

Promising Conversations

EXPLORING THE MEANING OF BEING A COOPERATING TEACHER

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Teaching as vocation demands the recognition and acceptance of “a fundamental fallibility, and hence a fragility and insecurity” (Huebner, 1987, p.24). Inherent in accepting teaching as a vocation is the struggle with and the tension of our own vulnerability within the lived experience of being a cooperating teacher.

I felt that temporarily I may have lost some power when the student teacher took over.

I felt anxious, I wanted to step in and say things.

I was sort of ready to throw in the towel and say “oh, I’ve made a big mistake again.”

In what ways can and do cooperating teachers recapture within the apprenticeship relationship the knowledge that life is bearable — not in the sense of having to put up with but in the sense that life is there to hold them up — as in living in community?

It was more of a social act with the student teacher. I think that makes it more bearable.

Giving up the privacy is not such a bad thing because you lose the isolation, and that’s really a big plus.

I miss the opportunity for talking.

I miss her as a person, being there to discuss.

THE PROPOSAL

In response to the call for improvement in teacher education programs and for interpretive research with an interest in disclosing human meaning in social life; I, as researcher proposed in this study to explore the meaning of being a cooperating teacher. The major project for the study of which this work is a part (Slocum, 1989) was to investigate and to open to discourse the cooperating teachers’ perspective of what it means to be a cooperating teacher so the educational community could come to know more clearly what that perspective is.

Tensions between what was reported in the educational literature and the lived experience of the cooperating teacher shed new light on the current concerns about the practicum. Consideration was given to how the experience had been defined and moulded by the underlying assumptions of educational program orientations that serve to perpetuate forms of educational practice.

The intent of this research was to capture the

experience of being a cooperating teacher. Questions of meaning guided the inquiry and opened the way toward uncovering the nature of the experience of being a cooperating teacher. The central guiding questions were: What is the meaning of being a cooperating teacher? What is the meaning of student teaching for the cooperating teacher? What would constitute a meaningful relationship between a cooperating teacher and a student teacher?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A brief history of American education furnishes the background for the evolving relationship between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher when the shift in the primary meaning of the apprenticeship relationship becomes evident. Haberman (1983) in his research and writings on historical development of teacher education describes the concept of the cooperating teacher as a master of the art, trade or mystery of teaching as having its roots in early colonial days. The place of teacher preparation was the school. The spirit of this kind of apprenticeship relationship was grounded in the notion that the apprentice was invited to be and become a part of the lived world of the master-crafts person. The metaphor is one of shared journey. Through the influence of the industrial era and academic advancements the relationship became fragmented. The university became a part of the student teaching practicum and the cooperating teacher deferred to the university's particular image of teaching.

As Haberman (1983) continues to trace the apprenticeship relationship through the era of the normal schools, teachers' colleges and Dewey's challenging notion of the laboratory school, an ongoing debate between teacher training and teacher education is revealed. Kliebard's (1975) metaphor of production helps us understand a teacher training curriculum which seeks to perfect the correct teacher behavior while his metaphor of growth illuminates a kind of teacher education curriculum where student teachers are expected to monitor their own behavior within the existing educational and social contexts of schools and schooling.

Further investigation of the purposes and rationale of current orientations to education brings to awareness the available frameworks within which the apprenticeship relationship may be shaped and defined. Research and writing by Joyce (1975) situates the apprenticeship relationship currently in use in the technical perspective of teacher education which includes the traditional-craft, personalistic and behavior paradigms as outlined by Zeichner (1983). These approaches do not seek to question the existing ethical, social and political systems in education which reside in the larger social context. The result of the implementation of these traditional goals is the preparing of teachers who can adapt and work within existing school systems, who are knowledgeable in subject and content areas and who have skills in various teaching techniques. The inquiry oriented paradigm recognizes education as political. It seeks to foster a problematic attitude on the part of preservice teachers toward existing educational programs.

An examination of the literature in a number of areas of concern in preservice education brings to light preunderstandings and assumptions about the experience of being a cooperating teacher. While these concerns are researched and written about from various viewpoints the recent work by people generally categorized as having a reflective, inquiry oriented perspective is having an impact. Within this approach to teacher education is the work of such people as Fullan (1985), Hopkins (1980) and Zeichner (1983) who base their work on the assumption that teacher education is a matter of life long learning and the belief that reform must change the perspective on teaching and teacher education rather than simply adjust details of the practice of teaching and training teachers. The image of the teacher is one who is reflective, critical and inquiring.

