


Pedagogy here on the ground: Using lived experience to research and understand our lives with children

Andrew Madjar 

Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

In education, it is common to hear that we need to close the gap between research and practice. Less common is a consideration of what it means to close this gap. A lot of policy, research and professional learning assumes that research should inform teacher practice by providing evidence about ‘what works’ for students’ learning. However, there are other important ways that we can understand the relationship between research and practice. In this paper, I discuss one possibility for understanding this relationship by looking at the research of Max van Manen and his work in phenomenological pedagogy. Phenomenology provides a way for teachers to reflect on their practice by prioritising the meaning and significance of lived experience. As I describe, phenomenology is a valuable way for research to inform practice; but its value lies not in being able to tell us ‘what works’, but in its power to do something with us.

KEYWORDS

Hermeneutic phenomenology; phenomenological pedagogy; phenomenology of practice; Max van Manen; lived experience

Introduction

With the re-launch of *ACCESS*, the journal has a renewed focus on making educational research accessible to a wide audience, especially to practitioners and teachers who work at the coalface in schools. As *ACCESS* editor, Nina Hood (2020), describes in her editorial, *ACCESS* aims to help bridge the divide between research and practice.

This is an important pursuit, and one that is not unique to *ACCESS*. As long as education has been an academic discipline we have reflected on how to bring research and practice closer together (Biesta, 2007a; Korthagen, 2007). I agree that an important role of educational research is to produce work that is of value to practice and makes a difference in the lives of teachers and students. However, I am concerned with the narrow way that the relationship between research and practice is often conceived. The source of my concern arises from two overlapping trends in education.

First, we tend to give primacy to studies that model their approach on the natural sciences, especially psychology (Lagemann, 1989; 2000). It is easy to appreciate why the methods of the natural sciences hold an allure for education. In the last century, science has proven to be a powerful

tool to both understand and harness the natural world. Furthermore, our responses to the current crises of climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrate the importance of basing our decisions on good science, and conversely, the dangers we face when we choose to ignore science. Therefore, it makes sense that we would want to use the methods of science to establish an empirically validated basis from which we can understand and improve education. However, before we ask what insight science can offer education, the more fundamental question is - *what is important about Education?* It is essential to ask this question before considering what science can offer educational research because the natural sciences are suited to asking certain types of questions, exploring them in determined ways, and giving specific types of answers. So, while scientific studies can provide some insight to education, if we favour these studies we are in danger of reducing educational issues to terms that fit within the agenda of science. Reducing educational research to an applied science means that what is worth knowing in education becomes determined by what can be established through specific methods. This limits not only how we conduct educational research, but also the types of questions we can ask. Consequently, the expertise that educational research can provide teachers is subsumed within narrow methods of inquiry. Therefore, if science is uncritically given authority in educational practice, there is a danger that we let science dictate our vision of education. But as many educational researchers have argued, many of the central issues of education and teaching are beyond the scope of the natural sciences (Joldersma, 2016; Smeyers & Depaepe, 2003; 2013; Smeyers and Smith, 2014). Therefore, if we want to bridge the gap between research and practice, educational research needs to address the diverse questions and issues that lie beyond the scope of the natural sciences.

The relationship between research and practice has also been overshadowed by a second, closely related trend – evidence-based practice. Towards the end of the twentieth century, there was a strong push for educational decision-making to be informed by research evidence about practices that are effective (Biesta, 2014; Wiseman, 2010). David Hargreaves - a prominent figure in the rise of evidence-based educational practice - asserts that, “research should provide decisive and conclusive evidence that if teachers do X rather than Y in their professional practice, there will be a significant and enduring improvement in outcome” (1997, p. 413). This perspective has implications for both researchers and practitioners: for researchers, the questions and findings of research projects need to help teachers increase student outcomes; for practitioners, their decision-making needs to be determined by research on ‘what works’ (Davies, 1999). However, this is a very limited way of understanding teacher practice because it only understands the instrumental value that teachers’ actions have. Consequently, the monopoly held by evidence-based practice in education has met serious opposition from some researchers (e.g., Atkinson, 2000; Biesta, 2007b; Blake, et al., 2000; Hammersley, 2007; Sanderson, 2003). Evidence-based practice can only provide a partial way to bridge the gap between research and practice. If research is to more adequately address the gap, research needs to speak to the richness of teacher practice and children’s education beyond mere instrumental value.

