Rethinking teacher action research as Bildung: a phenomenological approach to professional development

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Rethinking Teacher Action Research as *Bildung*:

A Phenomenological Approach to Professional Development

Abstract

In this article, I engage in exploring how teacher action research can be theorized as

professional development that contributes to the teacher's ongoing, ontological growth as

a being and a professional. I approach teacher action research from an interpretive

phenomenological perspective to understand the meaning of teachers' lived experiences

of conducting action research. The purpose of this research is to rethink teacher action

research as *Bildung*, a phenomenological approach to professional development that

explores the process of the teacher's growth that is constantly evolving and becoming. By

focusing on five teachers' lived experiences of conducting action research in their

classrooms, I delve into how teacher action research contributes to the teacher's *Bildung*,

the human way of cultivating process of the self as a teacher.

Keywords: action research; professional development; phenomenology; *Bildung*

Introduction

In this article, I engage in exploring how teacher action research can be theorized as professional development that contributes to the teacher's ongoing, ontological growth as a being and a professional. I approach teacher action research from Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, whose foundation is phenomenology, to understand the meaning of teachers' lived experiences of conducting action research. The purpose of this research is to rethink teacher action research as *Bildung*, a hermeneutical pracice to professional development. By focusing on five teachers' lived experiences of conducting action research in their classrooms, I delve into how teacher action research contributes to the teacher's growth as *Bildung*, the human way of cultivating process of the self as a teacher.

Bildung is a German pedagogical term that refers to educating oneself or forming the self. It is the concept of self-formation, education, or cultivation, which is an important concept in the human sciences (Gadamer 1975/2006). The concept of *Bildung* played a central role in the work of Goethe, Schiller, and Humboldt as part of the 18th century idealism. It originally referred to organic growth, an analogy of the development of the seed to fruit based on innate genetic principles as in the natural sciences. Yet, for Humboldt and Schiller, who identified *Bildung* as the primary goal of humanity since our true purpose in life is to cultivate our diverse talents into a balanced whole, passive ripening is not good enough for human beings; it is up to humans to develop to their full potential through active engagement with the world around them (Kontje 1993). That is, *Bildung* denies an inherent human essence; rather, it espouses that every individual can be developed by education and cultivation (Wahlström 2010). Instead of being passive

recipients of a preexistent form, individuals can gradually develop their own innate

potential through interaction with their cultural, social, geographical environment (Kontje

1993). Thus, *Bildung* designates the human way of developing or cultivating one's

capacity or oneself (Gadamer 1975/2006). And the concept of *Bildung* is strongly

associated with organic growth and it is a quest for personal self-realization (Swales

1978).

Teacher Action Research

For the last two decades, teacher action research or teacher inquiry has thrived as

an educational movement despite the current conservative, circumscribing political

context (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009). It is acknowledged as a way to value and honor

teachers' practical knowledge and to reclaim their autonomy and agency. Rust and

Meyers (2006: 73) posit that teacher action research should be understood 'as the

essential activity of a reflective teacher, as a viable means for teachers to question the

impact of their practice on student achievement and as a way of bringing teachers' voices

into the discourse around education policy'.

There are various indicators that more and more teachers are engaged in their own

action research using their own classrooms to improve and theorize their teaching

practice (Anderson 2002). Many schools and colleges of education in different countries

(e.g. America, England, and Australia) have developed entire courses devoted to teacher

action research. The increasing visibility of teacher research including book and journal

publications as well as presentations at conferences and professional organizations has

burgeoned in the last decade (Nolen & Putten 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009). As

teachers experience that outsider knowledge provided by so-called 'spectator research'

(McNiff & Whitehead 2006: 8) often does not work in their own classroom, they increasingly assume the primary responsibility for improving their practice based on their own classroom research findings. In so doing, teachers offer counter-hegemonic ideas and begin to 'talk back to those politicians and corporate leaders who have made them into the scapegoats of current school reform efforts' (Anderson 2002: 24).

Teacher action research is considered as a method of inquiry and evolved as a methodology in response to the growing need for more relevant and practical knowledge in education (Nolen & Putten 2007). The premise of teacher research is that 'teachers are legitimate knowers and knowledge generators, not just implementers of others' knowledge' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009: 89). It allows teachers to walk in 'the swampy lowlands' where teachers engage themselves in messy but crucially important problems focusing on 'experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through' (Schön 1983: 43). They delve into the dilemmas and contradictions that arise from teaching practice, resisting a narrowly defined, scientific experiment that focuses on certainty and measurable objectivity that might result in quick fixes. Thus, teacher action research is deep, nuanced, and visceral (Anderson 2002), presenting an opportunity to work as profound and meaningful professional development.

