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Doing Research through Descriptions of Teachers

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Abstract

The idea that teaching is a complex set of practices, deep-rooted in teachers' personal "being-in-the-world", underlies this research which employs a phenomenological approach in order to gain an indepth understanding of the teaching experience as it is perceived and thought of by those who are personally involved in it. The research objectives involve both methodological reflection on and knowledge development of teachers' experience. Qualitative conversational interview is the research technique we have used. This reflection originates from a two-year study of teachers' knowledge about practice: thirty-five teachers were involved each one of whom was interviewed twice. The analysis of the interviews has led to a complex vision of teaching practice, seen from the teachers' viewpoint. The core of their descriptions concerns several different meanings, expressed by all the teachers of all school grades, creating a composite profile of what teachers consider as essential in their practice. The data analysis led to the recognition of the presence of two main areas of teachers' practice. A research on the meanings teachers develop about their practice can be significant at two different levels: i. *methodological*; ii. *About practical knowledge in schoolwork*.

1. Introduction

Taking as a premise that teaching is a complex set of practices, deep-rooted in teachers' personal "being-in-the-world", this research employs an in-depth phenomenological approach in order to gain a deep understanding of teaching experience as it is perceived and thought of by those who are personally involved in it (Cohen et al., 2000). Thus, the research objectives involve both methodological reflection and knowledge development on teachers' experience.

As for methodological issues, the research aims at developing an epistemological and methodological reflection on potential and limits of a data analysis method, which combines grounded theory and phenomenological approach (Mortari, 2007).

Concerning knowledge about teachers' experience of teaching, the research aims to explore this experience as a whole, moving from teachers' descriptions of practice, which allow to grasp different levels in their perspective

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about what they do and the way they shape their everyday practice: these levels include practical knowledge, interpretive processes, positioning in professional role and identity. Most of the times, day-to-day work at school does not leave traces. Teachers develop knowledge in classroom practice, in face-to face encounters with their students, in questioning educational matters. When they think by themselves, discuss with colleagues, cope with everyday problems, they elaborate visions about human nature, teachers' role, pupils' learning and pedagogical perspectives orienting their educational choices. This research attempts to translate into words teachers' practical knowledge by putting their narratives of practice at the core of the heuristic action.

The paper presents the structure of the research and discusses the methodological problems emerging from the research process. The analysis of the descriptions of practice given by the participants is directed at the question about the meanings teachers build about their own practical experience, and to look deeply into it.

2. Theoretical framework

The research takes into account the literature on research about teaching originating from teachers' narratives of practice (Elbaz, 1991; Connelly, Clandinin, 1988; 2000; Van Manen, 1995; Shulman, 2004). Teaching is assumed as a complex set of practices needing a professional attitude based on reflective rationality (Schön, 1983) and involving teachers' subjectivity and life-world experience.

Therefore, the research accepts Van Manen's critical perspective about the research on teaching (Van Manen, 1994; 1995), emphasizing the necessity to go beyond rationalistic visions of teachers' work, which has been often identified with a problem-solving activity or with correct use of technical tools. Considering teaching experience as a whole leads to a better understanding of the different meanings teachers develop in their everyday experience at school and a complex profile of their thought about practice. Dewey (1984) said that educational research in school consists in trying to understand what the teachers do and think. Many researches follow this guiding principle, and aim to grasp the culture of school practice by observing teachers in action, collecting their narratives, listening to their reflections (Ayers, 1989; Johnson, Golombeck, 2002).

This study is based on an ecological research paradigm, which proposes a vision of knowledge as something that is rooted into natural life contexts and thus gives great value to subjectivity and subjects' encounter in knowledge building processes (Lincoln, Guba, 1985). In this perspective, human science research takes into account the complexity of real world and is stimulated to find adequate methods and tools to get closer to subjects' experiences, while being faithful to all their nuances and contradictions.

2.1. Epistemological perspective

Assuming teachers are active, intentional subjects leads to focus on the meanings they build on their experience of the world they live in. The research has therefore chosen a phenomenological approach.

This approach chooses to deal with human experience as the main research object and recognizes the adequacy of "non – exact", "non – mathematic" concepts (Husserl, 2002: 176). The main epistemological principles of phenomenology are:

    a. The search for the essence of phenomena
    b. Fidelity to phenomena.

The "essence" phenomenological research is interested in is not eidetic essence but "concrete" essence, that is what qualifies the phenomenon and distinguishes it from other phenomena. This research aims to highlight the core qualities of educational practice, going beyond its continuous changes (Mortari, 2010).

