Researching and Understanding Student Experience

How to gain access to student experience

Many teachers would agree that the first question educators always need to ask themselves is, what do the students who are in our classes actually *experience*? More importantly, it matters less what we, as educators, *say* that children experience; more crucial is what students themselves say. For example, a teacher may believe that he is caring about a student whom he teaches, but if the student does not *experience* the teacher's act as caring, then the teacher's belief is less relevant than what the student experiences.

How then can we attempt to come to understand how students themselves experience things? Here I like to show how we can ask students to describe specific instances of their classroom experience in as much concrete detail as possible. I have done this by engaging students in writing experiential stories or anecdotes. They were asked the following:

- Think back to one teacher and describe, in an anecdote, a particular experience with this teacher. In your anecdote refer to how the teacher talked, acted, behaved, or used certain gestures. What did the teacher say? In what tone of voice? What did you or other students say or do?
- Describe the kinds of things that were shown, taught, or learned in this lesson or school situation. What manner of speaking, choice of words, personal demeanor, or way of behaving were part of this situation? What was this experience like for you?
• Describe, for example, how this particular teacher in this particular moment seemed to help you understand something, to make you feel interested in a topic. Describe how in this situation you felt secure or insecure, capable or incapable, challenged or bored, smart or stupid, good about yourself or self-critical, and so forth.
• This event may have happened recently or several years ago. Do not use real names of teachers or students.

Anecdotes are short stories about single events. Students were also taught to write and edit the anecdotes. For the purpose of anonymity and plausibility some further editing was sometimes done. The following suggestions were given to enhance the narrative power of the anecdote (see also van Manen, 1997):

1. an anecdote is a very short and simple story
2. an anecdote usually relates one incident
3. an anecdote begins close to the central idea
4. an anecdote includes important concrete detail
5. an anecdote often contains several quotes
6. an anecdote closes quickly after the climax
7. an anecdote requires punctum for punch line

When working with students we must show interest in their writing and, in collaboration with the teacher, even teach them to write vivid experiential accounts. Depending on the events themselves and how able students are to describe them in detailed, concrete words, the anecdotes will vary in complexity and depth. Some stories that students tell are straightforward, other anecdotes are more intriguing. But in almost all cases there is a strong sense of relationality involved in the descriptions. The way that the teacher relates to the students is a dominant theme.

Students’ experiences of naming
In everyday life, in schools and classrooms, teachers call on students, address students by their names, pronounce, mispronounce, or confuse their names, and sometimes forget student names altogether. As adults we may have had many experiences with naming, misnaming, or name forgetting. We may have heard the story of how we came to be named as we are. The name was chosen before we were born, or parents waited until they saw us and then decided on a name. Or the girls in the family take the mother’s name and the boys take the father’s name, or perhaps we didn’t receive a permanent name until a ritual in adolescence settled a name upon us. Some of us received shortened names or nicknames—honorable or dishonorable, humorous or affectionate. Giving names seems an ordinary and yet a most peculiar act. What occurs when one gives a name? asks Derrida (1995). What does one give? One does not offer a thing. One delivers nothing. And yet something comes to be. The act of naming seems indeed a wondrous phenomenon.

So, it is strange that the pedagogical significance of students’ experiences of naming has received virtually no attention. How do students experience being called by their names? What is like for them to be misnamed, nicknamed? Or how do they experience incidents when their names are forgotten altogether?

If we were to ask individual students questions regarding their name experiences, they may say things such as, “It is important that the teacher knows who you are.” “The science teacher still did not know my name after three months!” “I don’t like it when a teacher calls me by my family name.” Comments such as these suggest that name experiences are important to students and that they are able to tap into these experiences if only we give them the opportunity to do so. But it is important to distinguish between student accounts that offer interpretations, views, or beliefs about name experiences and student accounts that describe the experiences as lived through. A phenomenological inquiry
requires experiential accounts as data for reflection. To this end students were prompted to describe their experiential moments themselves:

• Can you recall a name experience? Think of a specific time when a teacher called you by your name or by an incorrect name—or possibly when a teacher seemed to avoid calling you by any name.
• Tell what happened without explaining or giving opinions about it. Just describe the experience as you lived through it.
• Recall what was said by the teacher, by you, and by others.
• How did the teacher act, talk, and use gestures? What was the tone or feeling of the interaction? What did you say, think, feel, do?
• (This event may have happened recently or several years ago. Do not use real names of teachers or students.)

