NGHIÊN CỨU HIỆN TƯỢNG VÀ LÝ THUYẾT PHÊ PHÁN: LUẬN BÀN VỀ MỐI QUAN HỆ GIỮA GIÁO VIÊN VÀ HỌC SINH

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Bài viết này thảo luận chi tiết hai quan điểm lý thuyết của nghiên cứu định tính là: nghiên cứu hiện tượng (phenomenology) và lý thuyết phê phán (critical theory), đồng thời bàn luận mối quan hệ giữa giáo viên và học sinh dựa trên hai lý thuyết này. Bài viết cho thấy trong khi nghiên cứu hiện tượng tập trung vào các trải nghiệm cá nhân, và cách họ giải thích hiện tượng trong cuộc sống dựa trên các trải nghiệm đó, lý thuyết phê phán phân tích vấn đề ở tầm vĩ mô hơn. Đối với chủ đề sự tương tác giữa giáo viên và học sinh, nghiên cứu hiện tượng nhấn mạnh quan điểm cá nhân của giáo viên và học sinh về mối quan hệ của họ trong lớp học. Mặt khác, lý thuyết phê phán tập trung vào các bất lợi của học sinh như một đối tượng ít quyền lực trong lớp học, và cách ứng xử giải quyết sự mâu thuẫn, nhằm mang lại sự thay đổi cho học sinh, trường của họ và cả xã hội. Ngoài ra, chủ đề sự tương tác giữa giáo viên và học sinh cũng được đặt trong bối cảnh cụ thể của Việt Nam, nơi mà quyền lực xã hội và kiến thức giữa giáo viên và học sinh được coi là không đối xứng.

Từ khoá: nghiên cứu định tính, nghiên cứu hiện tượng, lý thuyết phê phán, quyền lực của giáo viên, mối quan hệ giữa giáo viên và học sinh, Việt Nam.

This article aims to provide detailed accounts of phenomenology and critical theory, and discusses the teacher-student relationship in light of the two perspectives. While phenomenology focuses on individuals' experiences and how they interpret their meaning to phenomenon, critical theory looks at the big picture at a macro level. In the topic of teacher and student relationship, the phenomenology approach highlights the personal perceptions and experiences of teachers and students on the topic and how their thoughts affect their relationship in the classroom. On the other hand, critical theory tends to look at the disadvantages of students as powerless enterprise in the classroom and their conflict handling behaviors in order to bring transformation to them, their schools and society as a whole. The topic of teacher and student relationship is then examined in the context of Vietnam, where the distribution of social power and knowledge between teacher and student is asymmetrical.

Keywords: qualitative research, phenomenology, critical theory, teacher power, teacher-student relationship, Vietnam.

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PHENOMENOLOGY AND CRITICAL THEORY IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN THE CLASSROOM

I. INTRODUCTION: PHENOME-NOLOGY THEORY AND CRITICAL THEORY

1. Phenomenology theory

Immanuel Kant first described phenomenology in 1764 in a scientific context (Cohen, 1987) as a response to the positivist approach, which tended to examine factors in isolation and develop generalizations (Jasper, 1994). Edmund Husserl is acknowledged as "the fountainhead of phenomenology in the twentieth century" (Vandenberg, 1997, p.11), who did most to define and develop the method and substance of phenomenology in the first half of the twentieth century. He emphasized how people experienced and perceived things, and criticized the idea of generalization without context of positivism (Mojapelo, 1997). In phenomenology, the pure phenomena are the only source of data to begin (Groenewald, 2004). Therefore, lived experience is a phrase commonly used in phenomenological research (Cohen, 1987).

Phenomenology focuses on an individual's personal, subjective lived experiences (Reeves et al., 2008). For Husserl (1931, 2014), the role of this theory is to explore the essence of consciousness rather than explanations. For example, Mojapelo (1997) explored the lived experiences of single teenage mothers in Botswana from their perceptions. Seven mothers from 16 to 19 years old who had left school due to pregnancy were interviewed to find out their experiences regarding motherhood. The findings show that this social problem negatively affects young single women's ability to finish school, find work, and support themselves. Unwanted pregnancy and motherhood have emotional, physical, and social impacts on adolescent mothers. The description provides "what they have experienced" and "how they experienced it" (Creswell, 2007, p.58).

So, the most basic premise of phenomenology is to describe the essential features of everyday lived experience completely and accurately. However, it is important to note that these experiences involve what Husserl called "intentionality", that is "the directedness, aboutness, or reference of mental states" (Siewert, 2017, p.1), creating the meaning of social phenomenon explained through their viewpoints and experiences. The meanings that individuals bring to lived situations and how they interpret the world is essential in phenomenology (Punch, 2013). For instance, Tuttle (2012) conducted a study to gain in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of university faculty who utilized technology for teaching and learning purposes. 20 faculty members were interviewed and the findings show two main reasons why they adopted technology. Also, it reveals that

the adoption affected the way a member taught, worked and lived.

