



FORMATIVE HERMENEUTICS AND THE ART OF INTERPRETATION: TEACHING IN CARING AND EDUCATING PRACTICES

A Hermenêutica formativa e a arte de interpretar: docência em práticas de cuidar e educar

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A Hermenéutica formativa y el arte de la interpretación: enseñanza en prácticas de cuidado y educación

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Resumo: O texto discute a ideia de Hermenêutica Formativa, baseada na filosofia de H.G.Gadamer, apresentando estudos empíricos sobre as experiências docentes quanto ao cuidado e ao sofrimento psicológico de alunos. Foram tomadas algumas vivências de docentes apreendidas nos percursos do componente curricular “Núcleo Temático em Políticas da Vida” (NT), a partir das atividades do Grupo de Trabalho (GT) “Metodologia Viva”, que aborda a qualidade das relações vividas pelos docentes, bem como a relação entre educação e saúde e sua indissociabilidade entre o cuidar e o educar. Participaram das atividades do GT vinte professores da educação básica. Como dispositivos de informações foram utilizados entrevistas, questionários e duas rodas de conversas vivenciadas no próprio espaço escolar em busca de interpretação acerca das experiências docentes. Em relação à análise, optou-se pela articulação da análise de conteúdo do tipo “tema emergente” e a análise fenomenológica do tipo círculo hermenêutico. Os horizontes interpretativos se organizaram em: A desvalia do docente cansado; O cuidado docente interrompido e suas possibilidades de resgate; Phronesis: saberes e estratégias docentes. Nesse processo inventivo de si, a ação de cuidado passa pelas relações e práticas de diálogo. Nessa arte de se interpretar e cuidar, o próprio ato educativo se faz na relação.

Palavras chaves: Hermenêutica Formativa. Docência. Cuidado.

Abstract: The text discusses the idea of Formative Hermeneutics, based on the philosophy of H.G.Gadamer, presenting empirical studies on the teaching experiences regarding the care and psychological distress of students. Some experiences of professors learned in the curricular component “Thematic Core in Life Policies” (NT) were taken, based on the activities of the Working Group (GT) “Living Methodology”, which addresses the quality of the relationships experienced by teachers, as well as the relationship between education and health and its inseparability between caring and educating. Twenty basic education teachers participated in the activities of the WG. As information devices, interviews, questionnaires and two rounds of conversations lived in the school space in search of interpretation about teaching experiences were used. In relation to the analysis, it was decided to articulate the content analysis of the “emerging theme” type and the phenomenological analysis of the hermeneutic circle type. The interpretive horizons were organized into: The tired teacher’s worthlessness; The interrupted teaching care and its possibilities of rescue; Phronesis: teaching knowledge and strategies. In this inventive process of itself, the care action involves the relations and practices of dialogue. In this art of interpreting and caring, the educational act itself takes place in the relationship.

Keywords: Formative Hermeneutics. Teaching. Watch out.

Resumen: El texto discute la idea de la hermenéutica formativa, basada en la filosofía de H.G.Gadamer, presentando estudios empíricos sobre las experiencias de enseñanza sobre el cuidado y el sufrimiento psicológico de los estudiantes. Se tomaron algunas experiencias de docentes aprendidas en el curso del componente curricular “Núcleo temático en políticas de vida” (NT), en base a las actividades del Grupo de trabajo (GT) “Metodología de vida”, que aborda la calidad de las relaciones experimentadas por los docentes, así como la relación entre educación y salud y su inseparabilidad entre el cuidado y la educación. Veinte docentes de educación básica participaron en las actividades del GT. Como dispositivos de información, se utilizaron entrevistas, cuestionarios y dos rondas de conversaciones en el espacio escolar en busca de interpretación sobre experiencias de enseñanza. En relación con el análisis, se decidió articular el análisis de contenido del tipo de “tema emergente” y el análisis fenomenológico del tipo de círculo hermenéutico. Los horizontes interpretativos se organizaron en: la inutilidad del profesor cansado; El cuidado docente interrumpido y sus posibilidades de rescate; Phronesis: enseñanza de conocimientos y estrategias. En este proceso inventivo en sí mismo, la acción asistencial involucra las relaciones y prácticas del diálogo. En este arte de interpretar y cuidar, el acto educativo en sí tiene lugar en la relación.