Writing within this reflective, inquiring perspective Huebner (1985), Westerhoff (1987) and Palmer (1983) awaken us to the spirituality of education. Their view of human life as a journey, teaching as a vocation, and teachers and students as travellers together on a pilgrimage stems from conviction that the difficult tasks of education "are easier if they occur among people who participate in communities of faith, no matter what their specific tradition" (Huebner, 1985, p. 123).

Perhaps within the reflective, inquiring view lies the opportunity and possibility to re-claim and re-experience the apprenticeship relationship as a shared journey.

FRAMEWORK AND RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH

Emerging from the inquiry oriented perspective of teacher education is the proposal for a shift from the dominant paradigm of empirical-analytic research to interpretive and critical modes of inquiry. Such a proposal is based on the rationale that the study of peoples' thought and action and the relation between the two is social enquiry. The central interest of interpretive research is the interpretation and disclosure of human meaning in social life emphasizing the discovery of meaning, its sources and shared understandings. The idea of a phenomenological research approach as presented by van Manen (1984) was appropriate to this desire for "a form of understanding that deepens and radicalizes thought and, as well, the acting that flows from it." (Aoki in van Manen, 1984, pii)

RESEARCH APPROACH FOR THIS STUDY

This phenomenological approach may be seen as a dynamic interplay among four procedural activities:

1. Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting (van Manen, 1984, pp.2-3).

REFLECTIVE INTERPRETATION

In this study, hermeneutics, as a theory of understanding and a process directed toward recovering lost or hidden meanings, guides the reflective interpretation of the meaning of the conversations.

Turning to a phenomenon. The phenomenon of being a cooperating teacher was first explored through reflections on my personal experiences as a cooperating teacher in Home Economics in the form of an autobiographical sketch. Reading research literature on cooperating teachers provided background about this notion and the underlying assumptions that have helped shape and define it. Phenomenological studies have provided examples for me of questions and themes which reflect the phenomenological intent.

Investigating the experience. I deliberately chose a research project and approach that allowed me to become a part of the process, the unfolding, toward narrowing the gap between the researcher and the researched. I began with the "ideal" of a co-researching relationship between myself and three current and experienced cooperating teachers in Home Economics. Through conversation as a mode of inquiry we explored the meaning and significance of our experiences. The nature of these conversations offered the possibility to question the taken-for-granted in our everyday lives through genuine searching, sharing and reflection. To clarify this idea of conversation in contrast to the common notion of interviewing we read about and examined the risks and benefits of this part of the research process.

Conversations with the cooperating teachers provided the data for this investigation. There were four sessions with each cooperating teacher approximately one month apart. The first conversation was conducted before the student teacher arrived, THE BECOMING phase. The second and third conversations took place while the student teacher was actually practice teaching, THE CHOICE-LIVED-OUT phase. The fourth conversation occurred after the student teacher had finished her practicum experience, THE REFLECTIONS-ON-THE-CHOICE-LIVED-OUT-phase. Each session was audio-taped and transcribed. These transcripts were shared with each cooperating teacher before the next conversation. Sharing the transcript served to stimulate reflections and provide new thoughts for future conversations.

Reflections-on-conversation. The resulting text was thematized and analyzed. Common

events which revealed similarities in reaction and circumstance were identified. These common events were situated in concrete expectations and concerns and in remembrances and reflections. Shared themes that reveal common patterns of meaning were uncovered. These shared themes are the structures of the experience that serve to allude to the meaning of being a cooperating teacher.

The written description. The final written presentation was structured thematically and analytically. The written description framed in a narrative/story form was made up of three elements; analogies, *questions of meaning* and portions of the actual conversation. Common *analogies* are an invitation to the reader to enter the lived world of the cooperating teacher as presented in the unedited portions of the actual conversations, the *theme statements*. This procedure was inspired mainly by the work of van Manen, Barritt, et al., Nouwen and Geertz.

Interpretation: The written descriptions were subject to an interpretive effort. The lived experience of the cooperating teacher was analyzed from her immediate experience. The experience was further interpreted in a searching out and analyzing of symbolic forms to a deeper uncovering of the experience within the context of the larger society.

The written descriptions and interpretations were checked by each cooperating teacher to assure a fair re-presentation, re-creation of aspects of the lived reality of the cooperating teachers' stories as they had experienced them as an essentially human experience, not just a re-calling or a re-telling of true events.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION WITHIN THE COMMON EVENT; REACTIONS TO THE INVITATION.