The empirical qualities of a phenomenon, which tell us about its concrete essence, can be classified into:

  – common qualities, which can be found in all the cases considered in the research
  – extended qualities, frequently recurring in the cases of the phenomenon under study
  – partial qualities, which appear in a limited number of cases
  – singular qualities, concerning only one of the cases of the phenomenon.

"An empirical research can be considered scientific when it is able to tell the empirical essence of a phenomenon, which is not ideal but concrete, built up by the common, extended, partial, singular qualities defining it. Such a research is rigorous, valid, but very difficult to accomplish" (Mortari, 2010: 14).

The research object is made of the meanings the participants express. "We firmly keep our look on consciousness, and we try to see what is immanent there" (Husserl, 2002: 76).

Phenomenological research is oriented to answer questions of meaning. Precisely, a phenomenological approach can be useful when the research aims at understanding an experience as it is lived and thought by the participants (Polkinghorne, 1989: 45). Phenomenologically-based inquiry asks how meaning emerges from experience by way of interrogating accounts of participants' experiences. Accepting the guiding principle of fidelity to "data" ("what is given"), the phenomenological approach takes the descriptive method as an epistemological model in order to gain rigorous knowledge in a way that is different from quantitative methods' way. This heuristic strategy looks for a description capable of saying the specific qualities of a phenomenon, its dimensions, its uniqueness. Particularly, phenomenology as empirical human science does not simply investigate something that is "out there", but the way it appears to human consciousness, the lived experience generated by the encounter between a subject and an object (Husserl, 2002: 159), through the descriptions given by the participants.

The object of phenomenological comprehension is the meaning of lived experience as the individuals involved live and perceive it. Consequently, participants are asked to describe an experience they have lived – rather than making abstract considerations (Giorgi, 1985). Phenomenological research is interested in descriptions coming from inside the ordinary being-in-the-world. The object of phenomenological inquiry, from an eidetic perspective, consists in the participants' descriptions. The goal is to analyse these descriptive texts in order to grasp a precise description of the phenomenon "as it appears" (Van Kaam, 1966).

3.   Research Method

Qualitative conversational interview is the research technique we have used. After a first interview, based on open questions oriented to obtain detailed descriptions of "what you do at school", a second interview was proposed. Before the second interview, the participants received the text of the first interview and were asked to comment on and to deepen what they consider important in it, and then to talk about some generative themes proposed by the researcher and emerging from the first content analysis. This method is coherent with a phenomenological approach, as Seidman suggests (1991), because   a phenomenological act of knowledge is characterized by a continuous movement between the researcher and the phenomenon investigated, which produces a deeper and closer perspective on others' life world.

We involved as research participants 35 teachers from all school grades who have been in service for at least 5 years, who were asked to "describe" their work. In our research, description is a key issue. Describing is a cognitive act required both by the participants and the researcher. During the interviews, the participants were involved in an analytical process of description of lived experiences, and the researchers produced descriptions starting from the data collected. The participants' comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon are the basis for an analysis that can draw out the essence of an experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The aim of phenomenological method is to gain a faithful knowledge of the phenomenon. According to this main object, the mind is required to become receptive to the appearing of the phenomenon, in order to let it show itself in its original given state. But it is very difficult because a researcher brings all his/her world and experience into the research field. This ordinary, personal beliefs and assumptions can become a pre-conceived set of theories, which risks limiting the openness of the inquiry process. What phenomenology requires to the researcher to do is to make epochè. Epochè consists in two main acts:

- suspending everyday perspective, our reactive attitude towards the things in the world

- facing things without presupposing habitual knowledge.

The work of one's mind, in order to make it as empty as possible, regards preconceived assumptions and constitutes a necessary task in order to search for a faithful description, which respects the original profile of the lived experience of the participants for it to emerge clearly. Epochè leads to acquiring a different perspective on experience, and accompanies all the research steps.

We analysed the descriptions using the following steps, coming from an analytical tool, which combines phenomenological and grounded theory approach (Mortari, 2007):

- reading the texts in order to get the sense of the whole
- finding significant statements about the experience, focusing on how the individuals experience the topic
- working out a synthetic description corresponding to each significant statement
- attributing a conceptual label to each synthetic description
- grouping them into meaning units .

Starting from the units identified, we wrote a descriptive portrait about each account given by the participants in order to highlight singular meanings, and drew a map for each individual description. The maps include a core of common meaning units and meanings that are specific to the subject concerned.