Palabras clave: Hermenéutica formativa. Enseñanza. Cuidado.

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“Education demands the greatest care, for it influences the whole life” (Sêneca)

Hermeneutics and the art of interpreting oneself

The human being is thrown in space and time, but this is only possible due to the consciousness of that condition, which is inexorable to humanity. To be thrown in the world implies assuming everything that is previous to man, for there is always something before, and at the same time everything that succeeds him, for there is always something to be, since the horizons indicate possibilities (Stoehr, 1999).

In this throwing oneself, human being lives the movement of his nature and the art of his construction in a constant search for balance and for health. “What the art of curing must produce is health, that is, something which is natural in itself” (Gadamer, 2009, p. 48). This tension of letting oneself go and making something, of hearing voices of nature and interfering in the paths has been, since a long time, both the disgrace and the redemption of human being. The founding myths of humanity usually bring this message, as is the case for example with the abrahamic traditions. In one of the versions, Adam and Eve, when biting the apple, i.e., when accessing knowledge, consciousness of existence, fall from the paradise, are detached from nature, but not to the point of a complete separation. Thus, human being lives his sage of being part of nature and at the same time of building its own nature, as an artisan of himself.

For more variable ends, going through health (Gadamer, 2009) to education (Menezes & Lourenço, 2019), where one’s strength starts and another ends? To what extent is it possible to interfere in the inventive processes of oneself, or would it be better to let nature act? Is it nature itself that which transforms and cures? Is educating something that comes from the subject or something that is given through mediations? Such questions refer to the problem of the construction of oneself, of self care and formation. Both are situated here in the field of hermeneutics insofar as they point out to the art of interpreting (Gadamer, 2011, 2015), but not simply interpreting the other, the text or the world. Hermes, which gives the etymological meaning to hermeneutics, is one of the Olympian Gods who is responsible for connecting the human to the olympian world, thus he is the messenger, for he interprets and connects different worlds. The God Hermes is crafty, inventive and interested in human activities, just as he has the capacity of moving away in order to clarify knowledge that many times resists comprehension (Macedo, 2000). For Bolzan (2005, p. 20) hermeneutics is the art of interpreting and is aligned to “many other synonyms or meanings such as: to clarify, to declare, to enunciate, to proclaim or even to translate”. The hermeneutics beyond the interpretation of the other is also an art of interpreting oneself, therefore, of constructing oneself, which demands self care and which leaves a trail of formation, concerning being and not only technical aspects. This understanding is crossed over by the idea of *Bildung*, which means the singular mode of a historical time of articulating its worldview and of improving from the various knowledges evolved (Gadamer, 2011; 2015). That is the idea of formative hermeneutics as an art of interpreting oneself and simultaneously one’s own formation.

Regarding hermeneutics, Gadamer (2002) points to some questions about the aegis of technique in contemporaneity as an answer to the human dilemma of interpreting himself. For the German philosopher, the hypertrophy of technical rationality bets everything on the human capacity of interfering in his condition, neglecting nature, more precisely in this ontological dimension, in its dialogical and historical existentialities. Although this problem may seem to lie in the philosophical domain, there are serious consequences, above all in the domain of care and education (Sousa & Ribeiro, 2019). This binomial, which was adopted by Sousa (2018), Sousa and Ribeiro (2019) of an “educate and care”, assumes that there is no process of caring which avoids the educating and vice-versa, and that the “educating and caring” is not given by technical rationality, but, before that, it takes into consideration the maieutic balance and the dialogues between relating partners in the wholeness of being (Gusmão, Palmeira & Lima, 2018).

This discussion about the processes of caring and educating has a particular importance in contemporary times, since we live in a “burnout society” (Han, 2015), marked by the demands of high performance, not to speak about the volatility and liquidity of human relationships (Bauman, 2007). It may be that some of these marks are contributing for the sickening processes in the educational field (Diehl & Marin, 2016), as is the case of suicide or even phenomena such as self mutilation and self injury¹, from now on designated as “self directed aggressivity”.