So with the journal, *ACCESS*, we have an exciting opportunity - not only to work at closing the gap between research and practice, but also to critically consider what it means to close this gap and imagine the relationship between research and practice in diverse ways. In this paper, I want to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between research and practice that both speaks to the practical demands of teaching, while also providing an alternative approach to the ones offered by the natural sciences and evidence-based practice.

I will do so by looking at the work of Max van Manen. Van Manen is a leading figure in an area called phenomenological pedagogy. As the name suggests, this field has its antecedents in two areas: phenomenology and pedagogy. First, phenomenology is an approach to philosophising that takes as its starting point how we experience things (Husserl, 2012; Moran, 2000). This does not mean that phenomenology involves retreating into our heads. Rather, an important thread of phenomenology is that we find ourselves *in the world* (Heidegger 1962; Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). But whereas the natural sciences and evidence-based practice see the world through

the lenses of measurement, experiment and theory, phenomenology is interested in the *lifeworld* (Husserl, 1970). This is the world where we go about our everyday life, involved in projects and interacting with one another.

Second, phenomenological pedagogy is rooted in the study of pedagogy. However, in contrast to an understanding of 'pedagogy as method' common in the English-speaking world (Ponte & Ax, 2009), phenomenological pedagogy draws from the continental tradition of 'human science pedagogy'. Here, pedagogy is about understanding the meaning of the human relation between the older generation and the younger generation (Friesen, 2020).

In the mid-twentieth century, many European educational scholars were inspired to apply some of the insights of phenomenology to their work in human science pedagogy (Brinkmann, 2016; Levering & van Manen, 2002; Saevi, 2017; van Manen, 1996; van Manen & Adams, 2014). Towards the end of the twentieth century, van Manen introduced this field to the English-speaking world (Friesen, 2017). In short, phenomenological pedagogy is interested in how pedagogy is lived. It studies concrete, real-world pedagogical situations and draws meaning from within these experiences (van Manen & Adams, 2014). This approach gives priority to lived experience over theoretical understanding. In this paper, I consider how this approach informs how we can understand the relationship between research and practice. But first, I will contextualise the importance of van Manen's research in my own journey as a teacher and researcher.

Worms, ladders and rocketships

Working in New Zealand schools, I have always been impressed at the effort so many teachers put into creating classroom environments that are fun, colourful and vibrant. There is one particular kind of display that always grabs my attention. It takes different forms in different classrooms - sometimes a giant worm, other times a ladder, or maybe a rocketship. These displays are brightly coloured, friendly and inviting, drawing you in. When you come in close, you realise that they are displays of student assessment data. You can see that Jeremy is reading at Level 14, so he is up high on the ladder. But Caleb is reading at Level 2, so he is all the way down at the bottom of the ladder, underneath the rest of his class.

Working as a teacher, there has always been an expectation put on me to have these types of displays in my own classroom. But they made me feel uncomfortable and uneasy. One day, I was attending a lecture by a leading professor and they brought up these displays as examples of good teacher practice. So I thought, this was my opportunity to raise my issues with the person who literally wrote the book about the practice. So I did. And the professor gave a very erudite response. Looking back, what I now find interesting is the way that I framed my concern. I argued that educational psychology shows that students are more motivated when they understand their abilities in relation to the learning content, not when they compare how they are achieving in relation to the other students in the class. So, I argued, do worms, ladders and rocketships promote peer-based comparisons that decrease student motivation and adversely impact student outcomes? In my argument, there are a few interesting assumptions. First, that the issue needs to be understood scientifically - namely, through the language of psychology. Second, that teachers are 'instructional technicians' - they are meant to use this technique because of its impact on student achievement. So third, if I wanted to critique this practice, I needed to present my thinking in terms of its effectiveness.