Phenomenology belongs to the micro level theory, which focuses on the individual level action and interaction in their daily life with consideration of their own context (Reeves et al., 2008). An emphasis on the subjective point of view from an individual's personal consciousness and experiences is what distinguishes phenomenology from other qualitative research (Shi, 2011). In short, the description of an individual's perception in a specific setting to seek meaning of the world is the priority of this theory.

2. Critical theory

Critical theory emerged from German social theorists who established the Frankfurt School in Germany in 1923 (Ruchti, 2012). The emergence of this school of thought developed in the politically turbulent context and the rise of fascist rule in Germany during the 1920s (Taki, 1996). The Frankfurt school of theorists including Antonio Gramsci, Adorno, Marcuse and Horkheimer were disappointed with "the ineffective and over-deterministic approaches" of traditional Marxism (Taki, 1996, p.41). They argued that Marxism did not provide sufficient framework to analyze the conflicts in the society nor offer a means to change the political oppression and domination (Smith, 1990, cited in Taki, 1996).

Critical theory is mainly concerned with power, justice, and the ways social institutions interact and construct a social system (Ruchti, 2012). This theory aims to underline inequalities in the society. According to Markula and Silk (2011), "Researchers in the critical paradigm locate individual actions within relations of dominance and subordination that, according to them, characterize the world we live in" (p.39). The issues of "struggle, power, culture, hegemony and critical consciousness" are important to critical theorists (Abraham, 2004, para.3). For example, Kilderry (2012) investigated early childhood teacher decision making at the preschool level in Victoria state, Australia. Critical theory approach in the study identified social and cultural dominance, offering comprehension into ideology and subjectivity. The findings show that teacher directed practice was "legitimated, marginalized, and silenced" (p.ii).

The aims of critical theory are social transformation and emancipation (Reeves et al., 2008). This theory orients toward the critique and transformation of individuals and society as a whole. Kincheloe & McLaren (2005, p.305) state that:

Research that aspires to the name 'critical' must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society. Research thus becomes a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label "political" and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciou-sness.

For example, Canen (1996) discussed the concept of competence in teacher education concerned with the preparation of teachers to deal with cultural diversity. The contributions of the intercultural

approach to change the situation of the education quality are discussed.

In summary, critical theory is a macro leveled analytical approach including the prominent role of both individuals and groups (Taki, 1996). The main aim of this approach is to bring transformation and empowerment to the society.

II. DISCUSSION: POWER IN THE CLASSROOM - TEACHER AND STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

1. Teache power-a phenomenology discussion

As discussed earlier, phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of an individual and how he/she gives meanings to social phenomena in everyday lives. In light of this approach, teacher power is discussed by looking at the experiences, the different perceptions of teachers and students in the classroom setting. Power often has two senses from the teacher's perspective, either taking advantage to have positive influences on students or inflict harms to them. The abuses of power are usually avoided at all costs to benefit the students and for teaching to "become noble and powerful enterprise" (Fisch, 1992, p.6).

All teacher power is based on student perceptions (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983). If the student does not perceive the power of the teacher, his/her attempt of power is not likely to be successful or to have any influence on the student. Power is also often perceived differently by teachers and students (Fisch, 1992). According to Fisch (1992), teacher power is present in the classroom, endowed by the discipline or the institution's structure. While some teachers choose the alternative means of authority such as encouragement, motivation, reasoning or persuasion, others have to use power to achieve educational goals. Many students, at the same time, perceive teachers as powerful, which reflects clearly in the teacher-student relationship. This perception results from their previous education environment or the concept of students and teachers' role in the classroom (Fisch, 1992).

A body of literature shows that when teachers consider themselves or are perceived by their students as powerful agents in the classroom, they are likely to overuse their power. Consequently, problems will arise and cause harm to the students. For example, a teacher may reward or punish a student based on their relationship or the student's popularity, resulting in unfair treatment in the classroom. In another case, a teacher may benefit from students such as monetary gain, goods and services, useful information, and student with expertise or connections (Barrett et al., 2006; Hargreaves, 2001; Holmes et al., 1999; and Reamer, 2003, cited in Aultman et al., 2009). However, teachers many times are granted less power than they need to fulfill their teaching responsibilities (Fisch, 1992). For instance, the students have disrupting behaviors, defeat the course objectives or violate the school rule. In fact, the teaching process usually involves a teacher's exercising of power in some way. While the teacher may think the power is toward the educational goals, some students may think

he/she is using power inappropriately. Fisch (1992) gives an example of the discrepancy between teacher and student's perception of the exercise of power in the classroom. The teacher assigns different roles for the simulation; however, some students refuse their roles because the roles are against their wills or beliefs. In this case, the power is interpreted as manipulation and the tension between teacher and student will occur, leading to the failure of learning goals. He concludes that teacher's perception of power makes ultimate difference.