Thus, how would be the teachers that do not consider the dialogical and relational levels of formative processes and focus above all in educational techniques? How would the students develop themselves in such

¹ Self mutilation is different from self injury in regard to the gravity and consequence of the act. The first is much more severe than the second. Both, however, are configured as a self directed aggressivity, which in Gestalt therapy is identified as ‘retroreflection’. Regarding this theme there is an ongoing study developed by Marta Marcial and Marcelo Ribeiro, researchers at Univasf.



a context? How are teachers, even though they have no access to an initial formation that articulates caring and educating, not even to the reception of processes which are inherent to life altogether with the art of teaching, interpreting themselves, composing themselves? How are teachers taking care of themselves to take better care of students? And when one faces difficult situations in the classroom, as is the case of phenomena like self directed aggressivity, something unfortunately very common today? How have teachers been referring and acting in their own process of taking care of themselves and of the other? Which surprises do teachers elaborate when discovering that educating is taking care of?

In this way, our objective is to comprehend some formative processes of teachers, and more specifically their formative hermeneutics, considering the contexts of lived experiences and affections which are above all directed to care. We are also interested in comprehending formative processes where teachers are faced with situations of students' self directed aggressivity. This text presents, however, a request to be written in the first person plural, since it reflects the work implied in a collectivity. This position already indicates the importance given to the relationships as constituting the being people, and, in a more precise way, it points out to the quality of relationships, specially when there is an implication to the other.

Thus, having Gadamer's phenomenological hermeneutics as a meaningful inspiration (Linhares, 2016; Dittrich, Leopardi, 2015; Alves, Rabelo & Souza, 2014), which makes the dialogue as the conductor of the art of interpreting, assuming the "preconceptions" as founding conditions, i.e., pre-theoretical, articulating comprehension and critique. We pretend, as was already pointed out, to better understand the becoming of a professor as an art of interpretation, specially regarding caring and educating when facing situations of students' self directed aggressivity. In this sense, some teachers' experiences were taken from moments of the curricular component called "thematic core in life policies".

Aspects of the method as a path

The empirical elements presented in this work are originated from the curricular component Thematic Core in Life Policies (NT), offered every semester in the undergraduate courses at a public university in the northeastern semi-arid. The NT attempts to integrate the dimensions of teaching, research and social extension in a interdisciplinary way, involving teachers and students from various areas of knowledge distributed in the working groups (GT).

The trimmed section here exposed refers to the activities of the GT "Living Methodology", which approaches the quality of the relationships lived by teachers, the interface between education and health, and the inseparability of caring and educating (Ribeiro, Sousa & Novaes, 2019). Regarding this work's purpose were selected the products of the last two versions of the GT, which tackled two themes: teacher's self care and the impact of students' self-directed aggressivity in the teacher. For both of the themes we used devices such as: semi structured interviews, questionnaires and talking circles. Twenty teachers participated: teachers of early childhood education (EI) for the first theme and both elementary school II teachers (EF) and high school (EM) for the second theme. Some attended the interviews, others the questionnaires and some others attended both the talking circles lived in the very school environment.

The interviews and questionnaires brought up subjects that versed about the relationship with students, the quality of dialogue and the affections when facing situations of self-directed aggressivity. The talking circles explored the teachers' strategies of dealing with matters of educating and caring, and how they were interpreted in their formative processes. Such processes are here understood by the actualization of the human "being", in an elaboration which happens through the dialogues with the other and through the lived and reflected experiences. This understanding is supported by Paulo Freire's idea of "being more" (1987), that sees formation as something more complex than simply learning or mastering a certain technical knowledge. This understanding is in line with the critique which Gadamer (2009, 2011, 2015) makes to technical rationality.

Regarding the analysis of the informations, we chose articulating the content analysis of the type "emergent theme" (Bardin, 2016) and the phenomenological analysis of the type "hermeneutic circle", that is the dialogue between parts and the whole. The emergent themes were apprehended from the transcriptions of interviews and confronted with the informations of questionnaires, which had a rather secondary role. In the talking circles, the informations were analysed considering the production of meaning through the dialogues which were elaborated and confirmed by the participants. We will in the following present the synthesis of the emergent themes and of the meanings.

Altogether, the emergent themes taken from interviews and questionnaires point to: (a) the sensation of professional devaluation; (b) a sensation of impotence generated by social pressure, above all the charges in terms of performance; (c) the subject of care and how much it depends on the mode of the school's administration mediating the quality of interpersonal relationships; (d) the strategies to deal with self-care will vary, depending on the conditions found in the context of each school.