However, this does not mean that teacher action research is a panacea that will fix the concerns of professional development discussed earlier. As van Manen (1990a) and others (e.g. Metz & Page 2002) point out, there are limitations of action research. For instance, van Manen posits that there are unquestioned assumptions that action research is uniquely able to relate reflection to action, and it always brings about change in educational practice. According to van Manen, for action research to become the 'basis of

a more self-reflective human science-oriented form' (van Manen 1990a:152), we need to go beyond these assumptions underlying the notion of action research and shift the limits of action research by critically and deeply engaging in reflections about what it means to be a teacher-researcher. In doing so, action research can provide a meaningful and solid foundation for teacher professional development that is powerful and transformative. Thus, this article focuses on rethinking teacher action research as phenomenological *Bildung* as a way to situate the meaning of professional development in the framework of the teacher's personal growth that is organic and ontological.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and *Bildung*

Gadamer coined the term philosophical hermeneutics influenced by the work of such phenomenologists as Dilthey, Husserl, and Heidegger. His seminal book *Truth and Method*, which is "phenomenological in its method" (Gadamer, p. xxxii), presents the concern of a philosophical hermeneutics as the concern of understanding. Gadamer posits his theory of understanding as a shift from a methodological hermeneutics to a philosophical hermeneutics, that is, a shift from understanding as a method of the human sciences to the universality of understanding and interpretation (Risser, 1997). Philosophical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of experience. "The intention of a philosophical hermeneutics is not to ask how understanding occurs in the human sciences, but to ask the question of understanding relative to the entire human experience of the world and the practice of life" (Risser, p. 9). Following Heidegger's analysis in *Being and Time*, Gadamer claims that understanding is not merely a concern of science, but it belongs to human experience of the world in general, that is, understanding takes place in every aspect of our experiences. He states:

[t]he way we experience one another, the way we experience historical traditions,

the way we experience the natural givenenss of our existence and of our world,

constitute a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if

behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened. (Gadamer, p. xxiii)

It is Gadamer's contention that the broader processes of understanding that occur

everywhere in human life experiences, i.e., its universality, have been largely undermined

by scientific method that pervaded modern thought. Thus, the task of philosophical

hermeneutics is ontological rather than methodological (Linge, 1977/2008).

"Philosophical hermeneutics includes, as part of the *event* of understanding, the

transformation of awareness and attitude that can occur as a result of engaging with a

given subject matter" (Davey, p. 39). The task of philosophical hermeneutics, then, is to

"bridge the gap between the familiar world in which we stand and the strange meaning

that resists assimilation into the horizons of our world" (Linge, p. xii). A polarity of

familiarity and strangeness, taken hermeneutically, helps us recognize *mis*understanding,

rather than "not understanding," which arises naturally because of our prejudices.

According to Gadamer (YEAR), "Understanding is not, in fact, understanding

better… It is enough to say that we understand in a *different* way, *if we understand at all*"

(p. 296, italics in original). Hence, here is a legitimate hermeneutical requirement: we

must place ourselves in the other situation in order to understand it by acknowledging the

otherness of the other, which involves the fundamental suspension of one's claim to truth,

and acquiring a necessary horizon. Gadamer posits understanding as a fusion of horizons.

The horizon is "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a

particular vantage point" (p. 301). "A person who has no horizon does not see far enough

and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, to have a horizon means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it" (p. 301). Therefore, "to acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion" (p. 304).

Then, philosophical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of the voice of the *other* (Risser). "This emphasis on the other has always been present in Gadamer's writings" (Risser, p. 15). Gadamer states, "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (p. 272). "The openness to experience means that one does not overlook the claim of the other, whereby one must accept some things that are against the one who seeks to understand" (Risser, p. 15). "In the end a philosophical hermeneutics is about self-understanding: but this, as Gadamer insists, has little to do with a philosophy of subjectivity. Rather, it has to do with our being at home in the world that we are awakened to in the voice of the other" (Risser, p. 17).