2. Teacher power–a critical theory discussion

The critical theory perspective looks at the powerful agents in the relationship of teachers and students, the injustice that happens in the relationship and its consequences. In this view, teachers are seen as more powerful than their students in the classroom. The distribution of power in the classroom is uneven. Research shows that conflict behavior depends on the power of the parties, students are rather passive in changing the situation and unwilling to confront or handle conflict with their teachers, resulting in negative consequences to students, schools, and society as a whole. While conflict is necessary to both personal and social change (Deutsch, 1971), the passive and dependent student role reduces the possibility toward initiative and change for themselves and the society.

According to many researchers, students seldom have formal power in the educational system and their power existence remains primarily informal (Miles, 1967; Chesler &

Franklin, 1968; Chesler & Lohman, 1971). French & Raven (1968) identify six bases of social power. (1) *Reward power* refers to a student's expectation that the teacher will do something nice for compliance. (2) *Coercive power* means a student's perception that the teacher has the ability to inflict punishments and will punish him for disobedience. (3) *Legitimate power* when a student believes that the teacher has the right to prescribe behavior for him in a given domain. (4) *Referent power* suggests a student's identification or desire to maintain or establish a friendly relationship with the teacher. (5) *Expert power* shows a student's perception that his teacher has special knowledge or ability in a certain area. (6) *Informational power* is based on the content of the communication from a student to his teacher.

Jamieson & Thomas (2004) state that the basis of an individual's power over another depends on his position in an organizational hierarchy. Teachers rank highest in legitimate, reward and coercive power while referent and informational power are available to peers (Kahn et al., 1964; French & Raven, 1968). This "reflects a highly uneven distribution of power between teacher and student, and a somewhat authoritarian mode of teacher influence" (Jamieson & Thomas, 2004, p.329). However, this type of power is usually seen in high school and undergraduate levels. To graduate level, teacher power is primarily expert and informational power. The teacher-student relationship has less emphasis on

authority and more on mutual respect and expertise (Jamieson & Thomas, 2004).

Because students have little or no formal power in the educational system, they do not have advantage when conflicts arise. They are unlikely to confront differences or dissatisfaction with the more powerful, their teachers as their perceptions. The negotiation of conflict happens when two groups have equal power. Students face the risk when expressing differences to teachers (Kahn, 1964; Chesler & Lohman, 1971). The uneven distribution of power in the classroom may lead to the dysfunctional consequences (Miles, 1967; Jamieson & Thomas, 2004). The students cannot change the indefensible situations that they perceive and continue their dissatisfaction and exasperation. At the same time, the school loses a considerable source of contribution for change and may suffer from disruptions due to the students' sheer frustrations. Student powerlessness can lead to indifference and withdrawal or confrontation (Wittes, 1970). To the society, it may create a dependent and passive generation unwillingness to bring change or transformation. Jamieson & Thomas (2004) found that students show "the predominance of avoidance behavior" when experience differences with teachers, reflecting "a relative inability or unwillingness of the students to be other than a passive, dependent receiver of whatever comes from the teacher" (p.332).

3. Teacher power–teacher and student relationship in Vietnam

3.1. Teacher power–teacher and student relationship in Vietnam–a phenomeno-logy discussion.

The phenomenological analysis shows that there is an imbalance of power between teachers and students in Vietnamese classrooms (Dang, 2006; Nguyen, 2011; Vo, 2014). This affirmation is consistent with Weimer's finding (2002) that "in most college classrooms, power, authority, and control remain firmly and almost exclusively in the hands of the teachers" (p.45). From Vietnamese teachers' perspective, they played the decisive role in students' success or failure. Teachers have long been believed by the society, the students, and by themselves to take the uppermost responsibility for students' intellectual and moral development. They were the omniscient knowledge deliverers while the students' responsibility was attending class to receive 'right words' from their teachers (Nguyen, 2011). In a study by Dang Van Hung (2006), Vietnamese educators explained why they exercised considerable power over the student learning. Firstly, they did not have confidence in their students regarding their intellectual maturity, content knowledge, and study skills. Little trust was placed in students' ability to decide what to learn and how to learn. Thus, teachers' ultimate power was used in the teaching and learning process. Secondly, they assumed that power is "an unquestioned part of what it means to be the teacher" (Weimer, 2002, p.25). Teacher is always considered a dominating figure in the classroom and a teacher's order must be implemented no matter what. Vietnamese teachers emphasized the

obedience of the students to produce academic achievement (Nguyen, 2011).

