



A Hermeneutic Investigation of the Meaning of Curriculum Implementation for Consultants and Teachers by Terence R. Carson. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Alberta, 1984.

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“The intent of this research has been to approach the question of curriculum implementation from the perspective of those interested in improving schools.” This key statement from Chapter III of Carson’s dissertation is perhaps the best starting point for coming to understand what his study is about. The “question of curriculum implementation,” as I understand it, was essentially this: What possibilities exist for implementing a new curriculum in classrooms in a way that acknowledges the pedagogical role of the teacher in interpreting and adapting the curriculum, given the limitations of an educational system that acknowledges printed documents as the only legitimate form of a new curriculum, establishes timelines for their production which makes dialogue impossible, and expects one version of the curriculum plan to serve the individual classrooms of a whole province? The purpose of the study was not so much to find the answer to this question, but to ask it with and of six classroom teachers and curriculum consultants for whose practice it was relevant. The real concern was to discover the nature of the contradictions between the actions and artifacts of curriculum policy makers on the one hand, and on the other hand, the teachers’ and consultants’ views of education as pedagogy: that is, as a way of being with children in a caring, sensitive, supportive way, leading each of them out from wherever and whatever they are to something more fulfilling, more sensitive, more knowledgeable, to what van Manen has called “the good.”

The question was asked and pursued hermeneutically through a series of six conversations involving three teachers and three consultants. The reason for this approach was given in the same place in Chapter III: “I have been critical of technically-oriented research which tends to rationalize and control teaching by gathering data on practice. Conversation allows research to return to a ground of practice by letting the participants themselves speak” (p. III-26). In hermeneutic inquiry, conversation is seen as the on-going attempt of participants to make sense of their commonly held world, in this case the world of implementing or helping to implement a newly prescribed social studies curriculum. The use of conversation as a

research method, which evolved during the course of the study, was eloquently described in detail by Carson in Chapter III. Briefly, it is this: The first level of engagement is understanding what is being spoken about. This understanding comes not from analyzing the conversation, but by virtue of the examples, images, metaphors, recollections, and references to past experiences (of curriculum implementation) that are used in the conversation. At the second level, conversation becomes a mode of research when it provides the occasion for hermeneutic understanding. Hermeneutic understanding becomes possible when, in the conversation, the participants compare their intentions with the results of their efforts and, realizing the shortfall, consider what they should do. It is this reflection on our curricular activities, recognizing their time-bound context and going beyond this to ask the practical question of what should be done, that enables hermeneutic understanding. The possibility for such understanding is enhanced when the conversations are transcribed, and the text is made available to the participants. Distancing the participants from their conversation in this way allows subsequent conversations to continue as a dialectic between how the participants speak of implementation, what this reveals about their understanding and practice of implementation, and how these relate to their practical interests in making schools more educational.

The methodology used in this study is fascinating, laudable, and noteworthy. Carson has presented a valuable description of hermeneutic inquiry in education which should stand as a model for future researchers. His general procedure consisted of three stages, each guided by principles drawn from the literature on hermeneutic inquiry. These stages, as he described them, were the following:

	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Guiding Research Principles</i>
Stage I	To initiate conversation.	Orienting participants to my interest in curriculum implementation. Coming to know participants and their experiences.
Stage II	To continue the conversation by keeping the question open.	To remain mindful of the hermeneutic priority of the question and to continue to search out the questionability of

Stage III	Reflecting on the meaning of curriculum implementation and its implications for practice.	implementation as reflected in practice. To interpret and accurately show the meaning of curriculum implementation for the participants. To critically reflect upon the relation between technical and pedagogical practice within the existing school system.
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While praising the study for its clear and insightful portrayal of hermeneutic inquiry, I must say that the nature and intent of the study were far from clear when I first began to read the dissertation. Carson himself stated his research questions differently in his first chapter from the way in which I have presented them. The questions in Chapter I were “(1) What do the concrete acts and objects of curriculum implementation, i.e., in-services, the teaching/learning resources, curriculum guides, etc., mean to the participants? (2) What do these acts, objects and meanings reveal about the way we live as educators within institutionalized educational settings? (3) What possibilities exist for reforming current practices so that curriculum implementation will fulfill the participants’ desires for better education?” (p. I-3). I found this initial presentation misleading and frustrating. In question 1, with whose acts are we concerned? Who are the participants? Are the participants the actors? Are they the only actors? If the concern is with “acts” of curriculum implementation carried out by both school-based and centrally-based educators, as I deduced from other parts of this chapter, then isn’t the concern more properly focused on events rather than on discrete acts and objects?