From the researcher’s point of view, students writing their experiences as they lived through them give the researcher access to the subjectivity of classroom life. Lived experience descriptions (such as the anecdotes in this text) are written experiences that the researcher borrows in order to examine what meanings may inhere in them with respect to a particular phenomenon such as the name experience. The researcher can then reflect on the anecdotes, looking for what, at first reading, might be unseen, probing for deeper understanding of the situation and of the meanings the incident held for the students. Here is an example of a student description:

Mrs. Smith is in a particularly foul mood this depressing Monday morning. I mean, she always seems to pick on me but today is especially bad. Science is a dreaded subject for me, but this year has to be the worst, all because of her. I raise my hand to answer her question and am really not expecting what I’m about to hear, for I have been in her class for about eight months already. But, in a horribly sharp tone, she says, "Yes Alexandria, what do you have to say?"
For a moment, I think about what to reply and then I say, "I'm sorry Mrs. Smith, but that isn't my name." (I believe that I answered quite appropriately considering the mistake she just made, after having me in her class for over eight months).

"Oh right, well get on with it then, Alexis," she answers in a terribly unkind tone.

The class erupts with overflowing laughter. Jeremiah, the class clown of course, pipes up and yells, "Her name's Alexa." And he repeats, "Alexa!"

Well, that just about makes Mrs. Smith's patience snap in half. "Shush up! All of you!" she exclaims. She is obviously embarrassed. We go on with the lesson, but I can't help but notice the slight rosy tinge on her cheeks for the rest of the period. Should I be happy, or should I not be happy, that she got the embarrassment she most certainly deserved?

We can hardly blame teachers for occasionally making mistakes with student names. The act of teaching is inherently improvisational. Teachers must instantly (inter)act in situations of contingency, and they must often lead their students through a myriad of activities in fast-paced environments where split-second decisions need to be made and where students’ comments and actions are often unexpected. So it is no surprise that teachers are bound to slip up on students’ names now and then. Sometimes teachers have difficulty with student names:

The first few times that I meet my classes I remind myself to look over the class list to make sure I know all the names of the students. As I quickly rehearse the names I try to connect these names with the persons to whom these names belong. Soon some of these students I will know so well that I no longer have to remember them. I will simply know them. I will have trouble remembering the names of other students for quite some time.
For example, in my grade nine class I have a boy who looks very much like his older brother who was in my class last year. During the first few weeks of school I kept confusing and calling Tim by his brother’s name Don. One day, when this happened again I could see that Tim was clearly annoyed even though he did not say anything. So, spontaneously I made a public apology to him. Of course, I felt embarrassed having to do this and my confession was somewhat like self-punishment. But I knew it important to let Tim know that he mattered to me. I told him how sorry I was that I kept confusing his brother’s name and how I appreciated him for who he was.

While the teacher may never have reflected on the phenomenological significance of the student’s experience of being named (in this case by a wrong name), the teacher does seem to realize that this is not an unimportant matter. The teacher senses how misnaming the student by his brother’s name somehow damages his sense of self and self-identity—for who he is in his own right.

Here is a student’s description of an experience of being connected to a sibling by name.