But in so doing, I was not presenting my real objection. It was not the issue of psychological motivation, or of technical efficacy that was creating a disquiet inside me. It was about the relationships that I had with the children in my class. My discomfort emerged when being faced with the child who hated being in the bottom reading group, who tried so hard to get better, and who would look at me with disappointment when their name remained stuck below the other children.

However, I did not feel that I could express my concern in these terms. I did not have an academically valid language that I could use to articulate the real issue I had with worms, ladders and rocketships.

Later on in my academic journey, I did find such a language through the writings of Max van Manen and his research in the area of phenomenological pedagogy. Van Manen (2014, p. 26) defines phenomenology as, "...a method of abstemious reflection on the basic structures of the lived experience of human existence". In this paper, I want to unpack what this means in relation to pedagogy and how it can help us to think about the possible ways that educational research can be relevant to teachers' everyday practice.

Phenomenology is a reflection on lived experience

The central focus of phenomenology is lived experience (see van Manen, 1990; 2014). Lived experience is the moment of the now. Right now you are seeing these words, either on a screen or on a piece of paper, and are engaging with the meaning of the writing. The now is not something that we can escape from. If we exist, then we find ourselves living in the now. But despite being so essential and basic to our lives, the now also proves to be elusive. If we try and capture the now we find that it has gone. We have already moved on to another moment. What phenomenology tries to do is retrieve this experience of the now by finding ways of describing our lived experiences.

Phenomenology is specifically interested in the *lived* dimensions of our experience. It is more than describing what happened to us and what we have observed. Rather, phenomenology is about grasping what it is like to live through an experience. Phenomenology tries to capture pedagogical practice in this *lived-throughness* - it sees teachers and children as *living* alongside one another in schools. The basic phenomenological question is: 'what is this experience like?' (van Manen, 2017, p. 811). Phenomenology looks at pedagogical situations and asks: *What is this experience like for the teacher?*; and, *What is this experience like for the child?*

Furthermore, our lived experience is *meaningful*. We inhabit a world of meaning. Meaning is everywhere on the surface of things. When we hear the sound of a car speeding down the road, we do not experience it as pure auditory data. Rather it has meaning - we experience it as a car. Likewise, when we see a child laughing or crying, the experience contains emotional and relational meaning. However, since this meaning is right under our noses, we often do not stop to notice it. Consequently, we are prone to a forgetfulness. The role of phenomenology is about reminding ourselves of lived meaning by making the implicit explicit. Phenomenology is about pointing out the meaning in the world - letting things show themselves, as themselves (Heidegger, 1962).

In this way, phenomenology provides a critique of scientism (Critchley, 2001). Scientism is the belief that the scientific method is the only valid way that we can have access to knowledge about ourselves and our world. Only science can explain how everything exists. The allure of scientism is obvious. Through science and technology, we have made astounding progress in the ways we explain and control the natural world. We look at the success of the natural sciences, and it becomes tempting to try and translate that success to how we understand the human and social world, including education. So, in education, we can come to believe that our answers will come from pursuing rigorous scientific inquiry. If we can just know the laws and processes that govern how our brain works and how we learn then we can develop the right techniques and solve all our problems.

Phenomenology, however, brings us back down to earth. Understanding the human world is about seeing the meaning that arises in the midst of life. It requires an insider's perspective. Science, on the other hand, positions us as outsiders, observing the world from a distance. But detaching ourselves from the world puts us out of touch. Only when things are appreciated in the thick of our existence can we understand what they mean. Our first access to the world is through experience. Pedagogy, for example, is first encountered by us as the lived relationships that we have with children. Before life in the classroom becomes an object of our scientific investigation, it is the world that we find ourselves in. Pedagogy begins in lived experience.

Scientific and evidence-based research is attractive because it claims to provide an objective basis for practice. Science promises that we can establish the 'truth' of educational reality and derive authoritative rules of action independently to individuals who are fallible and often hold unfounded opinions (Ramaekers, 2014). But perhaps what is true in education as a *human* science is not about an objective reality, but about human experience. In relation to pedagogy, a question I would like us to consider is: Do objective, impartial, methods establish what is true in pedagogy? Or, does speaking about pedagogy require a language that is sensitive to lived meaning?