Bildung plays a central role in philosophical hermeneutics (Davey, 2006). Gadamer uses the term *Bildung* throughout his book *Truth and Method*, in which he defines it as "the properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities." He emphasizes that what is important in *Bildung* is that a self can be formed without breaking with or repudiating one's past and that this formation cannot be achieved by any merely technical or methodical means. For Gadamer, "*Bildung* describes more the result of the process of becoming than the process itself" (p. 10). *Bildung* cannot be a goal; it cannot be sought as it grows out of "an inner process of formation and cultivation, and

therefore constantly remains in a state of continual *Bildung"* (p. 10). "In acquired

Bildung nothing disappears, but everything is preserved. *Bildung* is a genuine historical

idea, and because of this historical character of "preservation" it is important for

understanding in the human sciences" (p. 10), therefore, *Bildung* is a "task for man" (p.

11). Gadamer's inquiry into Bildung is an inquiry into the nature of understanding

(Davey, p. 43).

Davey expounds the meaning of *Bildung* in philosophical hermeneutics. Arguing

that "*Bildung* should have a prominent place in the reflections of philosophical

hermeneutics" (p. 41), he posits that its primary characteristics are as follows:

1) Bildung is both a formative and transformative process implicit within the

dynamics of hermeneutic encounter. "This suggests that what philosophical hermeneutics

grasps as understanding involves an active relation between the transformative and the

formative" (p. 43). "Insofar as philosophical hermeneutics grasps understanding as

coming to understand differently, both Bildung and understanding can be described as

transformative processes" (p. 43). However, Bildung and understanding are also

formative. As dialogical processes, they can generate new (social) formations of

understanding, formations that are not entailments of or, indeed, variations on what was

previously understood" (p. 43). "It is important to remember that Bildung is a practice,

the formation of a capacity, the ability to keep oneself open to what is other in order to

gain a sense of oneself. Bildung therefore has a clear ethical dimension" (p. 42)

"Openness to the other requires a particular refinement: the skill of being

critically distant while remaining involved, attentive, and caring" (Davey, p. xvi)

Through philosophical hermeneutics, I aim to bring out the meaning of teachers'
lived experience to the core and understand the way in which they make sense of their
ontological being as teachers, and how the experience contributes to their professional
development, drawing upon the concept of *Bildung*.

Research Methods

My research data emerged from a graduate course, Teachers as Researchers, that I
taught in 2010. My research participants were practicing teachers who took this class as a
part of their master's degree requirements. I collected data over two semesters, Spring
2010 and Fall 2010. I received an IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval for the year
long project at the beginning of the spring semester of 2010. Upon IRB approval, I
informed the students of my research plan and told them that their participation in this
study was voluntary and not a part of the course requirements. Informed consent forms
were distributed to the students and my department personnel collected the signed forms
and kept them until the semester was over. I did not have access to the signed consent
forms until the end of the fall semester.

(1) Interview

In interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), semi-structured, one-to-one
interviews are the preferred means for data collection since interviews can elicit detailed
stories, thoughts and feelings from the participant (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin 2009). I
interviewed five teachers who conducted action research in their classrooms as a part of
the course requirements. I selected three interviewees out of 14 enrollments from the
class of spring 2010, and two interviewees from 10 enrollments from the class of fall
2010 (See table 1 below). These interviews were conducted in spring 2011, focusing on

the questions about how they experienced conducting action research, how they made sense of it, and what it meant for them to be a teacher-researcher. I purposely selected full time classroom teachers. For example, paraprofessionals or part-time teachers were not included. Each interview took about an hour.

(2) The researcher's field notes on observations of teachers working on their action research and their discussions that took place during class.

(3) Artifacts: Participants' action research data, course assignments such as weekly journal and reflective essays, and final papers.

Insert table 1 about here.

Results

The primary concern of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the lived experience of the participant and the meaning that the participant makes of that lived experience. However, the end result is always an account of how the researcher interprets the participant's meaning making of the lived experience (Smith et. al. 2009). Although there is not a single prescribed 'method' for working with data in IPA, it typically involves reading and re-reading of the original data, developing emergent themes, and taking it deeper interpretation. In this section, I will present four emergent themes, and in the following section, interpretation will be provided. The four descriptive emergent themes are: (1) *Action research served as a mirror of teaching*; (2) *Action research promoted a sense of ownership of teaching;* (3) *Action research served as a*

pedagogical lubricant in a student-teacher relationship; and (4) *Action research is all about changing and growing.*

(1) *Action research served as a mirror of teaching*

One major emergent theme is the role of action research as an imaginary mirror. During observation, which teachers used as their data collection method, teachers paid close attention to their students and saw their teaching reflected in their students' attitudes as if they were looking into a mirror. This mirror image helped participants to look into themselves and face what they were 'doing' to their students, and realize that it was not the students but the teachers themselves who were 'causing the problems'. They became more aware of their actions, behavior, attitudes, what they were saying, and what they were doing. Action research worked as a mirror to guide them through the process of 'self-discovery'. Below are narrative examples.