This process aims at acquiring an analytical vision of the data in order to grasp the meaning the participants give to their experience. Afterwards, the researcher begins a self-reflective operation during which he/she reflects on these meanings as they take shape in his/her mind. In this process, the researcher produces a world of meanings, which is connected to the meanings built and expressed by the participants: this is a complex phase, requiring critical reflection and a continuous effort of clarification. All process of analysis have been conducted and negotiated in the research group. The meaning units, expressed in the participants' language, have been further examined and systematically interrogated in order to grasp the sense they reveal and, then, translated into a research language as close as possible to the experience they tell and one that is capable of expressing their complex world of meaning without simply putting scientific linguistic labels on it.

The last phase of the process consists in synthesizing and integrating the meanings identified, in order to build a general description, which should give an accurate, clear and articulated description of the experience (Polkinghorne, 1989; Mortari, 2007). In order to guarantee the data analysis process' validity and to recognize the misleading interpretations created during the research process, we discussed every step in the research group. We tried to make explicit our way of reading data explicit, and we critically discussed the meaning units always using fidelity to the phenomenon as guiding principle. In spite of these strategies, the researcher's look contains his/her subjectivity and cannot eliminate it: this is why the research group shared the praxis of the verifying conversation (Leonard, 1994: 61).

The epistemic action flow can be outlined as follows: (see fig.1)

3.1. Data sources

 The corpus includes the texts of the interviews (35 interviews – involving 8 pre-school teachers, 11 primary school, 8 from middle school, 8 from high school), each one repeated twice, lasting from 1 up to 3 hours each.

3.2. Analysis Results

 Phenomenological method is not a simplifying approach: on the contrary, it leads to different levels of comprehension, corresponding to a "core meaning", which includes the essential aspects, and the constituents of the phenomenon (Dahlberg, 2006). The constituents contribute to further elucidation of the meaning of the phenomenon and the tension among the different, sometimes contradictory, aspects that characterize it. On the basis of the core meaning and the partial meanings or constituents, it is possible to create a description as intense and general as possible of the phenomenon and its specificity. The final result is a complex description including essence and constituents, which has been called "lamination of meaning" (Gergen and Gergen, 1995). This expression defines the outcome of an adequate description: a meaning composed by different levels, which express the various aspects through which a phenomenon reveals itself in a holistic, non-fragmented vision to take into account the entirety of the phenomenon (Mortari, 2007).

The analysis of the interviews has led to a complex vision of teaching practice, seen from teachers' viewpoint. The core of their descriptions concerns several different meanings, expressed by all the teachers of all school grades, to establish a composite profile of what teachers consider as essential in their practice.

The data analysis led to a recognition of the presence of two main areas of teachers' practice:

II.   Teachers' action in the classroom

III. Conditions that facilitate teachers' action.

Each area is composed by different levels, which make visible the extended and partial qualities of the phenomenon under study. They can be described as follows:

i. Acting in class

- Focusing on experience. Teachers' actions are centred around the lived experience of the children, investigating the world as it is experienced by infants and children, and it is expressed through practices that are oriented towards thinking, creating and legitimizing spaces of significant experience, which become common patrimony and are related to types of knowledge and competencies.

- Nurturing thinking processes. Teachers approach attentively and carefully children's thoughts, in the various forms they materialize.

- Seeking sense in learning. Teachers speak of a constant investigation of meaning that informs their professionalism. This investigation is seen as indispensable in order that the students can also experience a dimension of good sense about going to school.

- Creating a sense of community: the place of learning relationship. The creation of a meaningful "community of relationships" within the classroom and school is pursued through a wide array of various daily practices. The relationships are considered by the teachers as a condition for creating a context in which life is characterized by care and trust, the basic elements for every community of learning.

ii. "Conditions" (held to be essential by teachers in order to carry out their profession with students well):

- Remaining in dialogue with the situation. The ability to develop a constant idea on how to act and about concrete situations, from the viewpoint of "contingency hermeneutics", allows for putting situated practices into effect.

- Constant exploration. An attitude of constant exploration emerges from the stories told by the teachers that permeates their actions in the classroom and their daily lives, according to diversified practices.

- Creating pluralistic professionalism. Another extended reality identified is that of teachers' necessity to create professional contexts in which sharing, confrontation and collaboration with colleagues and directors occupy an essential space.

- Creating educational alliances. The creation of relationships and forms of collaboration with children's families and other subjects in the area, constitute an essential dimension for acting in class.