I note this observation because I think the confusion arose because of adherence to a stylistic convention in writing research reports which is not necessarily in our best interests and ought to be modified or discarded for studies of this nature. The convention is to include in the initial chapters of the study a statement of “the research question” and definitions of key terms, along with statements of purpose, limitations, and organization. This dissertation report follows form. However, in an interpretive study such as this, it is a disservice to state research questions and definitions at the beginning, for it is the purpose of the study to discover these. The statements of

research questions and definitions which appear in the first pages of Carson's dissertation alienated me from the rest of the dissertation for quite some time. Perhaps these catered to my tendency to expect a clear statement of the grounds on which the study rested, either theoretical or methodological and preferably both. When I found neither in the beginning chapters, I felt frustration, which had to be overcome before I could begin to appreciate the value of the study, which, I think, is considerable.

Perhaps instead of our traditional format, the image of the hermeneutic circle should be used to guide the presentation of hermeneutic studies. The circle might be entered where it is closest to the researcher, with an autobiographical sketch of the situation in which the author's concern arises. The redeeming virtue in Chapter I of Carson's dissertation was the section called "Autobiographical Reflections," which contained important clues to the real nature of the study and piqued my interest to read further. Next in the account would come the search for method, a way of going beyond the present situation, questioning the concern. The body of the presentation would be the account of the exploration, in this case, the conversations. The account would close with a consideration of the practical question of what should be done.

Carson's dissertation illustrates beautifully the conversations he held with the social studies teachers and consultants. For each of the six participants, he detailed professional background, the nature of their relationship with him as researcher, and their understanding of curriculum implementation. From transcripts of conversations and reflections on conversations, he artfully teased out the themes that provided a rich description of each person's meaning for curriculum implementation. The account shows how Carson questioned the nature of reality with each of the teachers in turn, how he participated in the conversations as an authentic questioner himself, sharing his misgivings about the technical approach to curriculum development and implementation. Both researcher and teacher asked questions and shared their interpretations of the conversations. Together researcher and teacher moved from understanding the teacher's reality to questioning its grounds. As Carson pointed out, the understanding was not accomplished by entering into each other's subjectivity, but by bringing to language together their knowledge of schools as they are. The negativity of the school situation led to the questions that kept them moving through the hermeneutic circle to greater depths of understanding and closer and closer to emancipatory awareness.

The account of the conversations was followed by a chapter giving Carson's reflections on the research. His central claim was that "it is the lived relationship between technically motivated action and practical reason which constitutes the meaning of curriculum imple-

mentation in the work of educators” (p. V-5). This meaning encompasses three fundamental contradictions: (1) the contradiction between inquiry as an attitude toward teaching/learning and inquiry as a model, (2) the contradiction between helping children and citizenship production, and (3) the contradiction between education as having an enlarged understanding and outcome-based education.

I think these are fundamental and pervasive contradictions central to our practice as educators. I encounter them in similar form continually with those of my graduate students who take up the challenge to engage in critical reflection on their practice. It is of utmost importance to examine these contradictions and to address the question of what we should do about them. Not that there is a solution. As Carson points out, there is a contradiction inherent in any solution to the tension between the technical and the practical in curriculum implementation. It is this: to reject the technical imposition of preset curriculum guides on teachers in favor of a more educational form of inquiry is itself imposing something on teachers and limiting the possibility of teaching as a pedagogical act.

Even though there is no “solution,” the question of what to do must be addressed. As suggested above, consideration of the practical question might serve as the culmination of the account of a hermeneutic inquiry. One of the curriculum consultants who participated in this study asked Carson what he planned to do about the contradictions of curriculum implementation in his role as a university instructor of social studies methods courses. His answer could only be that he would continuously seek for the ever elusive solutions, and in so doing, attempt to conduct his work as praxis.

In this dissertation, Carson has provided a fascinating and valuable example of a hermeneutic inquiry into the meaning of curriculum implementation. In the course of this inquiry, he has laid bare fundamental contradictions underlying our work as educators. Each of us who admits to owning these contradictions is left with the challenge of deciding what we will do about them.