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Fusing the horizons between aspirations of continuing professional development and the realities of educators' experiences in practice: Interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology in early childhood education

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ABSTRACT: This article presents an argument for the use of interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology as an insightful and innovative methodology for research in early childhood education. In providing guidance for the use of this methodology, this article will focus on a doctoral study investigating preschool teachers' experiences of engagement with a continuing professional development (CPD) programme aimed to inform their pedagogical practice. The CPD programme focused on promoting and supporting inclusive pedagogy, practice and culture in the early education setting. The research study considered the phenomenon of engagement with the programme on participants' perceptions and practices of inclusion with the emphasis on their "lived experience" working in practice with young children. Findings from the research, validated by the philosophical principles of Heidegger, illustrate the importance of consideration of participants' individual contextual realities when addressing teacher education through acknowledgment of other perspectives that influence the effectiveness of the learning experience. The professional identity of the early years' educator and societal perception of this role is presented as having a direct influence on participants' engagement with the CPD programme. Interpretive phenomenology and the hermeneutic principles underpinning this approach are presented here as central to understanding the professional role and the subsequent development of effective teacher education in the early years.

KEYWORDS: Heidegger, professional identity, teacher education

Introduction

This interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological (IHP) study set out to consider the influence of a continuing professional development (CPD) programme on early educators' perceptions and understandings of inclusion in the early childhood education setting. The CPD programme in question, the LINC (Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years) programme is a special purpose, six-module programme designed to qualify the learner in inclusive practice and pedagogy, as well as qualifying in a leadership role as an "inclusion coordinator" and a lead educator in the preschool setting in Ireland. The rationale for the study is the recognition of the primacy of educators' experiences to inform further policy and practice development in relation to pedagogical practices and understandings. This study from the perspective of the educator as a learner, in the contextual reality of working in the early education sector, provides a depth of understanding that serves to bridge the perceived gap between policy and practice. The centrality of the role of the educator in the early education setting to quality and inclusive care and education has been recognised in contemporary research and policy (European Commission, 2014; Slot et al., 2015; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017). However, this study illustrates the importance of recognising individual experiences, contextual realities and

professional understandings that may impact the influence of CPD experiences in the sector. Guskey's levels of professional development (2002) identifies features of meaningful and purposeful learning by determining how participants use their new knowledge and skills, and if there has been organisational change as a result of the learning experience. Notwithstanding the recognised quality of the CPD programme in question (Ring et al., 2019; Department of Children, and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2019), this study highlighted the sectoral issues and societal perceptions that influenced how educators engaged with the learning and implemented strategies in practice to develop inclusive settings for young children. This article presents the rationale for the use of IHP in research in the early childhood education years as a means of bridging the gap between policy and practice in a complex and changing sector.

Interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology

Phenomenology as a methodology for qualitative research is firmly rooted in a "complex philosophical tradition in human science", studying the concept of "Being" what it means to exist as a person (Sundler et al., 2019, p. 734). Interpretative phenomenology is explained by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) as attempting to understand what it is like to walk in someone else's shoes, and the role of the researcher is to interpret and

explain the phenomenon. The research strategy for this study involved engagement with fourteen educators, geographically spread throughout Ireland, through an initial interview, prior to engaging with the LINC programme to discuss their understandings of inclusion in the early childhood education sector as well as illustrating the contextual reality of their profession. On completion of the programme, there was a field visit to each setting for the duration of the preschool session to inform the interpretation of their engagement with the CPD programme and a follow-up interview to discuss their experiences. It is important to emphasise that the phenomenon under investigation is not the programme itself, but rather the influence of engagement with the programme on participants' perceptions and practices of inclusion in settings. Heidegger's (1929/1962) hermeneutic phenomenological approach asserts that a phenomenon can only be unveiled ontologically through understanding of existence via the philosophical concept of *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world. There is an emphasis on the social dimensions of *Dasein* regarding how we perceive our personal and professional selves from a societal perspective, and how in turn, this perception of the self has an impact on the phenomenon. In this instance, it considered how the educator engaged with the LINC programme and their individual reactions to the learning experience as dependent on their perceptions of self. Heidegger also considers the importance of moods in our existence and the potential of our emotions to influence and alter other life experiences. These reactions can fluctuate and change depending on the context of those experiences from different perspectives. His philosophy also considers how the "big" question of life and death and one's general attitude to challenges influence how one approaches different experiences and phenomena in life.