4. Conclusion

A research on the meanings teachers build about their practice can be significant on two different levels: i. methodological; ii. About practical knowledge in schoolwork.

i. From a methodological viewpoint, during the whole process we have developed a reflection on potential and limits of a method of content analysis combining grounded theory and phenomenological approach. The teachers' descriptions contain a complex ensemble of elements: narratives on what they do, meanings they give to their actions, lived experiences, aims, ideals and beliefs supporting practice, facilitating conditions, history of the practice. The data collected presented a great complexity that required fidelity to the phenomenon and could not be translated in algorithms. The complex nature of the data made it particularly difficult to use the principle of evidence and to grasp the object "as it gives itself" (Husserl, 2002: 52-53).

ii. As for the knowledge produced through the research, the aim of phenomenological research is to clarify the essence of a phenomenon starting from a faithful description of its singular appearances. We can call the description of the essence a "descriptive theory" about the phenomenon (Mortari, 2007). In this case, we have to deal with a phenomenon – school practice – that most of the times does not leave traces. The research method we used has made it possible to give voice to teachers' practical knowledge, which is created every day at school. Having to deal with different children and face practical problems, teachers always search adequate, creative solutions. Their
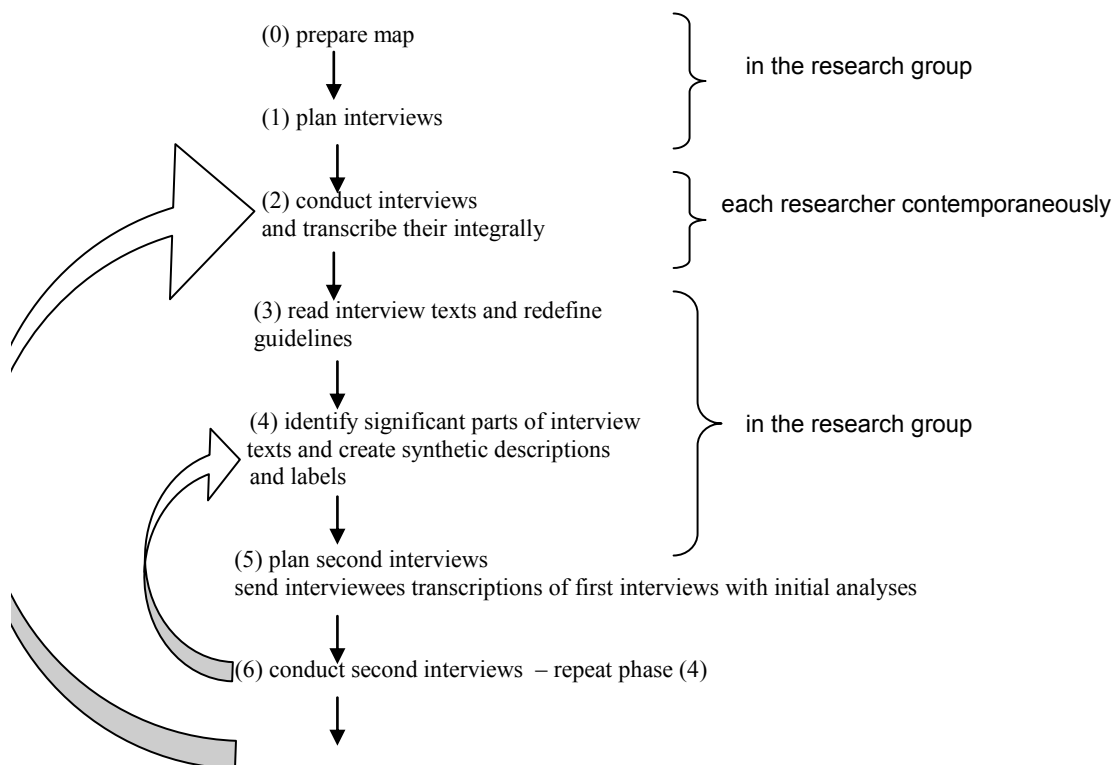
"being in research" (while they drive home after a school day, or while they share questions and thoughts with others) is an attitude that produces concrete pedagogical perspectives.
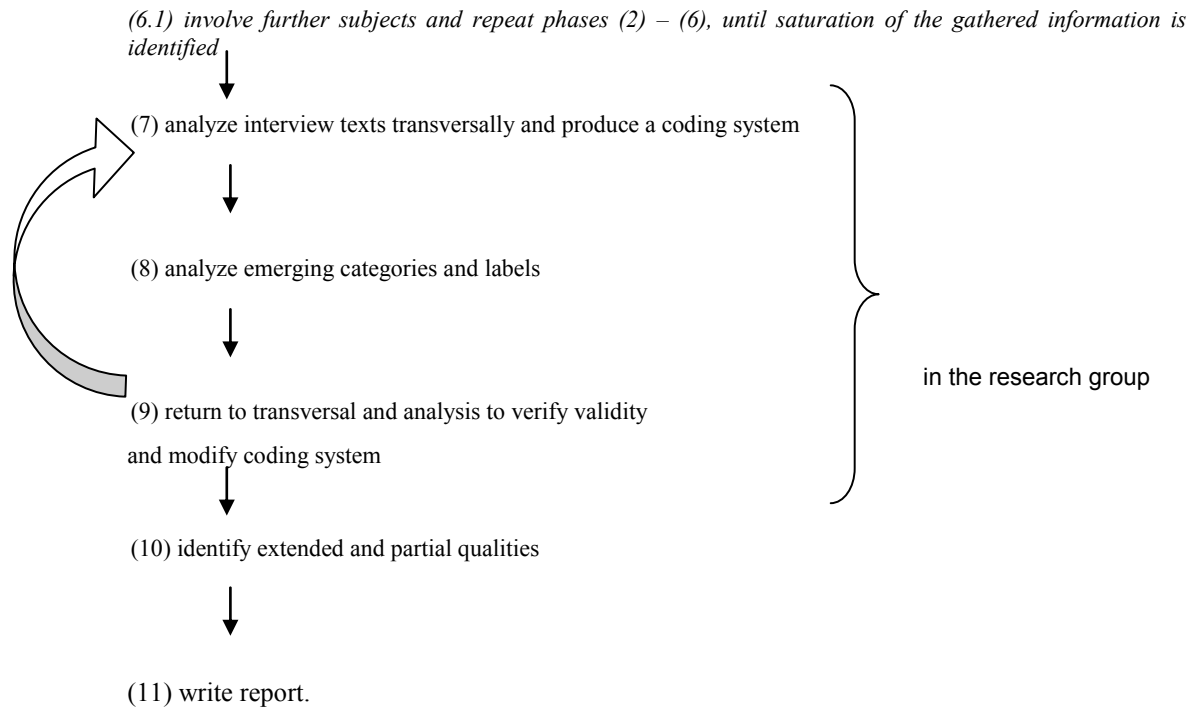
Through this methodological approach it is possible to produce a "history of practice" with the teachers (Shulman, 1987: 12). This brings on the discovery of tacit knowledge that could be useful for initial and continuous teacher education and professional development. One of the main tasks of educational research is to find ways for making teachers' practical knowledge available for others and to explore the reflective conversations with the situations that create it (Ayers, 1989).

