

# Researching the Experience of Pedagogy

In this sketch about some aspects of my research, I should probably start with the term “phenomenology”. Phenomenology is the name for the philosophical tradition that started in Western Europe in the 19th century, and that continues today. But in some countries phenomenology was also taken up by non-philosophers – scholars in education, pedagogy, psychology, psychiatry and other health sciences. In the 1950s this led to what in my native Dutch language is called the “methoden strijd” – literally, a struggle for what methods are most appropriate for studying human phenomena. But there is an interesting quirk in this struggle for methods in that phenomenologists are primarily interested in investigating how human beings *experience* their world. Part of phenomenological method consists of distrusting any method, and it involves deconstructing the various theoretical perspectives, assumptions, and conceptualizations that prevent us from interpreting experience as we live it, pre-reflectively.

I realize that this sounds rather confounding. So let me provide a “feel” for phenomenology by means of an evocative image of the 1892 painting “L’Enfant au pain” by the Quebec painter Ozias Leduc. At first we may notice the concrete things: the boy is gazing at the bowl, the bread, and the table that are in sharper relief, and so our eyes are drawn there also. But then we begin to realize that it is the music making that is really at the centre of the picture. In other words, the essence of the picture is concealed from us. And its truth lies not so much in what is

## Researching Lived Experience



*Human Science for an  
Action Sensitive Pedagogy*

**Max van Manen**

shown but in what cannot be shown: that wondrous but enigmatic sphere or sensibility of the boy and his mouth-organ, making music. I thought this painting was an appropriate iconic image for the phenomenological attitude. Phenomenology practices an almost meditative, yet highly reflective attentiveness to the concreteness of the ordinary things of our world. And it is always striking, but perhaps not really surprising, that even the most ordinary of human experiences soon turn enigmatic – and ultimately allusive – under this reflective phenomenological gaze.

I have spent part of my career trying to develop a research methodology for the human sciences. For example, the website *phenomenology.com* offers a cursory overview of the inquiry model by means of 80 clickable links, each describing an aspect of this methodology. In several SSHRC funded research projects, I have applied these phenomenological methods to topics and concerns of professional practice: the Tact of Teaching, the Pedagogy of Recognition, the missing Language of Pedagogy, and Childhood's Secrets.

These various projects have resulted in books that have been translated into half a dozen languages. For example, *Childhood's Secrets* was a SSHRC supported study of the emergence and significance of ordinary secrets in children's lives. Why ordinary secrets? Well, there is abundant literature about secrecy concerning pathological secrets that turn into malignancies and monsters, leaving complex scar tissues on the membranes of personal identity. And what these dark and pathological secrets share with those that are nice or more benign is that the secrets of the past may have their effects in the present. That is why practicing psychologists generally consider secrecy between people undesirable. But to my amazement nobody had ever done a careful study of ordinary secrets.

When around 5, 6, or 7 years of age children first begin to experience secrets, this is truly a momentous occasion. Why? Because from that time on the child no longer lives in one world but in two—an inner and an outer reality. Interestingly, parents and teachers are rarely aware of this change in the child's growth and development.

Over several years, I have collected from adolescents and from adults several hundred experiential accounts. I asked them to describe as concretely as possible the first secret they could remember from childhood. The memories are very different. Here is one example told by a young person:

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**SECRETS ARE NOT ONLY INEVITABLE DIMENSIONS OF CHILDREN'S LIVES, THEY ARE ALSO HEALTHY AND CRITICAL FOR THE CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-IDENTITY, AUTONOMY, INDEPENDENCE, AND MATURITY.**

*I distinctly remember the atmosphere of breakfast time in my childhood home: eggs on a blue plate, oozing yellow yolk, toast. These are the familiar things of breakfast time. I loved the gleaming of the forks and spoons on the red and white checked tablecloth, the hum of the refrigerator, purring like some great white cat.*

*My father was a big brown man, bringing forkfuls to a high sagging face. His hands were cracked; I could feel the grease on those mechanic's hands. He talked and talked. Mother talked too. Their words would hang in the air, wrapping me like a blanket. My sister was there too, sipping juice, tiny sips like a small brown bird.*

*The kitchen walls were yellow, and the far one, with the door, rippled with light and shade. The door on this wall was usually closed and on it, out of the shifting shadows and light, would appear: The Man on the Door. He was older than my father. He sat on a high backed chair, sideways to me. I could not see his features or his clothes. He was the Shadow Man who sits and sits.*