Those emergent themes converge with the meanings produced in the talking circles, marked above all by a fast life, by pressure and charges. The teachers have also brought how much this is translated into symptoms in the body and their difficulties in dealing with emotions. They have also tackled strategies of coping.



Informations in discussion

We present the integration between themes and meanings which formed what we called “interpretative horizons”: the tired teacher’s worthlessness; the interrupted teacher’s care and its possibility of rescue and; *Phronesis*: teachers’ knowledges and strategies. Such interpretative horizons will be composed by the empirical contents and followed by reflections pertinent to formative hermeneutics.

The tired teacher’s worthlessness

It is interesting to note that the teacher lives one of those professions with high identification power, i.e., in his daily activities he seems to be the whole time ‘logged’ in work. Even in situations of overload, he does not turn himself off. This exhaustion is many times followed by a conscious lack. In the interview, one of the EI teachers speaks to us about this:

I wanted to get it off my chest, but nobody had ever time to bother with me. Besides that, it was evident how exhausting is the teacher’s life, for I realized that much of the passion I had in the beginning of my career was lost due to the tiredness which is the life of a teacher (“Teresa”).

The devaluation felt by teachers is also associated with the perception that the colleagues are not so much integrated, in need of support. “Sometimes I think that devaluation is carried forth by the teachers themselves which are disunited”, says one teacher of early child education. This exhaustion, which is one of the symptoms of the Burnout Syndrome (Han, 2015; Nascimento Sobrinho, Barros, Tironi & Marques Filho, 2010), characterized by the triad of emotional exhaustion, depersonification and cynicism, has crossed through contemporaneity, reaching professions related to care such as doctors, policemen and, also, teachers. In the case of teachers it is presented by singular contours, since it affects the relationship with students. One EF teacher says in the interview that possible compensations, with the minimal recognition, are hindered from him.

The work’s routine consists in three shifts... It is a lot of work to prepare classes, correct evaluations and prepare material... Sometimes not only in the school, but also in the house. And, sometimes, when arriving at the school and finding students who do not value this... They are not interested in desiring to learn. All this results in us becoming “boring”, “grumpy” and discouraged (“Solange”).

The excessive demand for results in professional practice is not something that only comes from the outside. The demand is additionally lived by oneself. In those cases, far from being something positive in the sense of elevating the professional to see constant improvements, it has generated discomfort. Han (2015) points out that the obedient subject is not the subject which experiences pleasure, but the one who experiences duty. In this sense, the profession which mostly deals with care, such as it is the teacher, because of the demands, is inclined to formulate data which feed the system, which punishes or judges him if he is not adjusted with the society of performance.

Yes, I demand a lot of myself. Demand of myself, mostly. Really...really overloaded, I have no social life, I do not go out somewhere and nonetheless I am overloaded, worried and disappointed, for I do not see how to get better. I feel myself frustrated because I cannot reach the result I wanted (EF teacher, “Juliana”).

And this devaluation of the tired teacher seems to be aggravated when he faces the student’s suffering, in the limit of his *dispar* (Dejours, 1992). The following was said by “João Pedro”, high school teacher: “(...) I will tell you something... I had to want to not know about students’ problems because it was not being good to me. I could not handle my own problems, and how would I handle theirs?” Han (2015) points out that the society of performance make people live solitary weariness, moving away from others. This teacher found a way to endure the daily demands which go through both the personal as well as the professions spheres, questioning himself, reflecting and showing that the help of other professionals is necessary for the promotion of well-being.

This feeling of “devaluation” indicates a loss of balance, in a way that the teacher feels diminished, generating dependencies. The lack of autonomy, in this case, is hidden behind devaluation. This, for its turn, compromises the formative hermeneutics, considering that this is also given in the encounter with the student. By lacking autonomy, the teacher cannot establish a relationship of care with the other, also failing in his self-care. After all, for a living methodology, the teacher must live the relationship with his student beyond the transmission of content, seeing him in his totality (Ribeiro, Sousa & Novaes, 2019; Ribeiro, 2018, 2019).