“Sally Tilburn?” “Here. ” The first day of school has finally arrived. Mrs. Larson is taking attendance. My older brother, Ben, attended this school for three years. He set the reputation for me. Let's just say he wasn't exactly the teachers' favourite student. The benches in the hallway saw a lot of Ben throughout his school years. Every teacher I meet and talk to on this crisp September morning makes this connection to Ben. When I confess my name is Sally Tilburn, I can see the glimmer of hope in their eyes. Hope that I am not like my brother. “Tilburn, as in Ben Tilburn?” “Yes,” I respond. "Oh...I see," Mrs. Larson's voice lowers, no doubt remembering the times she had with Ben a couple years back. Everyone’s eyes turn to me. The whole class realizes what type of student Ben must
have been, just because of the disapproving look on Mrs. Larson's face and the awkwardness it creates. I glance at her. It seems as though she has no problem remembering who Ben was. Trying to lower my head, I can only imagine what the next few years of school will be like.

How does Mrs. Larsen's association of Ben with Sally influence the possibilities for the relationship between teacher and student? When other students in the class see Mrs. Larsen’s disapproving look and then turn their gaze to Sally, what are the possibilities for Sally’s relationship with her classmates? When a teacher doesn’t use a student’s name correctly, then the student may experience immediate and often intense feelings and thoughts.

Our discussion here is not to be critical of teachers when this happens, but to call attention to students’ experiences and to what it means when we try to determine what it is like for a student to have an experience. Even university students may feel sensitive to name confusions in their relations with their teachers.

Last term I took philosophy from Professor Li, who I really liked. And he seemed to like me because he often called on me and would say things like, “Frieda really makes an excellent point …” or “Frieda, what do you think of this issue?” and so on.

Some of my friends would laugh when Professor Li called me by the name Frieda. But I did not mind so much because he really seemed to respect me. At the end of the term, after writing the test, I went up to him and said: “I really liked your classes and I think you are such a wonderful teacher. I have learned so much from your philosophy classes. However, I want you to know that I am not Frieda. My name is Jane.”

Professor Li had been smiling as I thanked him but then looked shocked: “Oh, no, I am so sorry!” But I said, “Never mind—you had it partially right. My name is Jane Friedman.”
There seems to be a paradox related to Jane and Alexa: we don’t really know a person if we don’t know his or her name, but we can know his or her name and not really know him or her. Likewise, we may not know a person’s name but have a brief encounter and now know some aspect of the person intimately. Both Jane and Alexa seem to hesitate about correcting the teacher. Perhaps they know intuitively that it can be embarrassing for a person to forget someone's name. And, of course, there is the practical challenge that it is not easy to remember all names of people we meet.

When someone calls us by our name (especially when this someone is a significant person), then we may feel addressed in our singularity. Calling a person by his or her first name may create a sense of intimacy and trust. And sometimes we may feel irritated when a person adopts a tone of intimacy with our name that seems misplaced. Teachers also know that naming is a crucial aspect of the relation they maintain with students. Many teachers try to memorize their students’ names early in the new school term; they realize that it is important to be able to recognize and call their students by their proper name.

Naming is recognition: to be seen and noticed. We are able to recognize aspects of our world by naming them. Not only do we make things noticeable by naming them, but also we make them real somehow. That is why Gusdor (1965) suggested that “to name is to call into existence” (p. 38). And just as we call things into being by naming them, so we ourselves need to be named to exist for others and for ourselves. Things that fall outside of our linguistic reach may stay more indeterminate. And this is also true for proper names of people. The strange thing is that people, even those we think we know, do to some extent remain indeterminate until we remember their names. Somehow, by being able to call them by their name we seem to be able to reach them, and stand in meaningful relation to them. When, as teachers, we call students by name, we point to the singularity of a specific student, and we may take for granted that calling the name calls the student into relation with us.
To be called by my name is to receive recognition and to receive recognition literally means to be known. Someone who recognizes me thereby acknowledges my existence, my very being. This is not the same as fleetingly noticing people whom one passes in a busy street. To cognize means to know, but to re-cognize is to know again in the sense of becoming part of people’s memory. When I recognize someone I revive my cognitive experience: this person has become part of my experience, my life history. He or she exists for me; this person is now memorable. It is not surprising, therefore, that naming and recognition play such a critical role in people’s lives. One’s very existence depends on being named and recognized—to be known by others. To paraphrase Descartes: “I am recognized, therefore I exist.” The experience of recognition is inextricably intertwined with selfhood, identity, and one’s sense of personal being.