*I can still recall this strange presence as if he is right here: He knows of me and of whom I know; we share this. Still, he never turns his face to me; he is simply there, always in profile, light streaming on the door and wall around him. And although I am not at all frightened, I am awed by this person who appears only to me, with whom I talk without talking, who never looks but sees me. I cannot exactly call him a friend, but he is as natural and as inevitable as the green crown of maple leaves rustling at the edge of our neighbor's yard, as real as the pop bottles I find in the tall grass on the way to school, or the pebbles I cast at telephone poles.*

*Mother and father continue talking. I hardly hear them, absorbed as I am in the secret manifestation of the Shadow Man. Outside, a loud car passes and the sound fades away towards the next block. The shadows cast by the glasses on the table shorten and change shape. The Man on the Door flickers, momentarily fades, returns, flickers once more, and then slides away, dissolves. And with his disappearance, my family returns. I can hear my parents' conversation and my eyes return from the yellow wall to the yellow egg yolks on my plate. I finish my breakfast.*

Not only are these stories fascinating, they also show many pedagogical themes about the difficulties of learning to keep and share secrets. And they show the subtleties and difficulties that children experience in learning to keep and share secrets. For example, children may become acutely aware that they can hide their thoughts from their parents and thus that they can make themselves invisible, and yet, ambivalently, they simultaneously may believe that their mother or father can look right through them.

The etymology of the term "secret", *secretus*, means to separate, to set apart. Gradually, children experience a sense of separation from their parents, their family, and significant

## EN BREF

Plusieurs études fondées sur les méthodes de recherche phénoménologiques ont examiné la manière dont les êtres humains perçoivent leur monde. En particulier, les études sur les secrets d'enfance indiquent des nuances et des difficultés dans la façon dont l'enfant apprend à garder et à partager les secrets. En outre, la recherche sur le sentiment de soi montre que le phénomène complexe de reconnaissance touche tous les aspects de l'enseignement, de l'apprentissage et de la croissance.

others. Clearly a secret is not so much a thing that we keep hidden inside but rather a relational experience. Even when children hide or stash something in a secret spot, what they are really hiding is their "self" from others.

There are many aspects to this research that show quite compellingly that secrets are not only inevitable dimensions of children's lives, they are also healthy and critical for the child's development of self-identity, autonomy, independence, and maturity. And in our complex world, learning to deal with secrets is crucial for the ability to develop intimacy and maintain social relations with others.

The fundamental notion of self-identity is also at stake in another SSHRC funded project on the experience of recognition in children. Again, strangely, this topic has been virtually unexplored by education or social science scholars. And yet, the complex phenomenon of recognition is involved in all aspects of teaching, learning and children's growth. Recognition not only means that we want to be seen or praised for what we are or could be. Children also learn and grow by recognizing themselves in poems, stories, subject interests, in the personalities and gestures of their teachers, and so on.

Name- and face-remembering is probably one of the simplest aspects of recognition. All teachers know the importance of being able to call students by their names. Not only does naming literally bring that person into being and confirm his or her existence, the act of addressing a child by name also has the effect of singling out, selecting, and recognizing the uniqueness of the child.

The ordinary experience of forgetting someone's name shows how memory is inextricably tied to selfhood. When I meet someone who calls me by my name, but who I do not recognize, or whose name I have forgotten, my very sense of presence, of being in this situation, is disturbed. Not only is the other person's selfhood at stake in my forgetting who this person is, it is as if my own sense of self is also confounded. I have difficulty placing this person in my life history, and thereby, my own presencing of the past and future is disturbed.

In many accounts of forgetting someone's name, it appears that this situation is experienced as relational disorientation. While talking with the person and trying to remember his or her name, one may experience something like an inside/outside split in one's sense of self. It seems as if one's world has narrowed down to this very moment where one tries inwardly to deal with forgetfulness while one tries outwardly to maintain a normal relation and demeanor. A prevailing theme in these experiential accounts is that one's sense of self seems easily

compromised in situations when one does not remember someone's name, or when the other person obviously does not remember ours.