This application of understanding of *Dasein* is universal and is presented as particularly relevant to the study of educators' experiences in the context of a changing and developing sector with increasing expectations of their professional role. The challenges of working in the early childhood education sector have long been debated and discussed in terms of a general unrest in relation to pay and conditions as well as a lack of recognition of the professional role of the adult working in early education (Department of Education and Skills, 2010; Urban et al., 2017 [Not in reference list]; Moloney, 2020). Frechette et al. (2020, p. 2) summarise the objective of interpretative phenomenology as attempting "to uncover or disclose a phenomenon by pulling away layers of forgetfulness or hiddenness that are present in our everyday existence". The epistemology of this research is framed by this understanding of *Dasein* and how engagement with the phenomenon and subsequent conversations around their experiences of the LINC programme uncovered realities for participants that they may have hidden or tolerated in the routines of their professional and personal lives. It was not about evaluating the module content, but rather how the experience of engagement with the LINC programme influenced their role working with children in the early education setting. McManus Holroyd (2007, p. 2) recognised the opportunity for such hermeneutic understanding when individuals undergo experiences that disrupt the ordinary patterns of life, or "taken for granted aspects of existence". Engagement with this CPD programme is presented here as a new experience that is designed to challenge and inform students' understandings and knowledge of inclusion, and thence an opportunity for creating

this hermeneutic understanding and reflection on their role supporting the inclusion of all children in the preschool setting.

Exploring *Dasein* as the ultimate ontological basis for understanding our life-world, those social, perceptual and practical experiences, can only occur through interactions between participants, the researcher and literature. Gadamer (2004), a student of Heidegger, recognises that a researcher's assumptions and personal beliefs are a key part of the understanding and interpretation of the participants' lived experiences. Similarly, McManus Holroyd (2007) explains that any interpretation from a hermeneutical perspective must begin with the researcher reflecting on their own pre-understandings, or fore-projections. For me, as a preschool teacher and a tutor on said CPD programme at the time of data collection and analysis, this necessitated that I reflect on my story, my culture and histories in this social context. It required that I acknowledge that I am situated in a life-world not dissimilar to that of the participants; that I am simultaneously passionate about my work in the early years while frustrated at the lack of support, recognition and security in the sector. My pre-understanding of the programme meant that I knew the content of the modules and had benefitted from new learning on a personal and professional level; however, hermeneutic understanding guided me to reflect on "the way in which our blind attachment to certain classifications and categorisations limit how we understand and come to know the world" (McManus Holroyd, 2007, p. 3). Both Heidegger (1929/1962) and Gadamer (2004) philosophise how one needs to address these personal assumptions and distractions that may blur the existence of the phenomenon and place false realities on participants' experiences.

Reflexivity and reflection in interpretative phenomenology

The methodological principle of reflexivity and reflection forms the hermeneutic circle which represents the ongoing circular process of pre-understanding, gathering information and interpreting findings. It might also be viewed as an examination of the self and how one's motives and life history can influence, and indeed be part of, the research process (Oleson, 2005; Musgrave, 2019). While this reflexive stance is a key consideration in qualitative research in general, Frechette et al. (2020) note the centrality of this process to interpretative phenomenology when one considers the role of hermeneutic principles that guide the research study. Interpretative phenomenology searches for meaning within and between the parts and the whole of the phenomenon (Thomson, 2008; Suddick et al., 2020). For example, findings from the study highlighted the importance of collaboration with parents and external stakeholders as well as one's ability to understand, implement and reflect on the inclusive curriculum in place. Yet, these elements cannot stand alone in analysis and must be viewed as part of the whole experience. The research process created a space for the participants to share their views and reflect on their role working in practice from their personal perspectives. The incorporation of Gadamer's circle of understanding (2004) included a process of researcher reflexivity in addressing assumptions and personal biases at all stages of the research, as I moved in and among the data set, endeavouring to interpret the influence of the phenomenon on the participants' perceptions and practices. Throughout the research process, I kept a reflective journal,