> **Marie**: I guess an imaginary little mirror was held up to my face and said this is what you were doing to the kids, you are stressing them out. I noticed that I had been too strict with the way I was teaching and realized that I was projecting my own negative feelings, motivations or lack of motivations onto my own students.

> **Elly**: It was painful at times to realize that what I was doing was causing the problems, but before, I had thought that my students were causing the problems.

> **Morin**: It (action research) made me much more aware, especially of the things that I might project on them, the bias I might project without knowing I am. So, I think about that more.

Kay: It (action research) made me more aware of my actions and what I was

doing, and everything that I said, you know…It made me more aware of

everything I said.

Shelly: It (action research) has been about me, my process of self-discovery. I

was not cognitively challenged as a FACS teacher, so I didn't think I

could challenge my students.

(2) *Action research promoted a sense of ownership of teaching*

All participants talked about how action research helped them take the ownership

of teaching, empowering them as a teacher, and helping them find their voice and a sense

of responsibility. In addition, the experience of conducing action research helped them

take charge of teaching in a classroom with dignity rather than being technicians of

teaching. Through this experience, they experienced what professionals should feel, look,

and act. And they learned it from their experience, not from a textbook.

Elly: I think it (action research) empowers teachers and gives teachers a sense of

responsibility, like I owe this to the profession. Not owing as in I have to

do this but this is our responsibility as teachers to make education more

effective. Being a teacher-researcher made me feel that I'm not just

another teacher in another school, but I am contributing to the profession.

Marie: I loved, LOVED action research. I really did. It allowed me to watch my

students more. To see their faces change, watch them work with each

other, without me butting into their conversations. It really was liberating

for me and for them.

Shelly: Being a teacher researcher is…reclaiming some power. I'm not just a

teacher. But what I saw that is slowly built in me is autonomy. I feel that I have a lot of power. This whole research process started with me and ended with me. I mean, that's ownership, you know. I didn't read that from a textbook.

Kay: I stepped up and volunteered to do the research behind it (minimum grading practice) and take more ownership than before in my school. I've found my voice and I feel like my voice matters now and I have a right to be heard.

Morin: It was a way to empower myself to create the change maybe one a smaller scale to start with, and doing it by doing something, not by writing a piece of legislation.

(3) *Action research served as a pedagogical lubricant in a student-teacher relationship*

Teachers stated that they had an unexpected outcome of conducting action research regardless of their research topics. Overwhelmingly, teachers narrated how their relationships with students became stronger and closer while conducting action research, creating a better classroom environment as a result. The process of conducting action research helped teachers and students more open to each other, creating a sense of being a 'team' or a 'unit'. For example, Marie's big realization was that she had to give up control in her classroom and give more power to students, which made students happier about their writing assignment and their teacher. Action research enhanced, improved, and nourished the relationship with students as an unexpected outcome of doing research. Here are narrative examples.

Morin: It (action research) really solidified my relationships with my kids. By

involving them in what I was doing, they felt like we were a team. They

felt like we were one unit, rather than it's just me, and then them. I think

establishing that kind of relationship with them from the beginning as part

of the project really helped me continue that throughout the year, which

made my teaching better and just really helped those relationships

flourish. That's how I feel.

Kay: Probably one of the biggest things I learned from action research so

unexpectedly is my relationship with my kids. The relationship I

developed with kids was the most meaningful moment for me.

Marie: It was hard for me to give up control. I had to give up control. And once I

gave up control and allowed the students to have control over their

writing, they were much happier about the (writing) process and happier

with me.

Shelly: I know my students loved to be a part of my research. I kept them updated

about my progress. I feel like we got to see each other in a different light. I

don't get that connection with my students every day. I know now that if I

go up to the students and ask, 'how are you doing?' They know now that I

am really 'asking', and I'm not just looking for a 'fine' kind of answer.

Elly: It is empowering to say that I had a part in making this a better classroom

for my kids, a better environment for them to learn in, so that is powerful.

(4) *Action research is all about changing and growing.*

Teachers frequently mentioned how action research changed them and helped

them grow personally and professionally. They observed themselves grow along with

14

their students. Through the changes, they developed more confidence in themselves as teachers and teacher-researchers.