Sometimes people get so frustrated that they simply admit they have forgotten the person's name. But honesty can backfire as well. Let me share with you a short sample of a woman who has forgotten the name of someone who visits her at her workplace:

*"Hey, Diane! Good to see you! How have you been?" he greeted me with a smile.*

*Oh God, not another one! I felt I was on a trip to never-never-land. This time, I attempted to bluff my way through small talk with the young stranger. As we walked along together, he asked me how long I had worked for this firm. I hesitated, then replied I had been with them for about three years. The lad nodded approvingly, and said he was there to interview for a job as messenger or courier. Could I help him?*

*I threw in the towel, and smiled resignedly at him.*

*"Please forgive me. I know that I know you, but it is just one of those days! I simply can't bring your name to mind. I will be happy to put in a word for you, if you could write down your name and other relevant details."*

*"I don't get it," he muttered.*

*"Your name?" I did not waver.*

*"Diane, I'm your cousin, Rich," he said slowly.*

*Tears began to surface in my eyes, and I embraced my cousin, whispering, "I was just trying to keep anyone from overhearing that one of my relatives is applying. Of course, I'll put in a good recommendation with the personnel department. Absolutely!"*

In presentations I do for health science audiences I often read several of such stories. The accounts that people have provided me of name and face forgetting are often quite recognizable. Funny and hilarious even. And also revealing of puzzling aspects of everyday experiences. But when I tell them that the above story is told by Diane McGowin in her diary account of

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**NAME- AND FACE-REMEMBERING IS PROBABLY ONE OF THE SIMPLEST ASPECTS OF RECOGNITION. ALL TEACHERS KNOW THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ABLE TO CALL STUDENTS BY THEIR NAMES.**

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her Alzheimer's illness, people no longer laugh. Naming and name-and-face-forgetting was a subproject of my research into the pedagogy of recognition. But this name-forgetting also led to an inquiry into the question of how we might be able to understand the experience of Alzheimer's dementia.

Philosophically the "self" tends to be regarded as a state of consciousness where past and future are constantly actualized in the projects and involvements wherein we are engaged. Without

things to recall or to do, would we even experience a sense of self? Memory is dependent on these projects that we live from moment to moment. Only when "I am doing something" like preparing a meal, can I have the experience of forgetfulness, because now I need to recall from memory where I placed the can-opener.

If our sense of self, self-identity, or selfhood is experienced in the things we do and in the projects in which we are engaged, then what would selfhood "be" if we no longer had any projects? More concretely, how (or to what extent) does a person suffering from pathological memory loss experience an awareness of self? A relative of mine who suffers from Alzheimer's dementia still recognizes me (and my name) when he sees me, but he has completely forgotten the names of many other people whom he used to know very well. But now he also forgets what he did just a few minutes ago. So what has happened to his "self"? And is the "self" of the Alzheimer's person, who no longer recognizes friends and family members, a dissolved self? An eroded self? Is the Alzheimer's sense of self narrowed to the extent that projects still exist?

However important these questions seem, there is apparently little research done on them. In a new book, *Writing in the Dark*, published earlier this year, a series of graduate research papers are presented and discussed. They are applications of the methodology of phenomenology and they have resulted in many dissertation studies. Some of these topics are:

- A Child's Experience of Loneliness
- The "How Are You?" in the Nurse-Patient Relation
- Phenomenology of Classroom Conversation
- The Experience of Medical Diagnosis in the Mentally Ill
- Keeping in Touch by E-mail
- Living with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- The Role of the Body in Online Learning

The book title, *Writing in the Dark*, is only partially facetious. From a phenomenological point of view, the qualitative researcher is inevitably also an author. Writing is not just reporting the research findings. Writing is the very act of reflective inquiry and of discovery. To research is to write, and the insights achieved depend in part on the right words and phrases, on styles and traditions, on metaphor and figures of speech, on argument and poetic image, as well as on analysis and interpretation.

**Max van Manen** is a professor of Education at the University of Alberta. His books include *The Tone of Teaching and The Tact of Teaching*, exploring the practical knowledge teachers use and the significance of the pedagogical relation between teacher and students. In *Researching Lived Experience* he has developed a phenomenological human science methodology for qualitative researchers in education and other professional disciplines. The book *Childhood's Secrets: Intimacy, Privacy and the Self Reconsidered*, is written in collaboration with Bas Levering, a Dutch colleague. And in *Writing in the Dark* he offers a collection of applied qualitative research studies. He is the recipient of many research awards, and his books have been translated into many languages.

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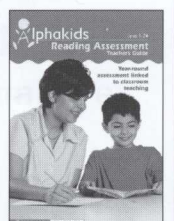
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