which Frechette et al. (2020) view as an "essential tool" to guide reflexivity in IHP research. The reflective journal is the resource that supported ethical reflexivity in this study and made me more aware of my role of ensuring that the ethical practice was "clean" throughout the process (Hodgkin & Beauchamp, 2019). This hermeneutic cycle of reflection is not about developing a specific procedure for understanding, but rather that it can support clarification for the interpretation of the lived experience (Gadamer, 2004; McManus Holroyd, 2007; Van Manen, 2014).

Gadamer's concept of horizons is also a relevant consideration in the context of this hermeneutic circle of understanding (2004). He explains how some individuals may have a limited horizon, which means that their point of view may not enable them to "see" far enough, and there might be an overemphasis on what is nearest to them. The same is true of one who may stand on a high vantage point and forget to "see" things that are close and familiar. When one incorporates this concept of horizon with that of *Dasein*, and how all of the associated factors from the perspective of the participant and of the researcher might impact the understanding of the phenomenon, then one can see the value of the reflexive hermeneutic circle of understanding to make sense of this process. This interpretive process forms a strong rationale for selecting IHP for this research study through which my own life-world and pre-understandings from my horizon places me in a position where I can interpret meaning to support a broader understanding of the phenomenon and factors influencing the participants' experiences. Engaging with the journaling of the research journey guided the reflexive processes as I challenged my own assumptions and understandings to be transparent about my own horizon of significance throughout. Dewey (1920) argued that this reflexive scepticism about our own thought processes is central to the reasoning and understanding of life experiences. A similar approach, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), communicates this interpretative process as the participants trying to make sense of their experiences through language and reflection, while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). It is, as Larkin et al. (2006, p. 108) note, a process where the researcher is facilitating the revelation of the subject matter on "its own terms and not according to the imposition of any preconceived set of assumptions and expectations".

Thematic analysis in interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology

Thematic analysis (TA) is a popular form of analysis in qualitative research and involves the examination and recording of patterns and themes within data. The data collection from the interviews and the field visits to the preschool settings were analysed through the use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) guiding framework. They argue that thematic analysis offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data, emphasising that this flexibility stems from the fact that it is a method and not a methodology (2022). As a method, Braun and Clarke (2020; 2021) assert that it can be used alongside any of the major ontological, epistemological and theoretical frameworks and is particularly relevant in phenomenology. Nevertheless, there is recognition of the challenges associated with TA in phenomenology owing to the philosophical underpinnings of the approach (McManus Holroyd, 2007; Sundler et al., 2019; Suddick

et al., 2020). Whittaker (2009, p. 89) asserts that analysis is "the fascinating process of making sense of what people have said, identifying patterns and understanding meanings", and in its early development, thematic analysis was often discussed as a phenomenological method (Rohleder & Lyons, 2014). Analysis in phenomenology, however, is not a linear process, but instead demands complete immersion in the data analysis in a recursive process, searching for the meanings and patterns in the data corpus (Groenewald, 2004).

Recent phenomenological studies have used TA to identify and understand meaning-oriented themes in the data. Indeed, Braun and Clarke's (2021, p. 54) more recent review of their approach as "reflective thematic analysis" presents an argument that this "suits questions related to people's experiences, or people's views and perceptions", which is particularly relevant to the research questions of this study. Sundler et al. (2019) argue that TA provides a framework to organise meanings into patterns, from which themes can be developed to form a meaningful wholeness to validate robust findings in qualitative research. In interpretative phenomenology, themes are not determined by frequency in the data, but rather by the meaning attributed to these themes, and the same is true in reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This is evidenced in the use of TA in phenomenological studies such as Laletas et al.'s (2017) study on childcare workers and their engagement with families, Bredmar's study on teachers' emotional experiences (2020) and Maxwell and colleagues' study of the reflexive journey in their education research (2020).