A shared theme: Personal uncertainty. Is there a teacher who has not known that personal sense of uncertainty in the first instant when the invitation to 'BECOME' a cooperating teacher is received?

*Probably at the time I thought, what a fool.
I said I'd never have another one.*

*I hadn't had a student teacher for a couple of
years, as a matter of choice.*

A shared theme: Professional duty. Is there a teacher who has not been stirred by a professional sense of duty during that same first instant?

*Then I think where would they go, somebody
has to do it. And I have done it before and I
imagine I can handle this again.*

Then I thought I'd take another stab at it.

INTERPRETATION

In reviewing the initial reaction of the cooperating teachers to the call to BECOME, the sense of inner turmoil and uncertainty unfolds with the words: "I said I'd never have another one." One perspective of duty reveals itself in the reluctant and unreflective statement "somebody has to do it." In an ordinary way we may think of duty as an obligation, a task we feel we must do even if we do not feel like doing it. Accepting one's duty is somewhat taken for granted. The way that duty is dispensed and fulfilled is not questioned. "I've done it before. I imagine I can handle this again" (p.75). Do these words speak of a duty that has lost its hope? If so, what other aspects of duty does the meaning of being a cooperating teacher encourage and foster so that cooperating teachers continue to answer "yes" to the call?

In situating duty as a dimension of education, Huebner (1984) lifts its meaning above the mundane and sedimentary providing an encouraging vision for cooperating teachers. Education as duty is "a call from the other that we may reach beyond ourselves and enter into life with the life around us" (p. 114). Duty claimed as such reveals its hidden hope for participation in the life which is transcendent. In this duty and this hope cooperating teachers find the courage to try once again, to plan, to schedule, to guide, to "contribute," to look once more for possibilities in the form of, and for the student teacher.

NEW QUESTIONS EMERGED

As a result of the study, new questions of meaning emerged toward revealing a deeper meaning of the experiences of being a cooperating teacher. As I continued to re-enter the conversations to make sense of them I began to wonder: what is at the heart of heeding the call to become a cooperating teacher? The more I reflected on the first conversations the more I had the sense that hope was at the heart of heeding the call.

As I struggled to re-present the lived experience of the cooperating teacher, with the student teacher present, I pondered on the question: In what way is hope lived out in the face of reality in the lived world of the cooperating teacher? For the cooperating teacher as leader with hope, compassion and hospitality were at the core, were the very nature of her authority. This portrait of a leader with evolving authority offered possibilities for revealing ways in which hope was manifested in the face of the cooperating teachers lived reality.

As I explored the meaning of being a cooperating teacher through reflections on her lived reality new questions arose: What are the meaningful and real struggles in the experience? What is the promise hidden in the experience? These questions pointed the way for the interpretive effort. As teachers we risk ourselves as we question the familiar, the taken-for-granted, as we move toward change for the good of all. The presence of the student teacher exposes the less than ideal lived world of the cooperating teacher. The cooperating teacher struggles with her uncertainties, powerlessness and isolation. Current conditions in schools encourage the cooperating teacher to consider her risks private. Conditions of community that accept vulnerability and share risks offer the cooperating teacher the opportunity to share her journey with the student teacher. Shared incompleteness can transform expressions of weakness to signs of hope and promise toward new meanings, new understandings and new relationships.

PHENOMENOLOGY AS A WAY TO MAKE SENSE OF THE CONVENTIONAL IMAGE AND TO DISCLOSE THE AUTHENTICITY OF BEING A COOPERATING TEACHER.

In unpacking the conventional image of the cooperating teacher, three concerns become apparent: (a) the university continues to define the role of the cooperating teacher without exploring or clarifying the nature of the experience of being a cooperating teacher, (b) the university perpetuates the present system which places the cooperating teacher in a low status position in the triad while at the same time consistently describes the cooperating teacher as the "single most important person in preservice teacher education" (Morrisey, 1980, p.3), and (c) the existing fragmented apprenticeship relationship denies the communal nature of teaching.

In the middle of these concerns, the lived experience of cooperating teachers brings us to an awareness of the different poles between which their lives vacillate and are held in tension. These poles emerged as the context in which to speak about the meaning of being a cooperating teacher.

In the BECOMING phase, the polarity between duty and hope deals with the cooperating teacher's relationship to her own past and present expectations. In the CHOICE-LIVED-OUT phase the polarity between imposed authority and evolving authority forms the basis of the cooperating teacher's lived reality as supervisor, as leader. In the REFLECTIONS-ON-THE-CHOICE-LIVED-OUT phase of the practicum, the polarity between isolation and community structures the cooperating teacher's relationship with the student teacher. The cooperating teacher's life is a constant movement between the poles of conventional performance and authenticity in thought and action.

