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Emphasizing an embodied phenomenological sense of the self and the social in education

Abstract

This paper reviews the theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology-related writings which support claims that the self and the social (the 'I' and the 'We') can plausibly be integrated and nurtured together in education. We begin by analysing contemporary theorising which suggests that reviewing foundational phenomenologists, particularly Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, can lead to greater clarity in understanding and appreciating the intersubjective sense of the self and the social. This perspective is aided by reviewing the reciprocal connections which take place during human action, situational structuring, and reality construction. Building on this review we consider some of the ontological possibilities for a self and social phenomenology to become more central to educational aims. In doing so, we raise rather than unpack in exhaustive detail associated methodological matters in light of their educational implications. If successfully enacted, we perceive considerable benefits for students in being able to directly attend to the properties of their experiences, especially in contexts where new habits are formed and where opportunities arise for self and shared experiences to be reviewed and reflected on by all involved.

Keywords: phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, embodiment, intersubjectivity, education

Introduction

There has been a welcome increase in writings on education of late that focus on how engaging with phenomenology can help reach beyond potentially narrow and rather restrictive approaches to learning and assessment, and which offer instead a broader and more encouraging educational perspective that is shaped more noticeably by subjective experiences (Rocha, 2015; Shepperd, 2016; Stolz 2020; Thorburn & Stolz, 2020). References endorsing such a perspective often highlight the contribution of Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962; 1964/1968) and Husserl (1952/1989). For example, Moran (2016) reminds us how Merleau-Ponty was particularly astute in piecing together the various threads in Husserl's later writings on intersubjectivity, especially in relation to empathy and humans' continuous engagement with their social and cultural life. For both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, human subjectivity was embodied and interwoven, as self-experience dovetails with a common identification that surrounds our experiences. Moreover, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty were preoccupied 'with how the sense of the one, common, shared

always outgoing world itself emerges from living, finite, intersubjective intentionalities cooperating together' (Moran, 2016, p. 110). On this basis, humans are intrinsically social beings operating within identifiable historical, social and cultural contexts and shared life-worlds (Szanto & Moran, 2016).

These lines of thinking suggest that further engagement with foundational and contemporary writers on phenomenology could benefit education, especially as there has been insufficient engagement with one vital aspect of phenomenology to date: namely, how can a phenomenology of the self, merge with a phenomenology of the shared and social; the 'I' and the 'We'. This is a crucial matter for philosophers of education, for as Thorburn and Stolz (2017) note embodied learner-centered approaches are not without their operational difficulties as students' interests become ever more specific and personalized in large classes with tight time schedules. In this environment, nurturing a transfer from a phenomenological interest in the self to something which is more about a 'We' phenomenology and a collective engagement with the shared and social is a complex matter for educators to reflect upon and fully engage with.

Our purpose in the paper therefore is to focus attention on the conceptual and educational implications of an enhanced emphasis on transcendental phenomenological possibilities. Guided by this commitment to reconsidering how students can have enhanced opportunities in their everyday schooling for self and shared reflections on their experiences, can we believe contribute towards the beginning of a new research agenda in an emerging area of phenomenological importance in education.¹ Framed by these intentions, we proceed by reviewing conceptual and ontological matters concerned with the self and the social in phenomenology. Thereafter, we

discuss notions of intersubjectivity in relation to human action, situational structuring and construction of reality. We then consider via a greater methodological focus some of the initial possibilities for a self and social phenomenology to become more central educational aims.

Developing a sense of the shared and social in phenomenology

A recent focus in phenomenological sociology has been trying to understand the intersubjective human mind relative to methodological individualism. Making progress on this matter involves reviewing theories of action which discuss the ‘ontological nature of social groups and their specific *collective intentionality* (original emphasis retained)’ (Caminada, 2016, p. 281). These joint intentions are underpinned by reviewing the individual/group distinction in learning from both a social ontology and methodological perspective, and considering in particular whether it is possible to understand the ‘I’ and ‘We’ as two different areas of focus from the same first-person perspective (Caminada, 2016). The conceptual backdrop to addressing ‘I’/‘We’ concerns centres on the view that phenomenology has overly focused up till now on a subject-centered view of the person. In some quarters it is considered that Alfred Schultz as a leading phenomenological sociologist was pivotal in reaching this viewpoint through applying the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl to the study of the social world (Szanto & Moran, 2016). However, as Vendrell Ferran (2016) notes, this widespread belief underrepresents the contribution of Husserl’s ‘interest in the problems of intersubjectivity, of empathy, and of the status of society and community as subjectivities of a higher order’ (p. 219). For Husserl, the general philosophy of the common mind is underpinned by beliefs, actions and sentiments, which once subjected to phenomenological reduction, become capable of highlighting peoples deeper thoughts and intentions. As Husserl (1922/1981, p. 68) notes, the development of phenomenology necessarily

requires to progress from an egocentric matter to a ‘transcendental sociological phenomenology having reference to a manifest multiplicity of conscious subjects communicating with one another.’ The central task therefore in social phenomenology is to explain the reciprocal interactions that take place during human action, situational structuring, and reality construction, in a way which does not view aspects of experience as causal, but rather views the dimensions of experiences as fundamental and very often publically accessible to others (Caminada, 2016).