The limitation of educational theory

Phenomenology is a method of abstemious reflection (van Manen, 2014, p. 26). Abstemious is related to the term abstain - a holding back. So if, for example, we abstain from drinking alcohol, this involves restraining ourselves - we resist the temptation to have a drink. In the case of phenomenology, abstemious reflection means that we restrain ourselves from assuming that we already understand something. We resist the temptation of imposing our beliefs onto the things in the world. For phenomenology, our genuine understanding of things is hindered, not because we know too little, but rather, that we know too much. Instead of letting the things of the world speak themselves, we are prone to speak for them.

We are particularly susceptible to this in educational research. We can become tempted by the *theoretical attitude* (van Manen, 1990, p. 182). The theoretical attitude is about translating the complexity of the world into neat categories, moulding the world into a form that can easily be comprehended, measured and controlled. However, the world does not present to us neat categories and ready-made concepts. Conceptual taxonomies and theoretical frameworks are not things already in the world, laying dormant, waiting for us discover and dig them up like ancient fossils. Instead, life is messy and imprecise. The life of schools is made up of dynamic relationships and unique situations. Therefore, any theoretical or conceptual description of pedagogy is going to involve a simplification and an abstraction. As such, these descriptions risk creating a distance from the very reality that we wish to describe (van Manen, 1982).

Theory does have the power to bring to light the meaning of our practices that are otherwise hidden from us. However, when we use theory there is also the potential danger of forgetting that our artificial constructions are only imitations of what is found in the daily life of teachers and children, not the things themselves. We might speak of our interaction with children in terms of data, outcomes, systems and programmes. Our thinking about education becomes about those things, and we are seduced into seeing them as more real than the real. By falling for a theoretical attitude, we forget that education is about the day to day lived relationships that we have with children.

An antidote to the theoretical attitude is the *phenomenological attitude* (van Manen, 2014). The phenomenological attitude is an attempt to get to the pre-theoretical layer of experience. It tries to grasp the meaning that arises in the lived moment of the 'now'. But in order to appreciate this meaning, we need to set aside our assumptions - our theories and our concepts - and attempt to approach the world with a fresh curiosity. The phenomenological attitude is an invitation to openness (van Manen, 2014), a creative "not-knowing" (Kearney, 2011) that gets us out of our regular habits of thought and our familiar acceptance of the world so that we can appreciate things anew. Only then can we let things show themselves as themselves.

Phenomenology in the classroom

Phenomenology can give us the tools to think about the pre-theoretical meaning of the lived experience of education. As an example, let us look at an anecdote taken from the research of Saevi

(2005, p. 168). Here, a young learning-disabled student, Oda, describes a learning moment she has in the classroom:

When my answer is wrong, I know it immediately because Per [the teacher] looks at me with this particular humorous glance and says, after just a little pause: "Yes ...?" Then I understand that he wants me to give the question a second thought. He just leans back comfortably and waits. That's why I like him so much. I feel relaxed and smart with him.

Imagine we were in this classroom observing this situation. On the surface, it's a mundane and trivial moment - a student gives an answer, there is a pause, the student gives another answer. However, Oda recalls this moment as one that stands out for her. She remembers it and chooses to share it because it is significant and meaningful for her. Why?

To answer that, we need to use Oda's description to see the moment as *lived experience*. We need to ask, *What was this experience like for Oda?* As Saevi (2005) describes, in this moment it is the gentle gesture of a teacher that opens up a space in which she can have another attempt. Through the humorous glance, Oda has the trust to enter that space and give another answer. The teacher's look affirms her uniqueness. It is a look that is meant only for her. The glance is also significant in how it does not bring attention to her disability or her mistake. The teacher practices a caring blindness, a caring forgetfulness. It recognises her potential. Oda is seen in the way that she wants and needs to be seen.

Education happens in moments like these. Teaching is a personal and relational practice that involves us encountering unique students in concrete situations. Likewise, when a child learns, they learn from someone while finding themselves in the world in a particular way. However, much of the research that we use to inform teacher practice is unable to capture how teaching and learning is grounded in the lived reality of the classroom.

