those stories [you need to help the students understand what's important about this; what are actually the themes of this story.] to bring it back to what we're actually talking about; which is really complex when you're doing it in a class room, and it's really fun!

Amongst the dialogue being shared, the stance taken by the teachers is one of *enabling* students in their recall of particular experiences alongside the encouragement for a critical engagement with these and others' experiences. One of the teachers commented,

Being a teacher is about giving them the power to feel able to present from their perspective, rather than from the textbook or wherever it is from out of the system. It's when it's from them – I think that's what brings the passion.

An ongoing concern for the teachers was to ensure that students felt safe enough to share what they know and who they are; the level of disclosure being the choice of the students.

So, if we can get them to share those things of knowledge with each other, I think that's really powerful. We have so many diverse cultures, so students can offer each other cultural knowledge, ... It's so powerful when that happens. Last Semester, ...[A student] shared a song from her home and she began to dance! And the whole class could see how important it was to her and they all got up and danced. And it was just a really beautiful moment, with so many respecting where she had come from.

The teacher's pedagogical ability to co-construct theory from lived experiences is all the more credible when the teacher has an up-to-date experiential understanding of the professional field. Authenticity is given to those teachers who 'have been there, when students are in initial teacher education. The final theme considers the influence of the student's ways of being on the teacher's experience.

THEME 4: The life and energy of genuine engagement

The students have grown in who they are and what they want know [for themselves, their family and their communities]. The energy from the students and their risk taking in sharing their perspective is infectious.

Students' choice to genuinely engage with others' in the class, sets off a change reaction that can be felt individually and communally. There is magic, life and energy in these moments. Teachers spoke

of seeing these occasions and their desire to hold these spaces open. These are times when the teacher has a sense that all their efforts are worth it, for such a moment.

I know that all the students are participating. They are involved with what's being taught and ... the feedback they give shows their excitement.

I think it's where the content comes alive. ...you have those conversations afterwards, ... and then you sum up and you share your stories. Then suddenly they start sharing their new understandings. And you realise that you've actually helped that knowledge to happen.

The class environment influences everyone, regardless of whether they are naturally expressive or otherwise, overt or timid, confident or lacking courage. As a consequence, relationships always matter. A key role for teachers 'at-their-best' is the oversight and guardianship of the space between the students and the teacher. All too often we can take for granted the reciprocity of influence each person has on others during shared experiences. Relationships exist between those relating, hence each individual has the ability to influence the movement of the relating (Giles, 2010).

Conclusion

In this article we report on a research inquiry which explored teacher's perceptions of their best teaching experiences within a teacher education topic. The transcripts enabled the construction of four phenomenological themes. The themes are intended to show the phenomenological nature of a teacher's way of 'being in' a moment of best practice. The four themes relate to the preparation of a place and space, the privileging of experiential pedagogies, the priority of story and the power of expression. The central focus appears to be the teacher's readiness for the shared experience we call learning. The research has also shown phenomenological insights into the best teaching moments as perceived from a teacher's perspective. Finally, this research bridges the gap identified between general studies on effective teaching-learning environments and a specific study of New Zealand Early Childhood Education teacher educators within a particular program. An understanding of the context of teachers' at-their-best experiences needs to be seriously considered in relation to the teaching and learning within other teacher education programmes. The generative and creative approach known as hermeneutic phenomenology has the ability to open powerful themes of what it is like being at your best as a teacher.

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