The interrupted teacher care and its possibilities of rescue

One of the things which were most evident in the whole of answers was how much teacher self-care and caring as teacher's practice depend on the way which the school institution takes care of its teachers. This obviousness, namely that for the teacher to care, he must be taken care of, has to be taken seriously. In this case, the role of the school administration indicates an unique importance, since an administration that is sensible to caring of teachers, improving the interpersonal relationships, creating mechanisms of attention, hearing and caring, might generate more resilient positions, in a way that teachers feel strengthened to deal with adversities and, above all, in situations of students' psychical suffering.

In one of the talking groups, some teachers complained about the conflicts and the daily demands, expressing that the school's demands, in certain moments, provoked exhaustion and contributed to illness. One of the teachers has particularly complained about the lack of interaction with the other colleagues. For her, the result of the technological outbreak brings new demands in the classroom, beyond the creation of difficulties regarding the students' attention span. It is possible to observe here the importance for the teacher to speak about his difficulties with his pairs, specially with the administration, which would act by confirming his lived experience.

The lack of those confirmations seems to indicate a loss of the integrality of the being, corroding the ability of being wholly with the other, of being open to the other. In an interesting way, Gadamer (2009) relates the idea of well-being (next to the idea of care) to the capacity of being in the relation. "But what is well-being if not occupying with oneself, so to be open and ready for everything?" (p. 90). In a formative hermeneutics, the being present in the relation is a condition for the art of interpreting, including the interpretation of oneself.

If on the one hand it is possible to observe an interrupted care regarding teaching practice, be it in the relationship of pairs, with students or with oneself, it is also noticeable ongoing possibilities which indicate the rescue of this self-care. In this case, the rescue has a lot to do with strengthening solidary, collective, caring spaces and the sensible listening of teachers, but also with a sensible and supporting mediation towards these questions by the school's administration. Another point worthy of comment is that the very care with oneself and with the other, which concerns formative hermeneutics, has a relationship with the interpretation of oneself. What we observe in these passages is that, for the teachers' "being-able-to-do", these demand, beyond more supportive spaces, to feel authorized to show the art of interpretation (Gadamer, 2009), producing new significative meanings.

***Phronesis*: teachers' knowledges and strategies**

This third interpretative horizon brings with it the meaning of *Phronesis* which, for philosophy in general and, in particular for Gadamer, has to do with practical knowledge, specially a knowledge which emerges and develops itself from experience and integrates itself with the other knowledges. There are certain things which the teachers know how to do that are much more connected with their practical experiences than with the technical knowledge which would define him as teacher.

Regarding the situations of psychical suffering of students which affect the teachers, specially self-directed aggressivity, some answers from the questionnaires were selected to establish contrasts and understandings (Macedo, 2018). In a general way, regarding the question of how they felt before a situation of self-directed aggressivity, two thirds of the teachers say not knowing what to do, and two thirds say it is only to draw attention, showing, in the latter case, lack of knowledge. This already indicates that the strategy to work with the subject of care goes through education. Certainly, those gaps are not absent of lived experiences, which show the possibility of an articulated education with the experiences of these very teachers, even though it is commenced by not knowing or affections, moving away from a formative proposal based in applied techniques.

Regarding some teachers' speech in the talking circle, it was possible to observe that, when getting in touch with negative affections, the teachers act with the student in an inflexible and distant manner. However, we note that those are attitudes which come from discomfort and maybe from a lack of repertoire to deal with those affections. These sensibilities, even the inflexibility or the defense mechanisms, are configured as those teachers' possibilities to interpret themselves, integrating their formative processes. Generally speaking, even Gadamer (2009, 2011, 2015) puts forth the idea that knowledge is present in other sources of expressivity.

Those dilemmas and challenges point out to the need for a formative hermeneutics which articulates caring and educating. After all, the meaning of *Phronesis* is when knowledge becomes an experience and is integrated in the practical consciousness of the one who acts (Gadamer, 2009, p. 12). Let us now look a report from an EM teacher regarding how he changed his way of relating with students.

My relationship today is super friendly, but it was not always like that. In the beginning I was much more "mechanical", like "Hey? Hey...". Without much talk. Even because it was not what I learned in my education. With the time I observed other teachers, I perceived the positive side that could be obtained with a more affective relationship with students ("Fabrício").



Another teacher of EF reveals in the interview an strategy that is more implicated in the relationship.