Instead, we're increasingly basing our understanding of pedagogy in scientific and technical languages. Educational talk is becoming reduced to the vocabulary of learning, measurable outcomes, data-driven decision-making and evidence-based practice. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their practice predominantly as instructional technicians. We are asked to think about helping students in terms of what evidence-based strategies will be effective in producing specific learning outcomes. But technical understandings of teaching are inadequate for grounding our practice.

Returning to the anecdote of Oda, what if we interpreted it from a technical perspective? We could describe it as an example of 'wait time' - a measure of the time between a teacher's question and a student's response. A researcher might analyse this time objectively by measuring the seconds that Oda needed to process the problem, and how the teacher engaged in effective practice by giving Oda sufficient 'think time'. But such an analysis does not uncover the lived meaning that this moment has for Oda. Rather than experiencing time as the objective passing of seconds, this moment involves a lived time. This lived time opens up a space that invites Oda to reconsider and revise her thinking. But what makes this opening inviting is not just the seconds that pass, but the personal, relational and emotional qualities that this time possesses. These are sustained through the lived body of the teacher - a humorous glance and a relaxed leaning back. In simple terms, Oda experiences this situation through a warm and personal relationship. Now imagine if another teacher observed this moment and went back to their classroom and attempted to recreate it. It would not be surprising if these efforts failed. The teacher may try and 'wait' for a certain number of seconds, recreating the objective conditions of the lesson. But they would be unable to easily create the comfortable and uplifting atmosphere that Oda experienced.

We see in Oda's situation that what animates teaching and learning are those ineffable qualities that lie beyond the horizon of technical thought. It is the pre-theoretical and lived meanings that create the conditions for Oda's learning. These conditions cannot be manufactured and reproduced

through technique because they fundamentally involve our whole being. Pedagogy is not a technical practice - it is a human practice.

Phenomenology and practice

Technical understandings of pedagogy cannot ground our practice because they are only capable of seeing the instrumental value of our actions. According to Biesta (2007b, p. 10):

The 'what works' agenda of evidence-based practice is at least insufficient and probably misplaced in the case of education, because judgment in education is not simply about what is possible (a factual judgment) but about what is educationally desirable (a value judgment).

Evidence-based practice asks about the effectiveness of our actions: 'How well does a particular action achieve a predetermined outcome?'. The question of 'what do we do?' is answered by finding out 'what works?'. However, technical, evidence-based models of education are unable to consider the appropriateness and desirability of our actions. But living with children also requires reflecting on whether certain actions are appropriate for children, irrespective of their efficacy. However, such a reflection is not possible if we think about our practice in exclusively technical terms.

In order to know what action is appropriate, we cannot rely on rules. Rules deal in generalities. But teaching involves finding ourselves in singular and dynamic situations with children who act unpredictably and uniquely. Thus, teachers need to be sensitive to the lived meanings of these situations so that they can act in thoughtful ways. Van Manen calls this ability *pedagogical tact* (van Manen, 1991a; 1991b; 1995; 2008). To act with pedagogical tact means that a teacher is orientated to the ways that a child is experiencing the moment. The teacher can discern the significance that the situation has for a student, and then acts in a way that responds to the specific contingent qualities of the situation. Acting with tact goes beyond knowing the right thing to say and do. Good teachers know *how* to speak and act. Every teaching moment involves small discernments about the right gesture, the right body language, the right tone of voice. But to call them 'small' does not mean that they are insignificant. They all contribute to what is appropriate and inappropriate for a child. From the perspective of a child, the small qualities of a situation can be the most salient features of their lived experience. As Oda described, a leaning back, a pause and a smile can be the features that make the difference. Good practice cannot be adequately captured through method or procedure. Instead, appropriate action requires a sensitivity to lived meaning and an ability to respond to situations with our personal and embodied presence.