In this regard, it is worth appreciating that in methodological terms the capturing of the transcendental through phenomenological reduction needs to achieve a perspective which avoids being overly Cartesian or overly solipsistic. Moran (2016) considers that Merleau-Ponty was capable of developing a more integrated ontology as he was particularly alert to the need to recognise a middle ground between the subjectivity of the ‘I’ and the acute objectivity of thinking of humans as objects in the world. What was needed was a form of communicative constitution which emphasizes the extent to which ‘We’ are intertwined and interwoven with each other as part of our intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968). However, the untimely death of Merleau-Ponty has made it difficult for scholars to consider the direction Merleau-Ponty’s thinking might have been taking when reviewing intentional intertwinings and their positioning relative to self-consciousness and the constitution of the other (Moran, 2016). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. xiv) problematically considered at one stage that ‘the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction’. However, as Cerbone (2012) notes, in substance what Merleau-Ponty was highlighting at the time was the importance of being led away from and back to our experiences; thus engaging with both our objective thoughts and our subjective experiences. This approach

enables the recovery of experiences in similar ways to how Husserl's notion of bracketing functions and in so doing excludes 'all of those theoretically orientated assumptions and prejudices about our everyday activity and its underlying structure' (Cerbone, 2012, p. 283). On this basis, the second person phenomenological standpoint becomes interesting relative to social ontology: what are peoples' obligations and what conditions might benefit the development of a shared sense of communicative practice and empathy. How can the first person benefits of freedom and autonomy dovetail with a shared sense of conduct and responsibility (Darwall, 2006). What appears required is some form of shared recognition and empathy, whereby how others respond is closely aligned with how the first person 'I' responds. As Smith (2016), frames it, it is possible to recognise another person's situation and feel as they do in a way that reveals a shared perceptually-based intersubjectivity. This could manifest itself through a shared sense of experiences mattering and of being part of the reason for becoming in tune with others experiences when observing and building consensus views based on observing.

Intersubjectivity: human action; situational structuring and reality construction

In recent years, contemporary philosophers have been reviewing intersubjective connections during *human action*. For example, Koo (2016) highlights how Merleau-Ponty's thinking has much to offer in appreciating how relationships which underpin the meaningfulness of shared and distinctive intersubjective experiences are structured. Merleau-Ponty is credited with taking forward thinking in this area by reconsidering how the 'transcendental ego recognizes its counterpoint in an alter ego' (Dillon, 1997, p. 114). Husserl's conceptual problem was that if the self is all that is known to exist (i.e. solipsism) the problem of understanding anyone else becomes insoluble. And, there can be no resolution of this problem unless it is recognized and

appreciated that the world is primordial and communal and where the living body (*Leib*) should be considered differently to the inert physical body (*Körper*). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty judges that the fusion between the self and the social cannot be achieved by meditative reduction and static analysis: rather what is required is recognition that a viable conception of intersubjectivity needs to have the capacity for both personal privacy and shared empathy within a coherent view of human experience. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, a corporeal schema exists within ‘a context of syncretic sociability, a context defined as prior to any distinction between perspectives or differentiation between what is mine and what is other’ (Dillon, 1997, p. 118).

Moreover, Loidolt (2016) in drawing upon Arendt’s (1998) conception of actualized plurality, highlights how the first person perspective can exist through promoting ‘a new understanding of plurality as something that not simply factually exists, but as something that has to be actualized in certain modes of being together’ (p. 43). Actualizing plurality involves action of the type and form which is evident through speech, judgement and action. This is required in order to achieve authenticity: where the ‘We’ does not melt away the uniqueness of the ‘I’. As Loidolt (2016, p. 52) frames the point, ‘the highest form of a We-community is that which is dedicated to the task of articulating individuality in togetherness, or, at least which is aware of its vital importance for human community.’ This sense of togetherness and authenticity matters as there are many inauthentic versions of ‘we-communities’ where the pursuit of set goals can repress distinctiveness and lead to a stifling sameness. For example, Ryen (2020) highlights that the widespread shift in curriculum planning emphasis from being content-based to competency-based runs the risk of undermining the authenticity of a more democratic focus on enhancing students personal self and shared capacities e.g. personal determination and ability to have

solidarity with others. Instead for Arendt (1998) what characterized genuine plurality was a fusion of action and speech, where speech is a key component for realizing authentic progress and not accomplishment which is distorted by trying to achieve fixed and inflexible goals. In this way, an elucidated phenomenology would outline how human action and speech constitute a plural togetherness that is framed and shaped by a sustained web of relationships and which defines the meaningfulness of our shared and distinctive intersubjective experiences (Loidolt, 2016).