> **Marie**: Action research to me was a very personal matter. It changed me. I had to change how I taught and how I approached teaching. EVERTYTHING ended up changing. That, to me, is action research. You're seeing yourself grow, and my kids grow. Action research makes you change. It should. If it doesn't, then, maybe it's not for you. It changed me even though I was scared to do it.

> **Shelly**: It's really been the process of growth as a teacher, but even personally… I feel like I'm getting smarter. This is giving me confidence because I can believe in more of myself and in what I can do.

> **Elly**: I think reflection is very important in action research. I think that was one of the biggest growths for me as I was looking at everything as an opportunity for growth for myself.

> **Morin**: It (action research) was incredibly enlightening and reinvigorating for me as a teacher. My action research project made me very excited and I learned so much more about my kids. I really, really enjoyed the experience and I grew so much.

> **Kay**: It (action research) helped me grow so much. Now as a teacher-researcher, I am not going to accept whatever is handed to me. I will do the research myself!

Discussion

15

In this article, I aimed to bring out the meaning of the lived experience of teacher researchers to the core and understand the way in which they make sense of their ontological being as teachers, and how the experience contributes to their professional development. It seems that all of my participants had the positive experience in conducting action research. However, this does not mean that every teacher who conducts action research will have a positive experience. One of the reasons for my participants to have such a positive experience seems to be due to their career stage. According to Fessler and Christensen (1992), there are eight stages of teachers' professional development: *Pre-service*, *Induction*, *Competency Building*, *Enthusiasm and Growth*, *Stability*, *Career Frustration*, *Career Wind-Down*, and *Career Exit*. It should be noted that these stages are not necessarily related to the length of time in teaching since some teachers might never experience some of the stages in their teaching career. Interestingly, the findings of this study reveal that all of my participants seem to be at the stage of *Competency Building* in which teachers strive to improve their teaching skills and abilities. Teachers at this stage are "receptive to new ideas, attend workshops and conferences willingly, and enroll in graduate programs through their own initiative. Their job is seen as challenging, and they are eager to improve their repertoire of skills" (Fessler & Christensen 1992: 41). The findings indicate that my participants are in the process of moving toward the next stage of *Enthusiasm and Growth* in which teachers reach a high level of competence in their work and continue to progress professionally. Their engagement with action research seems to have boosted their enthusiasm about teaching and their desire to grow, which in turn promotes their autonomy and agency and contributing to establishing their identities as professionals.

Then, what does this all mean? How can we seize this moment of growing of teachers and make sense of it? This moment presents a phenomenological opportunity in which the meaning of the lived experience of the teachers needs to be brought to the core and hermeneutically excavated (Carman 2008). Here, I make sense of the meaning of the teachers' lived experience through the concept of *Bildung* which, I argue, needs to be incorporated in the professional development of teachers.

The four emergent themes show that teacher action research has contributed to the teachers' professional development that is ontological, transitional, organic, and constantly evolving. The teachers were going though the process of the development of the self (*Bildung*) as a teacher, furthering themselves as professionals. In the following analysis, I will interpret the four themes in relation to the teachers' *Bildung*.

The first theme, *Action research served as a mirror of teaching*, indicates that during the process of conducting action research, a 'temporal distance' (Gadamer 1975/2006) was created between teachers themselves and the act of teaching, which led to their *Bildung*. It is just like there is always a distance between the viewer and the mirror. According to Gadamer, this temporal distance creates a separation between familiarity and strangeness and it must take place in the process of understanding and growing. Through action research, teachers were able to separate what they were familiar with about themselves from what they were doing to students, which appeared to be strange as they didn't realize it before. This temporal distance helped them realize that it was teachers themselves, not the students, who were "causing" the problems. By becoming more aware of what they do and say as teachers, they began to understand the tension created between themselves and the students. Thus, the process of becoming

more aware of the teacher's action through the temporal distance enables the teacher to recognize who she is (Schneider 2010). Becoming aware of one's own self is a reflexive process that leads to her *Bildung*.