If we accept this, then it does provide a challenge to the relationship between educational research and teacher practice. One of the common demands placed on educational scholarship is to close the gap between research and practice. Research is deemed valuable if it is able to provide evidence-based strategies and methods that can be used by teachers in the classroom. But such research can only provide guidance on the basis of generalisations that are abstracted from the day to day lives of teachers. Rules and methods will always be of limited use since they are unable to capture the messy, unpredictable and contingent qualities of life in the classroom. Does this limit the possibility of closing the gap between research and practice?

Phenomenological pedagogy provides an alternative way that we can understand the closing of this gap. Phenomenological research is a way to reflect on teacher practice. However, its value lies not in being able to tell us what to do, but rather in its power to do something *with us* (van Manen, 2007). By reflecting on the lived experiences of teachers and children, we can orientate ourselves to the meaningful ways that teachers and children find themselves in the classroom. By reflecting on lived experience descriptions, we can develop our ability to notice meaning that might otherwise be obscured from us. Furthermore, we can foster our imagination about the lived significance that situations might have for children.

There have been various phenomenological studies that deal with various features of school life, such as - the impact of technology and the internet on our relationships with students (Adams, 2006, 2012; Friesen, 2011); education outside of the classroom (Foran, 2005); students' experiences of movement (Smith, 2007); and school failure (Henriksson, 2008). The findings of these studies are valuable for teachers - but not because they provide a conceptual explanation of the processes involved in the phenomena, nor, because they provide rules for good practice. Instead, these studies help elucidate lived meaning. By engaging with these studies, teachers are directed towards the lived meanings that constitute their own experience and the experiences of their students. The expertise of the researcher involves demonstrating their sensitivity to lived meaning and their ability to interpret the significance of this meaning. What the researcher offers teachers is not conceptual, but perceptual. Through engaging with phenomenological research, the teacher cultivates their ability to see what an experience is like.

By engaging with this research, we can become more attuned to both the positive and the harmful ways that our own lives intersect with the lives of children. But this ability to notice lived meaning is not important for its own sake. Rather, we need to be sensitive to meaning because it helps us to act with tact. Interpreting the meaning of pedagogical experiences includes recognising how these moments are practical (Langeveld, 1983). In our encounters with children, we find that we are responsible to do what is good and right for the child (Saevi & Eilifsen, 2008). We need to know when to act and when to hold back, to sense what should be said and what should be left unsaid. In this sense, phenomenological pedagogy is concerned with our actions. But whereas technical approaches to educational research encourage us to apply actions from research to practice, a phenomenological approach is more about transposing a sensitivity for lived meaning into the lived moments that we share with children. In this way, phenomenology can help close the gap between research and practice, not by giving us rules for action, but by encouraging us to be more thoughtful and sensitive in how we navigate the life of teaching.

This does not mean that techniques and methods are not important for teaching practice. They can help us think about new and different ways of doing things, and can provide alternatives to our regular practices that we mistakenly consider to be effective. However, a technical understanding of teaching will never be able to capture its significance as a human practice. The photographer Elliot Erwit is quoted as saying, "All the technique in the world doesn't compensate for the inability to notice". Similarly in teaching, we might be well versed in all the latest techniques and have rehearsed all the lines that effective teachers say. But if we do not embody pedagogical tact in our interactions with children, then our technical proficiency will not make us a good teacher.

Tact and technical proficiency are not mutually exclusive. Good teachers use evidence-based practices, but when they do so they are able to maintain a thoughtfulness in their actions. Good teachers are like a great Jazz musician improvising a melody (van Manen, 2015, p. 89). Their playing is enlivened with spontaneity, while at the same time informed by the structures of harmony and rhythm. The music is free, but not chaotic. The musician exhibits technique, but they are not bound by it. They are able to create an artistic expression of sound that arises through a creative and dynamic interplay between themselves, the other members of the band, and the moment. Likewise, great teachers are able to take teaching techniques and weave them through the life of classrooms in ways that are thoughtful, sensitive and responsive.