In terms of making progress in framing how intersubjective experiences can be *situationally structured*, Merleau-Ponty uses a number of conceptual devices for making experiences more visible, most notably in his later writings the intertwining differences between subjective experiences and objective existence i.e., between the eye and the mind and the felt and the touched (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1968). More recently, Cath (2019) has investigated similar structural concerns associated with trying to gain knowledge from experiences that have not been directly experienced. Cath (2019) distinguishes between gold standard knowledge of experiences whereby propositions are comprehended in a phenomenal way i.e. when the person has been able to directly attend to the phenomenal properties of their experiences. This is relative to silver standard knowledge of experiences, whereby propositions are comprehended through relevant and similar experiences and bronze standard knowledge of experiences, whereby propositions are comprehended only in some non-phenomenal way. And while such a conceptual overview comes with certain practical caveats e.g. no one would plausibly countenance having experiences to gain knowledge which led to undue upset, pain or disadvantage, Cath's (2019) critique

highlights the benefits of fusing knowledge with the phenomenal properties of first person experiences when viable e.g. when testing and validating ideas as part of truth making.

Moreover, in terms of *reality construction* the account of subjectivity advanced by Merleau-Ponty provides a theoretically sound basis for understanding experiences better and for embodiment to become more central to educational aims. In embodied learning terms, Merleau-Ponty was quite certain that exploring the motility and actions of the body from the self and other perspective can play a key role in our perception and thinking on the holistic nature of the ‘body-subject’ and states of the mind. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. 102) contends that by taking into consideration the body in movement we can ‘see better how it inhabits space because movement is not limited to submitting passively to space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their basic significance which is obscured in the commonplaceness of established situations.’ In this light, movements are learned when the body is incorporated into its ‘world’ and is not a ‘handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 139). As such, bodily activities are different to our relationship with material objects which lack entirely in subjectivity. For as Dillon (1997, pp. 113-114) frames the point, in terms of mutual understanding, ‘I understand the behaviour of your hands as I see them from the outside because my hands are similar to yours and I know them from the inside.’

Furthermore, in terms of understanding and sharing our intersubjective experiences, Merleau-Ponty highlights the reciprocal nature of experiences and of how other people can have sensory perceptions which can be communicated in ways that reveal similar thoughts and emotions. For

there is ‘beneath the conceptual meaning of the words, an existential meaning which is not only rendered by them, but which inhabits them, and is inseparable from them’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 182). Appreciation of this point highlights the indicative possibilities of sensory experiences, where bodily activities can respond to the dynamics of the surrounding perceptual field. As Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. 183) notes, in relation to aesthetic experiences, they can confer ‘an existence in itself, install it in nature as a thing perceived and accessible to all’. On this basis, new meanings can link up with each other as new habits are formed and communicated. Thus, at the foundation of experiences and reflections, we find a being which immediately recognizes themselves as it has both ‘knowledge both of itself and of all things, and which knows its own existence, not by observation and as a given fact, nor by inference from any idea of itself, but through direct contact with that existence’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 371).

Such a view of knowledge and existence is underpinned by Merleau-Ponty’s belief that bodily activities highlight the false dualism of Cartesian mind/body thinking and provide instead a way of conceiving relations which avoid over-privileging abstraction and cognition and under-representing the significance of the body in human experience. This view of conceived relations exists in a context where awareness of others is a perceptual rather than an inferential or behaviour recognition matter (Smith, 2016). Therefore, understanding the sociality benefits of the self and the social in relation to the body/mind dimension is predicated on understanding the phenomenological lines of thinking which inform observing, reviewing and reflecting on self and shared experiences. On this basis, we need to become ‘perceptually aware of others not simply as bodies exhibiting *mere* (original emphasis retained) behaviour, but as persons displaying

psychologically rich behaviour (original emphasis retained)' (Smith, 2016, p. 164). Notable, among these qualities is empathy, and in particular the part empathy can play in appreciating how things are for others i.e. in a sense of being able to feel as others do.