The second theme, *Action research promoted a sense of ownership of teaching,* signifies that teachers feel that they are professionals who are called upon to develop an inner authority that enables them to determine for themselves what is valuable (Schneider 2010). This development is critical in an age of compliance where teachers become the 'executers of other people's decisions' confronting the deprofessionalization (Ballet & Kelchtermans 2008: p. 2). Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009: 138) also argue for professional judgment and freedom and identify a first step as 'redeveloping the professional confidence of teachers'. Teachers' lived experience of conducting action research in their own classroom helped them develop the ownership of teaching and find their voice and a sense of responsibility. Teachers also felt liberated and empowered, seeing autonomy slowly built in them, rejecting being the mere technicians. Developing a sense of ownership of teaching helps them realize who they are as professionals and strengthen their professional confidence in the process of *Bildung* as *Bildung* is an identity-shaping activity, making meaning of one's own person (Mortensen 2002). *Bildung* designates an action that the teacher creates her 'self' that is held to be valuable and it presupposes the free choice of aims by the teacher (Schneider 2010).

The third theme, *Action research served as a pedagogical lubricant in a student-teacher relationship,* seemed to help teachers getting closer to the students. This can be interpreted as Gadamer's notion of 'holding upon nearness' (Gadamer 1986: 113). The experience of nearness is a 'growing familiarity with the world' (Risser 1997: 199) of

students with whom they interact. It is the nearness that classroom teachers need to seek, holding the needed time and dwelling space to account for the concrete relational undergoings and doings of teaching and learning (Author et. al. 2010). As teachers were holding upon nearness with students, their *Bildung* is shaped and so was the student's *Bildung* as they were learning from each other. As the teacher gave up control in a classroom, and the teacher and the students worked as one 'unit' or a 'team', students were given more autonomy and freedom to decide what they wanted to do. Along with teachers, students also began to shape their own *Bildung* as part of their growth and development. According to Dewey (1938: 40),

> A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth.

By establishing a closer relationship with students, teachers learned to create an environment where experiences that would lead to growth take place.

The last theme, *Action research is all about changing and growing,* indicates teachers' professional growth that renders them 'becoming'. As Kierkergaard (1974: 79) puts it, 'An existing individual is constantly in the process of becoming'. Van Manen (1990a) pointed out that one of the assumptions about action research is the notion of change. However, he maintained that action research does not necessarily have to deal with what we must do next or what we should plan for. Rather, more significantly, action research must learn to deal with what we should have done, which in turn, will help teachers grow and change their practice. One of the participants, Marie, said,

'EVERYTHING ended up changing'. She emphasized 'EVERYTHING'. This 'everything' could include her view of teaching, her way of knowing, her pedagogical tact, herself as a teacher, her relationship with her students, her teaching methods and strategies, and more. It is a change in the teacher's 'Gestalt' or form. This change denotes that the self is never something finished, but rather subject to becoming (Drechsler, cited in Schneider 2010), which is at the heart of the concept of *Bildung*.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored the meaning of teacher action research, taking a phenomenological approach to professional development. The teachers' lived experiences were brought to the core using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The four emergent themes were interpreted as a way in which teachers develop and educate themselves, working toward their own *Bildung*, therefore rendering a meaningful professional development opportunity.

As many of the current professional development initiatives fail to get to the heart of the teacher's personal and professional growth, I suggest that educators, teacher-educators, administrators, and policy makers focus on professional development whose mission is to develop the teacher's *Bildung* that constitutes the teacher's philosophical, ontological, and professional journey of becoming. And teacher action research is a viable means to accomplish such a mission. Through action research, teachers engage in their own *Bildung*, forming and cultivating their capacity, the ability to 'keep oneself open to what is other in order to gain a sense of oneself' (Davey 2006: 42). This study illuminates how teacher action research can work as a way of thinking, being, teaching, and researching that goes beyond 'knowing', thus, act more effectively on the knowing.

Gadamer (1975/2006: 9) defines *Bildung* as 'the properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities'. When we understand teacher action research as *Bildung*, teachers' professional development would be far reaching, thus this kind of understanding should be a critical part of the educational reform movement. I do not claim that teacher action research will always result in meaningful professional development without any challenges. However, Dewey (1938: 50) said, 'Education as growth or maturity should be an ever-present process'. Then, teacher action research as *Bildung* should be an ever-present, never ending process of professional development in which teachers engage in a pedagogical journey with ups and downs, challenges, struggles, dilemmas, and meaning-making questions.

I'd like to conclude this article with an e-mail message that was recently sent to me by Marie, one of the participants, who read the transcript of her interview as member checking:

> *I did read it; I'm just now answering some emails. So sorry for the delay. I've been sharing, informally, the wonders of action research. There are days like today I wish I could go back to that time. It seemed so much easier than what I am dealing with in my studies. Can you believe I am saying that? I guess that is what learning is all about- the struggle shows growth and the relief shows anything is possible.*

Education as growth is an ever-present process, indeed.

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