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Phenomenology of Practice: The Application of Hermeneutic Phenomenology in a Case Study of Middle School Infrastructure

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The Qualitative Report

Ninth Annual Conference



My Background

- High School English Teacher
- Middle School Assistant Principal
- Middle School Principal
- Research Fellow, Ethics in Education Research Group, University of Phoenix
- Interests
 - Reflexive methodologies
 - Ethics as lenses to examine our own prejudices and values

"My task is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make you see. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm — all you demand; and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask."

Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of Narcissus*

Case Study Background

- Opening of Orange Pines Middle School
June 2001-May 2002
- Based on criteria discussed in two seminal documents, *Turning Points: A Report of the Carnegie Commission* (1990) and *National Middle School Association: Elements of an Effective Middle School* (2001)

Middle School Design Elements

- Challenging and Relevant Curriculum
- Varied Teaching and Learning Methodology
- Flexible Organization and Support
- Shared Vision, High Expectations, Positive Climate
- Teachers Who are Expert and Committed
- Safety
- Family and Community
 - National Middle School Association, 2001

Part of Larger Case Study to Examine the School's First Year

Surveys, Focus Groups, and Interviews

- Parents
- Students grades 6, 7, 8
- Teachers

Review of key archival documents of first year

- Memos
- Newsletters
- Agendas
- Meeting notes
- Email
- Personal notes

Strategy to Meet Several Criteria: Modified Block Schedule

- Flexible Organization
- Safety
- Varied Teaching and Learning Methodology

Strategy to Meet Several Criteria: Modified Block Schedule

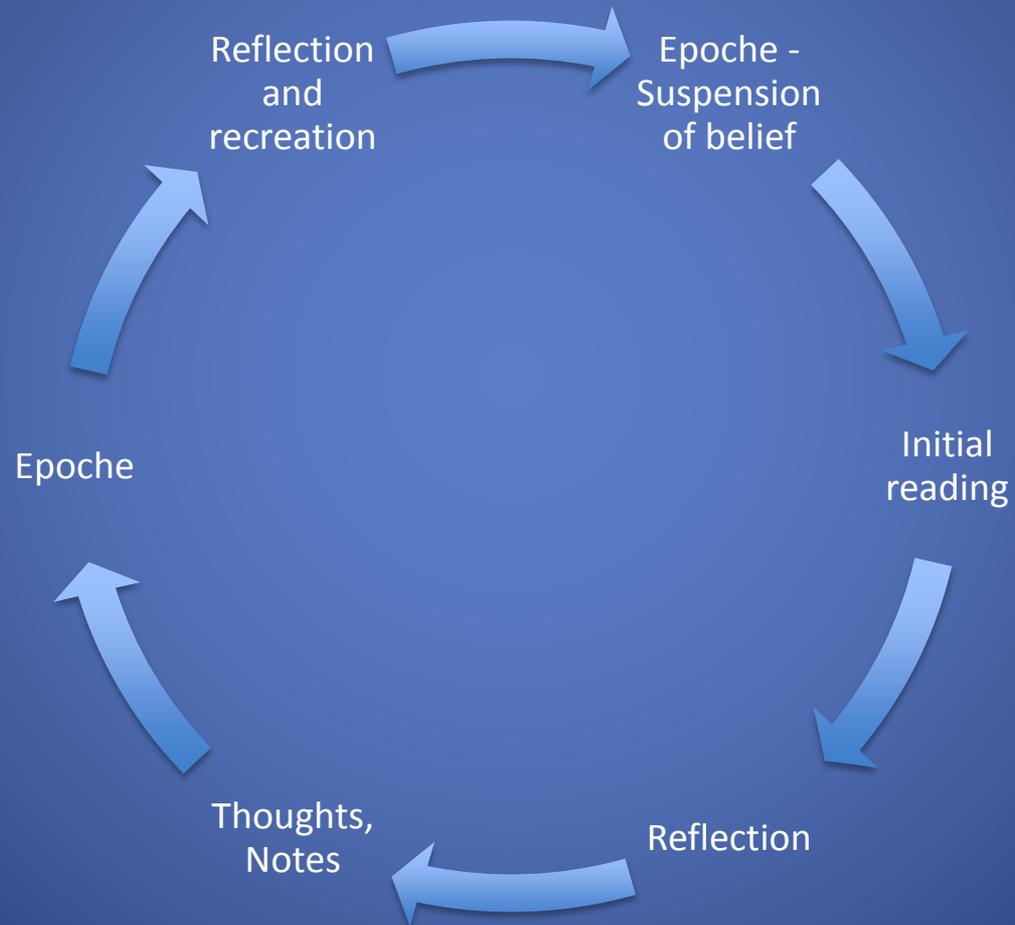
- Modified Block would meet three days per week, MWF
- Four classes would meet for 75 minutes each
- On one day, teachers would lose their planning period
- Required vote of faculty to alter contract with 75% approval

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Question(s)

What was the modified block schedule like for key stakeholders at Orange Pines Middle School?

- Parents
- Students
- Teachers
- Administrators

Hermeneutic Circle



Guiding Thoughts

“Phenomenology of practice refers to the kinds of inquiries that address and the practices of professional practitioners.

Phenomenological inquiry continually is to open to questioning assumptions and preunderstanding – this opening up and making explicit assumptions is art of the phenomenological reflection itself (van Manen, 2014).

Guiding Thoughts

Phenomenology empowers “subjectivity to radicalize itself and to struggle to dislodge and confront the unexamined assumptions of our personal, cultural, political, and social beliefs, views, and theories” (van Manen, 2014).

“Doing robust hermeneutic phenomenology requires opening oneself to a journey of contemplative thinking, questioning, and writing.” (Spence, 2017).