**What is named when we speak of student “experience”?**

Experiences seem to arise from the living flow of everyday existence. In German language this living sense is retained in the term *Erlebnis*, translated as “lived experience.” Gadamer (1975) suggests that there are two dimensions of meaning to lived experience: the immediacy of experience and the content of what is experienced (p. 61). Both dimensions have methodological significance for qualitative inquiry. In recent years there has been a resumption of interest in the notion of experience. Scholars such as Wood (2002) and Jay (2005) are resurrecting the focus on the meaning and significance of experience in contemporary inquiry. They argue that lived experience forms the starting point for inquiry, reflection, and interpretation, from Hegel through Heidegger, to Foucault and Derrida. This thought is also expressed in the well-known line from Merleau-Ponty (1962), “The world is not what I think, but what I live through....If one wants to study the world as lived through, one has to start with a direct description of our experience as it is” (pp. xvi-xvii).
The “contents” of experiences are recognizable in the sense that we can name and describe them, or perhaps they come into being as experiences as we name and describe them. No doubt we could distinguish many more such experiences in the above student accounts. For example, in Kathleen's, Tim's, Alexa's, and Jane's descriptions we could distinguish the experience of waiting, the experience of being startled, the experience of the teacher's look, the experience of the touch, the experience of hearing one's name spoken in a certain tone of voice, and so forth. Every nameable experience seems to acquire an identity that makes it potentially distinguishable from other experiences. We could single out any of these moments that we just named and ask, “What is the phenomenological meaning of that experience?” What is the phenomenology of being startled by feeling something touching our face? Next, it is possible to focus more carefully on the nature of touch and ask, “How is the experience of being touched or struck by an object different from being touched by a person’s hand? What is the phenomenology of the human touch? How is being touched by a friend or a teacher experienced differently from being touched by the hand of stranger?”

Indeed, phenomenology always asks those sorts of questions: “What is the nature and meaning of this or that experience-as-we-live-through-it?” “How does this phenomenon present itself as a distinguishable experience?” It is often baffling how the meanings of experiences are so much more difficult to determine than the meaning of concepts which can be studied by examining their use in language. Gadamer explains that all lived experience has a certain immediacy that eludes every determination of its ultimate meaning. Why? Because when we try to recover the contents of our experiences through memory or reflection we are in some sense always too late. We can never recover experience as it happened in the instant of the moment. Moreover, says Gadamer (1975), everything that is experienced “is experienced by oneself, and part of its meaning is that it belongs to the unity of this self and thus contains an unmistakable and
irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life” (p. 67). Indeed, what belongs to a certain experience cannot be exhausted in what can be said of it or in what can be grasped as its meaning.

The phenomenological interest is focused on the phenomenon as an aspect of our existence. It tries to grasp the living sense of the moment before we have lifted it up into cognitive, conceptual, or theoretical determination or clarity. Indeed this conceptual or theoretical clarity would be misleading or at least full of assumptions. We, therefore, try to come to an understanding of a phenomenon by constantly investigating and questioning these (psychological, personal, cultural, theoretical) assumptions. We ask, “What is experienced in that moment before we reflect on it, before we conceptualize it, and before we even name and interpret it?” Only through this type of questioning can we come to discern the complex and subtle nature of experience when we speak of student experience.

We need to acknowledge that even in naming a student experience we have already lifted it up, so to speak, from the raw reality of human existence. That is why we have to constantly remind ourselves that we are trying to understand not some named concept, but the prereflective existent—that raw moment or aspect of existence that we lift up and bring into focus with language. Is experience ultimately a linguistic phenomenon? And how is the body involved in our experience as we live it from moment to moment? Does experience already have meaning before we are consciously aware of it? Or are these experiences more primal phenomena? And how is this prereflective moment already part of our lived experience? The point for us is not that we should try to develop philosophical answers to these questions, but that we must remain aware of their openness and reach.

