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“Without Hermeneutics I’m Stuck in My Own Thinking”: Preservice Teachers Adopt a Hermeneutical Stance Toward Action Research

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“Without Hermeneutics I’m Stuck in my Own Thinking”: Pre-service Teachers Adopt a Hermeneutical Stance toward Action Research

Abstract

Pre-service teachers need to question their taken-for-granted beliefs and biases about their students. Hermeneutics is a philosophical perspective that uncovers the subjectivity of our perceptions and can help students understand the necessity of questioning biases. This study explored what happened when pre-service teachers undertook an action research project with their students and analyzed qualitative data with a hermeneutical stance. Data consisted of audio-recorded class dialogues about readings on hermeneutics, interviews, student papers, and pre and post surveys. The data revealed that hermeneutics helped pre-service teachers: become aware of their biases; question their initial interpretations; and assume a self-reflective stance toward teaching.

Purposes

This study explored what happened when pre-service teachers took a hermeneutical stance towards teacher action research. In a joint credential/masters teacher preparation program, pre-service teachers undertook an action research project with their students and analyzed qualitative data with a hermeneutical stance. The potential for teacher action research to cultivate reflection over pedagogical practices (Bonner, 2006; Canning, 1991) and to add to the knowledge base of teaching is documented (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992). This project primarily focused on pre-service teachers assuming a hermeneutical perspective during their interpretations of students and the analysis of student work.

Pre-service teachers preparing to teach in today’s diverse urban schools need opportunities to learn about their students so they can question their taken-for-granted beliefs and biases (Bowers, 1982; Delpit, 2006). Preparing teachers to meet the needs of diverse students is complicated when the majority of pre-service teachers are White, middle class, and monolingual English (AACTE, 2013) and while the media presents deficit perspectives of students of color and students in poverty, showing them “needing to be contained, subordinated and to some degree, broken” (Ullucci, 2009, para 1). There is a danger that pre-service teachers will focus on the deficits rather than tap into the funds of knowledge of students who lack social, economic, or cultural capital (Moll, 1992). We were interested in investigating whether the theoretical framework of hermeneutics within teacher action research could support pre-service teachers to question their initial biases concerning diverse students.

Perspectives: Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics uncovers the power of our interpretive lenses to frame our perception; perception is interpretation (Ellis, 2007; Gallagher, 1992; Smith, 1991). As Ellis (2007) puts it: “The interpreter - the one hearing or perceiving - actively constructs the meaning of what someone else says, and does so by drawing upon everything else he or she has heard or observed” (p. 5). Hermeneutics uncovers the subjectivity of teachers’ interpretations of students’ behavior and the need to challenge initial assumptions to develop understanding and clear communication. Recognizing the subjective nature of perception is particularly important for pre-service teachers entering urban classrooms

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with students representing diverse cultures and backgrounds, since pre-service teachers base pedagogical decisions on their limited interpretations of their students’ behavior and actions and these choices affect students’ well-being, success, and life chances.

The philosophical perspective of hermeneutics informs both action research methodology and teaching. Within action research, qualitative researchers engage in multiple “loops” of inquiry, referred to as a hermeneutic circle. Analyzing data this way involves reflecting on one’s own lenses, the lenses of the theoretical framework, and the participants. It underscores the need for more than one person to interpret qualitative data because each individual brings a perspective or horizon, as Gadamer (1997) puts it, and research becomes a search for a reconciliation or fusion of those horizons through the hermeneutic circle.

Although hermeneutics is only one of many theories these pre-service teachers encounter over the course of their two-year teacher preparation program, the graduates frequently cite hermeneutics as the most powerful perspective they learned. They often describe its impact on their teaching practice and their lives. This seems surprising given the complexity and the theoretical bent of hermeneutics. We questioned what aspects of the hermeneutical perspective within teacher action research led these teachers to assert its enduring value on their teaching practice.

Methods:

In a joint masters/credential program at a large public urban university, pre-service teachers enroll in masters level theory courses (for example, on multicultural education and qualitative research) in addition to their methods courses. Embedded assignments build toward their action research projects, beginning with cumulative annotated bibliographies and ending with a project on a topic of their choice. When they learn how to analyze qualitative data, they explore hermeneutics. First they explore it as a theory of interpretation of language-rich data. They read Gallagher’s *Hermeneutics and Education* alongside teacher inquiry projects - with hermeneutics as the stance towards analysis - published in Ellis’ *Teaching from Understanding: Teacher as Interpretive Inquirer* (2007). Then they study hermeneutics as a stance toward teaching in general and they consider the interpretive nature of making sense of their general observations and assessments of their students.