The Big Q position presented by Braun and Clarke (2015; 2021) recognises that the researcher always brings personal experiences and philosophical assumptions to the analysis and creates a space for reflexivity within the process. A particularly appealing feature of the Big Q in this study is the creativity permitted in the flexibility of analysis to reflect my values and theoretical perspective as one who has an entangled history with the early education sector. In IHP studies such as this, TA can be utilised to interpret the underlying meanings embodied in the lived experiences that have been organised into codes and themes in the data set (Van Manen, 2014; Ho et al., 2017). Smith and Shinebourne (2012) have offered guidance on TA in IPA through a step-by-step process of reading/rereading, coding, clustering, iteration, narration and contextualisation, which has been adapted in recent Irish research by O'Sullivan et al. (2020; 2021), and this provided further guidance in the analysis process for this study.

Interpreting the findings from the hermeneutic phenomenological study

Heidegger (1929/1962) describes the starting point in attempting to uncover people's realities of a phenomenon as having to make a "leap" into the data. He uses the imagery of swimming, philosophising that one cannot know what swimming is like unless you dive in and experience that sensation. The interpretive journey into the phenomenon experienced by the participants felt like something similar in that I had to test the waters, questioning how deep I should wade in to find meaning. Endeavouring to capture the essence of what inclusion means to participants, which Fry et al. (2017, p. 3) describe as the "whatness" of a phenomenon, involved the writing and rewriting of their experiences and perspectives. The themes

and sub-themes which were developed from the analysis are presented in Figure 1.

Discussion and interpretation of themes is based on the hermeneutic circle of understanding which recognises that themes cannot be isolated from each other, but rather that each relates to the other to create a holistic comprehension of the phenomenological experience (Groenewald, 2004; Bazely, 2009; Englander, 2012; Bhar, 2019). The first-order constructs (Schutz, 1932/1976) of the phenomenon are presented in the participants stories, capturing what they prioritised as central to their experience. Then as researcher, I organised and interpreted these stories, creating the second-order constructs by using the literature and theory to inform my interpretation, which, in terms of relative reflexivity, is about showing the meaning behind these realities. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 117) describe this stage of the analysis in reflexive TA as "arriving home and telling a story about your adventure", while also advising the researcher that the process of writing the story is part of that analysis.

Smith et al. (2009) talk about the "gem" in interpretative phenomenological analysis, a significant idea that is uncovered as a key finding which underpins responses to the research questions. In this study, the professional identity of the participants, and how this role is perceived by them and others as part of their *Dasein*, is a central feature of the findings. It resembles the base "ingredient" of the whole "cake" (Braun & Clarke, 2021), or the shadow forever lurking throughout the "story" of the analysis (ibid., 2021). This theme is characterised by how the role of the participant in the early years setting, as a preschool assistant, pedagogical leader, or as a manager, influences their ability and authority to implement change and development based on new learning. Their own personal and family circumstances also influence perceptions and biases around concepts of inclusion. This theme demonstrates how one's horizon of understanding – what one knows and what one has experienced – informs interpretations of new knowledge (Gadamer, 2004). It considers how the contextual reality of participants' professional identity influenced engagement with the learning from the LINC programme and the subsequent influence of this on children and their families in the early education setting.