Table 1 is presented to illustrate the scope of the complete study and to elaborate upon and clarify themes and tensions revealed within and between a conventional image and an authentic image.

IMPLICATIONS — SO WHAT OF THIS KIND OF RESEARCH

Authenticity of thoughtful action reaches beyond, transcends conventional performance.

TABLE 1.
Shared themes/tensions revealed within and between
the conventional and authentic images.

COVENTIONAL IMAGE

*denying/overcoming the contradictions/
tensions toward living in false expectations
and illusions.*

AUTHENTIC IMAGE

*living out the tensions toward insights and
reflective, thoughtful, caring actions in the
transcendent dimension*

BECOMING PHASE

professional duty/personal uncertainty

a call to reach beyond ourselves

doubt expressed as inability to predict and
control

benefit of doubt as a state of vulnerability
and openness toward sensitivity to 'other'

disconnectedness with university supervisor
and program

solidarity through collaboration with
university supervisor

CHOICE LIVED OUT PHASE

the expert

room for not knowing

undefined/imposed boundaries

firm boundaries

imposed authority from university, and to the
student teacher

evolving authority whose core and nature is
care and compassion

commiserator of immediate experience

contemplative critic with unsettling questions

encourages student teacher to master
content, teaching techniques and fit into the
system

does not make learning painless but makes
the painful possible

REFLECTIONS ON THE CHOICE LIVED OUT PHASE

teaching as a job/a new technique/ new
methods

teaching as vocation/journey

relationship defined as skills and concepts
to reduce struggles

brings struggles into our presence to reveal
insights toward action

apprenticeship relationship fragmented
between university and school

communal nature of teaching through
collaboration between university and school
participants

risks private: experience alienation,
isolation, unrelatedness, powerlessness

home economics as a way of living —
making journey available to student teacher,
shared insecurities understood as a way to
liberation through community

This means that in the move from the conventional image to authenticity, the cooperating teacher needs to be constructively involved in the unfolding and making of the student teaching practicum.

As the authenticity of being cooperating teacher is disclosed, many ways and forms open in which the student teacher can be and become teacher. Imitation of the cooperating teacher by the student teacher does not mean to teach like the cooperating teacher, to model her, but for the student teacher to live her teaching as authentically as the cooperating teacher lives hers.

For the authenticity of being cooperating teacher to be made visible there must be those associated with the student teaching practicum who recognize that teaching can be renewing, life-forming, and transforming under the appropriate circumstances. In conditions of community, the responsibilities of the cooperating teacher appear as affirmations of a disclosing of her authenticity in being a cooperating teacher rather than as a fatiguing variety of jobs, activities, and projects.

A life in community requires a time for solitude. This means that within the student teaching practicum, a time and place for reflection, individual study, and pondering must be seen by educators as important to both the student teacher and the cooperating teacher.

A student teaching practicum as communal in nature can be a sign offering hope and confidence. Many students beyond those directly addressed as student teachers in the practicum can see the authenticity of the cooperating teacher's way of being and are inspired by the hope and confidence she brings to education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Phenomenological research provides us the opportunity to admit there is a whole lot we do not know in teacher education and provides the place and space for taken-for-granted backgrounds to be disclosed and made visible. This research can provide a backdrop against which other researchers let the voices of cooperating

teachers and student teachers be heard as they let their own lived experiences speak to them.

In the preparation of teachers, the first step to a better quality practicum comes only when the cooperating teacher understands how the student teacher understands what is happening. The cooperating teacher's actions are based upon her desires and intentions, and these rest firmly on her understanding of the events happening in the student teaching practicum. It can be helpful to explore and think about different ways of approaching particular educational events and situations in the practicum. As alternatives reveal themselves, teachers and students become aware that they have the power to choose their actions.

Research is meaningful for cooperating teachers themselves as a reflective practice toward uncovering the conditions of practice that have led to the conventional image being the way it is today. Cooperating teachers can think of social practices they carry out in classrooms that foster/confront the conventional image.

This research study seeks to achieve an awareness of different ways of thinking about and acting with cooperating teachers. It is hoped this study will be considered as an alternative, complementary way to work with cooperating teachers. This research is not exhaustive, not a final authority. However, more studies of this nature can help us understand the "multifaceted nature of educational experiences" (Barritt, et al., 1985, p.84).

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