Data consisted of audio-recorded class dialogues about readings on hermeneutics, interviews with six students in a group, individual student papers, and pre and post surveys in three cohorts of pre-service teachers (98 students over three years).

To analyze this data, we assumed a hermeneutical and grounded theory approach (Ellis, 2007; Merriam, 1998). We read and reread the students’ papers, transcribed interviews and surveys and compared each of our interpretations of these data to one another’s interpretations. Over time, we derived categories through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998). The data reveal what the pre-service teachers described learning from assuming a hermeneutical perspective for their action research and their teaching.

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Data

The pre-service teachers described becoming aware of their biases. This awareness of bias led to questioning their initial interpretations of data and of students in general. Ultimately, they recognized the need to assume a self-reflective stance toward teaching.

1. Awareness of biases

By taking a hermeneutic stance within teacher action research projects, the pre-service teachers described recognizing how they form biases about their students. One described hermeneutics as “about realizing I need to overcome my own judgments, even the awareness that I make judgments all the time.” Another wrote, “Hermeneutics taught me I have biases that are based on my, and only my, prior experiences. I evaluate my students based on my own constructed biases.” The teachers recognized how they construct biases, how difficult biases are to recognize and how they impact their actions. In so doing, they paved the way to begin to communicate and to evaluate their students more clearly. The idea underpinning this effort is that ultimately, without noticing biases, we are subject to them. Awareness of the process of constructing our biases and the limited and narrow nature of the building blocks of our own perceptions is critical if we are to prepare pre-service teachers to transcend bias.

2. Questioning initial interpretations

Upon recognizing their biases, the pre-service teachers described how learning to question their initial interpretations must be a systematic practice. They described this variously as an “awareness of my need for feedback,” “the need to look below the surface,” or the need to “see through a different lens.” This necessity to delve beyond initial interpretations in relationship was demonstrated in the context of both their research projects and their teaching in general. For example, one wrote,

In action research this means I need to enlist my fellow colleague teachers to review and review my data and really listen to their noticings. I need to be ready for them to see things I didn’t. I never would have really had real findings without this process.

In another typical example, a pre-service teacher referred to the implications for her teaching:

Without a hermeneutical stance I would only see in my students what I expected to find based on my prior experience with my students. I can’t do it alone, I have to ask my students and I have to ask my peers about my perspectives on my students.

Both descriptions address recognizing the limits of their own interpretations of qualitative data and of students (students’ behavior, words and learning). These limits led the pre-service teachers to understand the need for reflective practices. They saw the critical need for enlisting colleagues to share their perspectives.

3. Assuming a self-reflective stance toward teaching

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Assuming a hermeneutical stance toward their action research and analyzing qualitative data through multiple readings with other teachers led these pre-service teachers to new and unexpected findings. Since their action research projects examined their teaching and their students’ learning, they described how unexpected learnings about their students instilled a deeper understanding of what constitutes reflective teaching. For example, one wrote:

I knew before to reflect, but it’s really now understanding how deeply I am conditioned to assume and not question. Like now I know to listen more and question more, and tell less. These are requirements of taking a hermeneutical stance – to really reflect means we have to really change our perspectives based on what we learn about our students.

This pre-service teacher described learning not only about the importance of reflection on an abstract level, but how she plans to reflect by recognizing her conditioned assumptions, and questioning and listening to the degree.

Another identified journaling as a hermeneutic practice to aid her reflection over her teaching:

Now with hermeneutics, I know I need a systematic practice like journaling to identify assumptions, biases and beliefs. I need to share my writings with my colleagues for without multiple perspectives I cannot identify my own. It’ll be like I’m teaching in a vacuum and really I’d only be teaching myself.

Another wrote:

Without hermeneutics I’m stuck in my own thinking about my teaching, about my students (that’s the data of teaching). I know now to go back and forth between my perspectives and what I observe, think about my students and then re-evaluate my perspectives and observations and this looping is infinite.

In general, these pre-service teachers described how understanding the limits of their own interpretations led them to plan to adopt systematic practices of reflection. In the longer paper, we relate several cases in which the pre-service teachers’ commitment to a hermeneutic stance led them to reflect over their interactions with diverse students in order to determine how to better meet their needs.

Significance

While we cannot know if these pre-service teachers’ understanding of hermeneutics within action research will lead them to reflect on their interpretations of students in their future as teachers, the findings here suggest the promise of hermeneutics to prepare teachers who recognize their biases and question themselves through systematic reflective practices within action research - to come to deeper understanding to better meet the needs of culturally diverse groups of students. Given the need to prepare pre-service teachers to contradict the isolation that contributes to professional stagnation and ultimately perpetuation of the status quo, hermeneutics is a promising theoretical framework for teacher preparation.

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