Heidegger (1929/1962) speaks of this notion of "appearing", which Smith et al. (2009) explain as an idea that is ready to shine out in the findings, but which requires the researcher to facilitate and understand the process of uncovering this meaning. The



FIGURE 1. Final themes and sub-themes of the study considering the influence of the LINC programme on knowing and understanding inclusion

findings and the literature indicate that perceptions of the role of the educator, by the self and in societal views, has an influence on commitment to engage with CPD, to collaborate with others and to develop inclusive pedagogical practice. Sexton's (2007) components of teaching as a profession include the recognised knowledge base and commitment to ongoing professional development. The topic of professional identity developed as a semantic code in the analysis, which Terry (2021) explains as an explicit finding in the data. It also is understood as a prominent theme owing to the fact that on completion of the programme, one has gained a new leadership role of inclusion coordinator (INCO) in the setting. However, the IHP approach emphasises the interpretative role of the researcher in understanding the latent meanings behind a prominent theme such as this. Having emerged spontaneously in conversations from the participants in both pre-CPD and post-CPD analysis, this theme reflects the contextual backdrop of the study during a period of change and development in the early years sector that has a direct impact on the role of the educator in practice (Radio Teilifis Eireann, 2013; 2019; Department of Education and Skills, 2018; DCYA, 2016; Moloney, 2020).

Contribution to knowledge, theory and practice in education

Braun and Clarke (2022) ask the important "so what?" question in qualitative research – what can one take from this study that might make a difference to practice, policy and research? First and foremost, from a pedagogical perspective, is acknowledgement of the value of engagement with the LINC programme for participants and the children they work with in practice. This study presents new learning about inclusion, including the need for effective pedagogical leadership, intentional relational pedagogy, reflection on practice and the centrality of quality CPD experiences for all educators. The principles of Heidegger's (1929/1962) concept of *Dasein* recognises the necessity of incorporating people's realities as well as their personal moods and life experiences to understand their interactions with and responses to different phenomena. In consideration of the fundamental right of all children to access quality and meaningful educational experiences at all levels, the reflexive and interpretative nature of this study illustrates how the lived experiences of teachers need to be incorporated into the effective planning and implementation of inclusive education, given their role as duty bearers (Gillett-Swan & Lundy, 2021). This study draws attention to the need to consider and address these realities through the development of a framework to support this reflexive process (Figure 2).

The framework recognises that the role of the adult working in the educational setting is the foundation of quality and inclusive pedagogical practice. The teacher is the person who sets the standard for the inclusive culture of the setting as well as being the duty bearer for the rights of all children receiving the service (Lundy, 2007; Waters & Payler, 2015; UNESCO, 2017). Concurring with this, findings in this study indicate that the professional identity of the leader in the early education setting has a direct influence on the development of an inclusive culture. There is an overlap and interconnectivity within and between the themes here which illustrate the capacity of a leader to lead and implement change, and consequently the challenges of doing so, and to promote the inclusion of all children. In considering

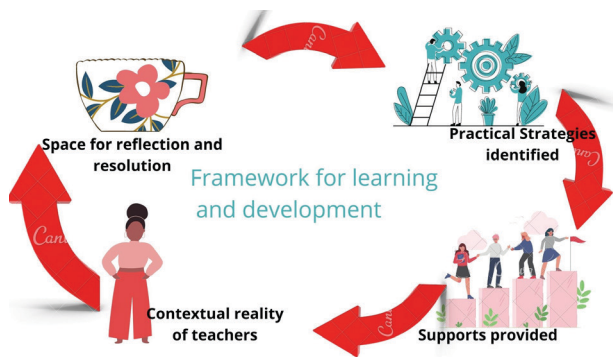


FIGURE 2. Framework for learning and development in education

critical levels of evaluation of professional development, Guskey (2002) discusses that although participants' reaction to a CPD programme may be positive, it does not necessarily follow that level two, participant learning will be achieved. The recommendations from this study are incorporated into this framework in considering how a space can be created for teachers to reflect on *Dasein* to respond to the responsibilities of their role to ensure that they are part of that quality and inclusive educational setting. Practical strategies should be devised through collaboration, reflection and action, informed by the realities of working with children, marrying horizons of significance (Gadamer, 2004) so there is a shared understanding of what action must be taken. The next step is to identify what supports are required, both on a broader societal level, as well as relevant to individual local cases, whether this is in the form of CPD, additional resources, or mentoring sessions. The key to achieving the levels of professional development advocated by Guskey (2002) for meaningful and effective learning in teacher education in the early education sector is the recognition of the lived experiences of the teachers' professional roles in practice.