Guiding Thoughts

True prejudices facilitate further understanding while false prejudices hinder such development. Prejudices originate from past experience and influence future possibility. They enable us to make sense of the situations in which we find ourselves yet, paradoxically, they may also constrain understanding and limit the capacity to come to new ways of being.

(Spence, 1999).

Guiding Thoughts

- What preunderstandings am I bringing to the research process?
- How are my understandings fusing with those of the participants' texts and other literature?
- Where are my emotional responses signaling what matters to me?
- What am I seeing or not responding to?
- Are certain interpretations being privileged over others? (Spence, 2017)

Setting the Stage and Implementing the Strategy

Initial memo request to alter teacher contract to eliminate one planning period per week

I can assure you that we have discussed this at length with our teachers both during the interview process and at a general planning meeting. I am confident that we will be successful in our faculty vote. The research on block scheduling is extensive but most importantly, we are making this request in the best interests of our students and in our desire to meet their needs.

Setting the Stage and Implementing the Strategy

Key Themes :

- Pride
- Confidence
- Self-assurance
- Excitement
- Belief that benefits are self-evident.

Setting the Stage and Implementing the Strategy: Training Priorities

- Bus tour,
- Meeting student needs,
- Data analysis,
- Behavior management,
- Curriculum and resources
- Best practices for middle schools, delivered by district rep
- Team planning,
- Teacher Bar-B-Q and community Open House

What was it like?

What is missing?

Setting the Stage and Implementing the Strategy: Later meetings

Two Communications Committee meeting notes mention “problems with block scheduling.”

No other mention of block scheduling in minutes of discipline or other committees throughout year

What was it like?

What is missing?

What was it Like for Parents?

I think block scheduling is a good way for my child to finish assignments and work harder.

I like it because the students get to know each other, participate in teams with enough time to do their projects and not leave them unfinished.

What was it Like for Parents?

My child loses his attention in classes that are so long. He gets bored and dislikes school because of it.

I think block scheduling is confusing.

Block scheduling is dumb.

What was it Like for Parents?

Key Themes

- Appreciation
- Understanding
- Assurance

- Confusion
- Boredom

What was it Like for Students?

I like scheduling for these certain reasons;

1) we get more time to work on certain projects 2) we have more time for class assignments and 3) we have more time to do our homework. I dislike block schedule because I spend a longer time in some classes I don't like.

I hate block scheduling cause it's boring if you have work to do and you get done you ain't got nothing to do. I'm sorry but there is nothing that i like about it.

What was it Like for Students?

Key Themes :

- Appreciation
- Interest
- Boredom

What was it Like for Teachers?

Block scheduling provides an opportunity for the student to get the sufficient practice at the independent level prior to the student attempting to complete work at home. The fact is that 30% of the students do any kind of homework. Block scheduling allows for extra time to complete the “homework,” if you will, at school.

What was it Like for Teachers?

- Disappointed.
- It has worn me out – tiring. Difficult with this student population. Get more out of these students with shorter periods.
- You made us do it.

What was it Like for Teachers?

- Confusing. Kids keep asking when class is over.
- Almost unmanageable. Not working. Will be voted down by over 50%.
- Days with no break, I feel burnt out. ESE kids are tough, especially at the end of the day.
- If I were a better teacher, I would like block better.

What was it Like for Teachers?

Key Themes :

- Opportunity
- Anger
- Frustration
- Exhaustion
- Self-deprecation

Closing Documents

April - Statement to teachers before vote:

Remember – some of our students work better given blocks of time, and some do better with short periods. The same can probably be said for teachers. Approval of this schedule gives us opportunities for success for all! We will discuss the proposal at the faculty meeting on Wednesday.

Closing Documents

Closing Surveys:

I think Orange Pines should continue block scheduling next year.

- Parents 80%
- Students 50%
- Teachers 60%

Closing Documents

Statement to teachers after contract waiver vote:

The official vote was 19 yes, 13 no. By contract language the 75% required was not reached.

What was it Like for the Principal?

He was really upset. They knew what it was. People who had been his friends – thought they would continue, and they didn't. He felt betrayed by people he brought in and hired.

He was very proud of doing block. Very proud. Did lots of planning. Liked that kids could start their homework with someone who knew the work.

He was mad.

What was it Like for the Principal?

Key Themes:

- Anger
- Betrayal
- Loss
- Frustration

Reflections: What was it Like for Me?

- What was the meaning of my reactions to the results?
- What could I have done better to implement the designs?
- What did I learn to become a better school leader?

Reflections: What was it Like for Me?

After all this time, feelings remain tender.

- Pride
- Excitement
- Energized
- Guilt
- Anger
- Frustration
- Judgement of teachers who resist change

Reflections: What was it Like for Me?

- Epoche/bracketing/suspension of belief very hard.
- Difficult not to jump to evaluation – weigh success and failure.
- All have their sincere feelings.
- I can't dispute their feelings.
- Work to see each as a “child of God.”

Implications and Thoughts for Further Study

Professional practitioners must apply the art and practice of phenomenological inquiry and self-reflection to describe and improve their work through “thoughtful and tactful action,” as well as “the everyday practice of living” (Van Manen, 2014).

Implications and Thoughts for Further Study

- Infrastructure shapes experience.
- School leaders must consider the sincere feelings of shareholders when implementing change.
- Paradigm shifts require significant investments of temporal and physical resources to have any chance of success.
- Paradigm shifts must come from within the organization and its shareholders, not mandated externally.

Implications and Thoughts for Further Study

- Current environment of assessment, accountability, and punitive post-positivism inhibit change.
- Educators, especially teachers, are more reluctant than ever to work outside the box and attempt anything innovative or different.
- Future studies should explore teachers' feelings within this caustic environment.

*It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in
patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:*

*“That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all.”*

- T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J, Alfred Prufrock*