But if educational research only provides a toolbox of methods and techniques, then it will have little relevance to the complex and dynamic experiences of teaching. Similarly, if research understands pedagogy in exclusively scientific terms, then it loses touch with the lived reality of pedagogy. If research is to be relevant to practice, then it needs to find ways to reflect on the way that pedagogical phenomena first appear in the lived experience of teaching. The languages of science and psychology, while useful, are unable to do this. Consequently, they should not be relied on to provide a ground and foundation for our pedagogical reflection. According to the philosopher, Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. lxxii):

I am not the result or the intertwining of multiple casualties that determine my body or my “psyche”; I cannot think of myself as a part of the world, like the simple object of biology, psychology, and sociology; I cannot enclose myself within the universe of science. Everything that I know about the world, even through science, I know from a perspective that is my own or from an experience of the world without which scientific symbols would be meaningless. The entire universe of science is constructed upon the lived world, and if we wish to think science rigorously, to appreciate precisely its sense and its scope, we must first awaken that experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression.

Similarly, we cannot think about teaching as merely measurable variables and outcomes. Everything that we study in education would be meaningless when understood apart from how we find ourselves in the classroom with children. When educational research talks about practice in terms of the science of learning, and about the effectiveness of teaching, this will always be a second-order expression of pedagogy. Educational research also needs to have a role in awakening us to the more fundamental experience of teaching.

To this purpose, I believe that phenomenological pedagogy should play an essential role in bridging the gap between research and practice. It gives researchers and teachers a way of reflecting on teacher practice in a way that is grounded in the lived meanings that make education possible as a human activity. Furthermore, for phenomenology, the importance of lived experience is not just that it provides a different way of looking at things. Rather, lived experience is seen as our first and most fundamental access to the world. According to van Manen (1990, p. 173), phenomenological pedagogy “bids to recover reflectively the grounds which, in a deep sense, provide for the possibility of our pedagogic concerns with children”. Phenomenological pedagogy is not just an alternative way to think about our practice as teachers, nor just one possible methodology among others. Instead, phenomenological pedagogy is about reminding ourselves how children are already a concern in our lives, prior to adopting any theoretical or methodological perspective.

Returning back to the issue of worms, ladders and rocketships - I struggled to articulate my concerns because I did not have the appropriate language available. My issues with the practice emerged from my lived experience, trying to deal with the ways that I found myself personally and ethically entangled in the lives of the children in my class. Yet when it came to talking about these issues, there was a disconnect between the relational meanings of my practice with the technical, rational and instrumental language readily used in educational research. This language felt detached from the lived significance of my practice.

My own experience is a small example of a wider issue. The gap between research and practice arises because the language often utilised in research does not speak to the lived experience of teaching. This is not merely an issue of needing to translate research findings in ways that is digestible by teachers (i.e., this problem wouldn't be solved by simply replacing academic jargon with everyday language). Nor is this an issue of needing to distil research into clear instructions that can be easily applied by teachers. Rather, the problem with the language of educational research is that it borrows from other academic disciplines, such as psychology, rather than trying to think about, first, what makes education distinctive (Biesta, 2011), and second, how it is grounded in the lived relationships between teachers and students. Therefore, to close the research-practice gap, we not only need to improve how research communicates with practice, but reconsider the underlying logic of the language that we use to cross the divide. Van Manen (2015, p. 88) asks:

What would it mean if teachers were regarded not as instructional technicians but as ethical persons, as moral agents with their own professional language? A professionally acknowledged pedagogical language would allow educators to think of their daily practice as ethically grounded and in service of the children and young people as unique and growing persons.

Phenomenology gives us the opportunity to develop this language. It makes it possible for us to reflect on what it means to be a teacher in a way that is rooted in the ways that we, as adults, find

ourselves living alongside children. Through phenomenology, researchers and teachers can develop a common language that speaks about the lived meaning of teaching here on the ground.

Notes on Contributor

Andrew Madjar has a background as a primary school teacher in New Zealand. He is currently a PhD candidate at the [University of Auckland](#). He is on the [PESA Executive Committee](#) and is Editorial Administrator for [ACCESS: Contemporary Issues in Education](#). His research interest is in using hermeneutic and phenomenological methodologies to elucidate the lived significance and lived meaning of classroom life. His current research explores moral uncertainty in the lives of teachers.

ORCID

Andrew Madjar  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5097-3546>

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