Urban (2008) recognises that much of the policy and practical recommendations for the Irish early education sector is presented from the top down, reflecting a perception that there is a lack of scholarship in the field to effectively contribute to policy. Schutz (1932/1976) argues that the starting point for investigation in any area of the social sciences must begin with those who experience that phenomenon in their everyday lives. The conceptual framework of this study reflects the phenomenological basis in terms of understanding the lived experiences of those enrolled in the LINC programme. The nature of the inquiry was to seek a perception of truth and an understanding from the perspectives of those being studied. The limitations of phenomenological research are acknowledged in recognising that these experiences are personal to the participants, informed by their own perceptions and the truths that are relevant to their lives (Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Sundler et al., 2019). However, consideration of these experiences provides an insight into realities that should be acknowledged and valued to address any disconnect between policy and practice. While this study did not necessarily start out to address the lack of practitioner voice in educational research, the journey has highlighted the need for an informed perspective on policy initiatives in practice. A shared perspective on elements of practice, and a realisation of one's horizon of significance, enabled me to give voice from the life-world of the practitioner working in early education settings. Coming to

know and understand these perspectives from practice, while simultaneously acknowledging and addressing the context of my understandings, validates the experiences of those of us tasked with the responsibility of caring and educating young children. Recognising that the influence of learning from the LINC programme could not be fully understood through conversations alone, incorporating field visits into the data collection methods provided another perspective of understanding about the lessons from the programme. Immersion in the phenomenon through participation in the morning preschool sessions with the participants provided me with an opportunity to gain those "rich and compelling insights into the real worlds, experiences and perspectives" of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2014, p. 1). The phenomenological approach allowed for a depth of understanding and of empathy by placing the emphasis on the participants' experiences as central to the research question, and then applying my own interpretation by linking to the context and literature to support this understanding.

Conclusion

This study illustrates how the lessons from the LINC programme have the potential to support and develop educators' perceptions and practices of inclusion in early education. Furthermore, it acknowledges that knowledge and the implementation of learning is dependent on the context of the learner's reality. It presents a perspective from the early education sector illustrating how different understandings of inclusion can be influenced by their life-world, depending on their lens and the horizon on which they stand. It validates the positive influence of this CPD experience on inclusive practice in the early education sector (Fortunati et al., 2019), while simultaneously acknowledging the need to provide support to facilitate the sharing of lessons learned and reflecting on practice as relevant to each setting. The framework for learning and development (Figure 2) provides a basis for acknowledging the individuality of early education settings and a process of identifying supports needed in that context. This study advocates for the extension of the LINC programme to all educators and teachers working in early childhood educational settings to support the development of an inclusive culture through a shared understanding of the competent child. This study has established the centrality of relational pedagogy, underpinned by the principles of the Irish curriculum and quality frameworks, *Aistear* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) and *Siolta* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006), as the bedrock of inclusive practice. In contributing to theory (Lundy, 2007; DCYA, 2016; Moloney & McCarthy, 2018), it has been argued that concepts of inclusion are necessarily entwined across all elements of quality early childhood education and care and should permeate modular content from a rights-based perspective for the child. It also builds on existing research relating to the influence of professional identity on quality inclusive education for children by considering the leadership role in the setting. One of the key contributions from this study is the inclusion of the practitioner voice in research (Arnott & Wall, 2021; Skehill, 2022) and the use of hermeneutic phenomenology in facilitating that process. It presents an accessible format for research in education through incorporation of the realities of working with children and families and guidance for the respectful resolution of challenges

in the educational setting. This article has illustrated the flexibility of hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology in accessing teachers' views and experiences that has the potential to bridge that gap between policy and practice by creating a shared horizon and an understanding of different perspectives.

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