The way I see my way of caring towards a certain student goes through a very motivating conversation, depending on the situation, and what made him to mutilate himself. I try to share something of my history and the overcoming of problems I also went through in adolescence. Besides that, I always attempt to be attentive to this type of student, by playing around, by giving importance to him, with a fraternal hug... Through those various actions, I show him that he has importance, that he is important, and that he is unique, exclusively by his characteristics, his gifts, his virtues ("Rodrigo").

Teachers are capable of recognizing the students' suffering and can act towards a relationship of care, but not without cost. This indicates that caring, which is inherent to the teacher's practice, but in a situation in which the other manifests a great suffering, also wears the teacher. On the other hand, this reinforces the thesis that for the teacher to care, he must be taken care of.

It is very sad when I get to know about those cases. Firstly, because you know that that student is suffering for something, something is bothering him, disturbing his internal peace, his emotional balance, his life. Secondly, this student, for living in a such problematic atmosphere which does not allow him to see solutions, might take the worst of the decisions, suicide. In my adolescence I had experiences of this type, generated from family problems ("Fabiola", teacher of the EF)

Other teachers, in quick answers, indicate their unpreparedness to deal with situations of self-directed aggressivity. Thus, a teacher that works with adolescents for more than over 20 years has never directly faced self-directed aggressivity, but only heard about cases. She feels unprepared to deal with those themes, but she also feels challenged, in the sense that it is not only the content which is important, but also that the students need something else. Another teacher works with adolescents for a lot of time and identifies himself with the students who express suffering. This teacher has already experienced cases of self mutilation a while ago. At the time, he attempted to use a religious approach in order to convert the teenager.

Lastly, a teacher of the EM who works there for 19 years with teenagers, believes that it is difficult to talk about self-mutilation, since it is something that is very intense. When one case showed up, he was apprehensive, without knowing how to talk. In a moment, he asked if the student was okay and what was going on. The teenager told him about the cuts and said that she felt no affection coming from her family. This teacher then sought for help with colleagues and was oriented not to speak about what had happened, but to have a special attention with her, since she was a very shy student.

A circle which concludes, but also restarts

As we have said, formative hermeneutics is, in short, the art of interpreting oneself in the interaction with the other, towards the merging of horizons as described by Gadamer, entailing all the potentiality that this comprehensive encounter promotes. In this inventive process of self, in the scope of the teacher's doing and being able to do, it goes through self-care, through the care with the other but, above all, through the relationships and through dialogue. In this art of interpreting and caring, the very educational act makes itself, because it is given in the very relationship. It is in this sense that we borrow a passage from the singer Roberta Campos: "Life is a way to compose oneself". Our appropriation is then referred to the aesthetics of existence, where we make, create and interpret ourselves, therefore, in the care of oneself, in the care with the other. And the teacher, in the act of caring, educates. Therefore, in the "educate and care" he is becoming, composing himself, because he is living the relationship with the other.

We have considered hermeneutics, besides being the art of interpretation, an art of dialogue, which implies producing interpretations, even about ourselves. This work, therefore, which had as object the comprehension of teachers' formative processes, considering the contexts of their lived experiences, affections, specially when they are faced with situations of self-directed aggressivity, indicates gaps and lacks regarding the levels of interpersonal relations in the school context. After all, what Gadamer (2009) says about the importance of the "art of being able to listen one another and the strength of being able to hear one another" (p. 180). as a novel in the sense of hermeneutics, must be valued in the school spaces, in the school's floor, specially if the object is to effect (continual) formations which integrate caring and educating.

We are aware of some limitations of this enterprise, above all in relation to the pretension of dealing with things that surpasses the scope of this work. However, the limitations may reveal challenges, going exactly through formative hermeneutics, evidently inspired in Gadamer's phenomenological hermeneutics, which has to do with the possibility of elaborating a more conceptual study relating the idea of living methodology, something that we are developing.

Besides this suggestions, another one which draws us is to articulate this meaning of hermeneutics as interpretation of oneself with the ideas of care of self in Foucault and self-care in Heidegger. Furthermore,



and from a more empirical standpoint, there are a lot of studies to be conducted in the context of schools, specially ones which face the phenomena of self-directed aggressivity and how educating and caring might be integrated in a formation of being. After all, spaces which establish the teachers' capacity to listen as provocative moments for their formation, and the appreciation of their experiences regards indeed a formative hermeneutics.

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