In fact, the last question arising from our research concerns the contribution of phenomenological knowledge to improve and orient practice. We assume that a research is relevant when its results are somehow significant for the participants, and more generally for those who are involved in the phenomenon investigated. The research results can be significant because they go into the core of the phenomenon itself and can throw light on teachers' lived experience by giving a key, which allows them to grasp a better understanding of their experience. The meanings identified in teachers' perspective can help to elaborate a reflection on how these meanings contribute to shape practice and to constitute a resource or a bias in their work.

Teachers' practice is a classic topic in educational research (Calderhead, 1981, 1989, 1996; Shulman, 1987; Clark & Lampert, 1986; Cochran-Smith & Litle, 1999) because the study of teachers' practical knowledge leads to an emphasis on the complexity of this profession, in recognizing good practices, suggesting ways for improving practice, and offering excellent models (Shulman, 1987). Through this research process we tried to accomplish a "useful" research (Rorty, 1993). In this research, phenomenological approach permitted us to an in-depth look into meanings, perspectives and practices that are seldom made visible and available for further reflection and practice. In education, where action deals with an increasing complexity, it is necessary to "root thought in concrete educational problems in order to build theories that can serve actionable knowledge" (Mortari, 2010: 5). This can help pedagogical research to contribute to improve educational practice.

Fig.1.

(6.1) involve further subjects and repeat phases (2) – (6), until saturation of the gathered information is identified

(7) analyze interview texts transversally and produce a coding system

(8) analyze emerging categories and labels

(9) return to transversal and analysis to verify validity

and modify coding system

in the research group

(10) identify extended and partial qualities

(11) write report.

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