This passive learning style was also reported by Vietnamese students when they described it as "spoon-feeding" (Wong, 2004, p.158), especially when in Vietnam, students do not usually have tutorials but only lectures. Learning in large class hindered their opportunity to have discussions with their peers or teachers. In addition, Vietnamese teachers are claimed not to have close rapport with their students and usually maintain a distance from them. To the students, their teachers were "serious", "not friendly", and they were "scared of" their teachers (Wong, 2004, p. 159). The teachers' power and expectation of obedience is also reflected in the students' hesitation to give comments on their teachers. Evaluating teachers openly is not typical of Vietnamese culture (Nguyen, 2002). In a study by Ngan T Nguyen (2011), the students were not comfortable when being asked to judge their teachers. However, being more open later, they shared their experience of subordination in the classrooms under the teachers' control. This disconnect between teachers and students reinforces teachers' position of authority and power, which may lead to the negation of learners' abilities and beliefs and finally silenced them. Communication reluctance usually happens in Vietnamese classrooms. The students' way of learning is typically described as "passive", "traditional", "dependent", or "lack of confidence" (Dang, 2006, p. 194). Not only because of the students' characteristic, but also due to their lack of power, the teacher-

centered approach has been taking place.

3.2. Teacher power–teacher and student relationship in Vietnam–a critical theory discussion

There is a clash between Western and Vietnam's cultures and values such as individualism vs. collectivism and a small power distance vs. a large power distance (Ellis, 1994, 1996; Sullivan, 1996). According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), Vietnam is one of the Confucian Heritage Culture nations scoring high on the Power Distance Index (PDI), which indicates a greater emphasis on hierarchical relationships. The higher the PDI score, the higher level of inequality of power within the society. In a high power distance nation like Vietnam, the less powerful members of organizations tend to accept and expect that power be distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1986). Teachers in Vietnam also seem to be more distanced to students than teachers in the West (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Wei, 2012), contributing to the lack of student-teacher interaction and limitation of students' learning outcome. Hofstede (1986) indicated that the power distance flexibility has an impact on the nature of the teacher-student relationship, as shown in the predominant classroom discourse in Vietnam of "teacher volubility and student taciturnity" (Chick, 1996, p.27).

According to Confucius, teaching profession is the most honourable of all and teachers' words are more important than anyone else's, which clearly shows the power of Confucian hierarchical status and respect for teachers (Nguyen & Mcinnis,

2002). In Asian cultures in general, teacher-centered approach is dominant when teachers act as an authorized figures in the classrooms and learners are taught to respect and obey authority figures, i.e. teachers (Confucius, 1947). Vietnamese students do not usually play an active role or volunteer to answer questions. They wait until being called upon or sure that they have correct answers. There are several explanations for this phenomenon. The students were afraid of breaking the norms, which social harmony was put a great emphasis on in the society and they were more concerned about the appropriate behaviour than their wish. In collective cultures like Vietnam, other people's thinking is more important than a personal desire. Also, the students did not want to "lose face" when making mistakes due to the teachers and peers' pressure (Vo, 2014). The clearly formal and hierarchical relationship between teachers and students in Vietnam strengthens the teacher-centered method of teaching, causing negative effects on the development of the students' critical thinking and creativity. It seems to be a paradox when teachers want students' autonomy but they are not ready to give up their power. Due to being deeply influenced by the culture and the traditional education in Vietnam, the students took the existing imbalanced power for granted and tended to accept it conditionally.

III. CONCLUSION

While phenomenology pays close attention to individuals' experiences and how they interpret their meaning to an issue, critical theory looks at the phenomenon at a large-scale level. The former approach is not likely to produce generalizable data or bring social change, whereas the latter may miss the details and complexity of the problems. In the topic of power in the classroom, phenomenology approach sheds light on the thoughts of teachers and students on their relationship in the classroom. By contrast, critical theory tends to look at powerless enterprise in the classroom to bring empowerment to them, thereby the transformation to their schools and the society.

In Vietnam, the perceptions of Vietnamese teachers and students and their interpretation confirm the long existing dominant power of the teachers in the classroom. The teachers' lack of trust in their students' ability to have their own voice in the learning process reinforces the teacher-centered teaching approach while the students tend to accept the fact of being spoon-fed and consider the teachers their knowledge transmitter. The teachers need to be empowered to share their power with the students by taking the role of a facilitator or a guide. Meanwhile, the students need to be empowered to be the center of the teaching and learning process.

In light of critical theory, the distant relationship between teacher and student is rooted in the Confucian ideology, which emphasizes hierarchical structure in society, i.e. between teachers and students. Students are taught to deeply respect their teachers and adhere to any teachers' rules. Teachers as agents of the education system wield a great amount of power and control over the lives of their students. As can be seen, teacher power in Vietnam matches the critical theory

perspective, which considers students the less powerful members in institutions, leading to the archetypal teacher-centered approach.

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