_The pedagogical significance of orienting to student experience_
So what we are learning (coming to understand?) about any experience, and the experience of recognition and naming in particular, is that we need to realize that even by naming an experience we already shape the prereflective nature of experience as we live it from moment to moment. And yet, we must try to do the impossible and reflect on the possible meanings of the experiences that we live.

I am a foreign student who has been in Canada only for a few months. My Chinese name, Huixia Ling Ho, is difficult to pronounce for Canadians. I am also rather quiet in my classes due to my inadequate English skills. All in all that makes me feel rather invisible in class. In one of my classes I am impressed by the teacher’s ability to motivate students’ participation in class discussions. The teacher learned everyone’s name very quickly despite the large class size. He always calls students by their first name. However, he rarely mentions my name. I thought that I did not mind it that much. But one day, when he discussed each group project, calling each student’s name as if he appreciated every member's effort, I found myself waiting for my name to be mentioned. At last it was our turn. There were four in our group.

I concentrated on the teacher. He began to name the first two individuals in our group. Then, I saw him hesitate for a moment and skip my name to the fourth member. I was unrecognized. I was a bit surprised at myself.

I did not expect that I would be so disappointed. I was embarrassed. I was painfully aware of my Chinese name which makes me who I am. I realize that I have become nameless, a nobody in this class.

Huixia, who is a secondary school student, shows remarkable insight into her experience. But we should realize that this awareness is only possible because she has expressed her experience in language (here in written form). She seems to realize that, at the collective level, her Chinese name gives her a certain identity, but she also realizes that at the personal level her name refers to her
singularity, her uniqueness. One the one hand, it is her uniqueness that is denied by the teacher’s not including her by her name. By the teacher’s forgetting or skipping her name she cannot feel recognized and seen—she feels nameless. On the other hand, her cultural identity is also at stake in the teachers’ name forgetting. Huixia seems to experience hurt that is associated with the withholding of recognition at two levels of subjectivity: her universal subjectivity (being Chinese) and her singular subjectivity (being her own unique self).

Even though, as researchers, we seem to be speculating about Huixia’s inner life, it needs to be pointed out that this is not really the intention. As researchers, we are not the teachers of these students and we are not really able to “know” them as unique individuals. Our subject is not this or that student; our subject is the phenomenon (the experience) of naming. Huixia’s description of a naming incident is an example of this human phenomenon (what it is like to be named, misnamed, unnamed, etc). And so are all the other experiences we borrow from students. We are trying to construct a qualitative text that makes the experience of naming recognizable to readers. In this recognition lies the possibility of becoming more pedagogically sensitive to the experiences of individual students such as Kim, Sally, Jane, and Huixia. A teacher practitioner has a broader interest than we do in this text: the teacher must be interested in his or her students’ individual experiences as well as in the phenomenon of the naming experience. In concrete classroom situations, the phenomenological and the personal understandings merge into a fuller pedagogical understanding.

From the perspective of professional practitioners, there are always two pedagogical aspects to a phenomenological interest such as the student experience of naming: on the one hand, there is the experience of naming as a human phenomenon, and on the other hand, in actual teaching-learning situations there is the inner psychological experience of this or that particular student. Of course, phenomenology, as a philosophical methodology, cannot help us understand the psychological lives of particular students. As researchers
we can only focus on phenomenological understanding. And yet, there is always the larger picture of the actual lifeworld where teachers must deal with the psychological lives of real children. At the general level, teachers can increase their thoughtfulness by reflecting on the phenomenological meaning and significance of naming; and at the level of everyday thinking and acting the teacher also needs to know psychologically, as best as possible, how a particular student experiences a specific learning moment or specific classroom incident. In concrete and practical pedagogical relations and situations these two types of understanding (phenomenology and psychology) cannot really be separated. They are grasped together and enacted, as pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact, in the present instant of each teaching moment.

References