Self and Social phenomenology: educational possibilities

As Zahavi (2012, p. 187) neatly frames matters, one of the major applied challenges 'facing a phenomenological account of intersubjectivity is to find the proper balance between the similarity and difference of self and other.' This is on the basis that an overly objective structure which describes and analyses from a third person perspective is markedly different from an overly subjective first person account of experience which lacks reference to relationships between subjects and which misses out on the expressive unity required where subjectivity and intersubjectivity are mutually interdependent notions. In conceiving of how experiential lives are lived in relation to the world, Dillon (1997) considers that Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity upholds his ontology and the primacy afforded to phenomena. This is on the basis that Merleau-Ponty's holistic ambitions conceive of ways in which 'being' is considered of self and shared importance, and where there is a focus on concrete, embodied and perceptual experiences. Notably, for Merleau-Ponty the body is the object of experience and while we share similarities with other people's bodies in the world, how we come to understand our bodies is different because we never occupy the same space at the same time. In this complex world, humans can adjust or become accustomed to different circumstances e.g. circumstances which provide the possibility of adjusting or becoming accustomed and/or receptive to different intersubjective worlds. Adopting such a perspective enables students to distinguish and understand their experiences of themselves from their experiences of others through combining

different types of phenomenological practice within different world views and schools of thought.

However, as highlighted earlier, one criticism of phenomenology is that in methodological terms concepts such as phenomenological reduction and bracketing remain somewhat opaque, even if they are capable of aiding reflection (Cerbone, 2012). Therefore to understand experiences better it is beneficial to engage with phenomenological methods which are capable of generating a shared understandings of basic truths from which each person can reflect on their experiences of themselves and others. In this light, we highlight later in the paper how promising critical-constructive developments of hermeneutic understandings of knowledge might be enhanced in mainstream educational contexts through reappraising the relationship between teachers and students (Ryen, 2020). Prior to this we outline why the problematic relationship between phenomenology and educational methodology thus far has rather hindered than helped achieve the multiple pedagogical and learning gains possible.

Phenomenology and educational methodology: some current concerns

Van Manen's (1990) conceptualizing has as Vagle (2014) notes, been particularly influential methodologically in attempting to describe experiences in the world. The approach (2001) van Manen recommends is characterized by investigating experiences as we live them rather than how we conceptualize them e.g., by describing phenomena through writing and reflecting on the themes which characterize phenomenon. Despite the popularity of this approach as a methodology, Vagle (2014, p. 57) is also aware of its limitations by noting that 'if your drawn to structure, steps and frames ... using this approach might be challenging.' As structure and

constructing reality are considered important matters when reviewing intersubjective connections during human action, we share Vagle's (2014) concerns, especially when there are anxieties that students' accounts of their experiences can become overly descriptive relative to experiences which engage with subject content matter in richer and more detailed ways.

When you take into consideration the contestable nature of phenomenological enquiry in the research literature (see for example, van Manen, 2017; Smith, 2018), it makes sense to be cautious of the ways it could be used in educational research. Indeed, the recent debate between van Manen (2017) and Smith (2018) highlights how phenomenology is part of an ongoing debate between its practitioners that remains unresolved. This highlights the need for greater discernment and scrutiny, particularly when it comes to educational research. Due to the influence of van Manen (1990, 2002, 2014, 2016) in the phenomenology-as-qualitative research literature – as well as in the educational research literature – we think it is crucial that we outline some philosophical anomalies found in his work that are deeply problematic and worth sharing. In van Manen's (1990) most cited book, *Researching Lived Experiences*, he draws from both descriptive and interpretative threads from the phenomenological tradition as a means to investigate human experience and how we make sense or meaning from it. Unfortunately, a serious criticism of van Manen's approach concerns a noticeable lack of analytical rigour and a level of ambiguity with certain concepts of importance, which in turn renders much of his work of limited value to those who want to use phenomenology in their research projects. Take for instance van Manen's reference to the notion of "mystery" in his explanation of the nature of data (i.e. "thing given"), where lived experience becomes both the source and object of phenomenological research. In order to highlight how phenomenological research can be

engaged with, van Manen (1990, p. 50) draws from the lived experience of parenting (i.e. “phenomenology of parenting”) to highlight how through parenting we come to know the “mystery” of parenting, and thereby one of the central aims of phenomenology is to “... bring the mystery more fully into our presence ...” so it becomes the object of the research. In developing his ideas further, van Manen turns to the concept of “theme” or “themes” which can be analysed to unlock meaning through phenomenological description and interpretation. Rather than clarify what he means by phenomenological themes, a number of contradictory statements seem to muddy the waters considerably. Take for instance the following statements from van Manen (1990) on phenomenological themes: “No thematic formulation can completely unlock the deep meaning, the full mystery, the enigmatic aspects of the experiential meaning ...” (p. 88), and “... no conceptual formulation or single statement can possibly capture the full mystery ... (p. 92). Here, we have an example of van Manen claiming that the researcher can come to “know” the object or phenomenon being studied through experience, but yet at the same he remains rather vague and inconsistent, or contradictory about key phenomenological ideas and concepts employed in conceptualising it. Without a doubt, this stems from the fact that van Manen has no method or does not employ a method in a consistent way when it comes to phenomenological research. In fact, van Manen (1990, pp. 29-30) states that:

... there is not really a “method” understood as a set of investigative procedures that one can master relatively quickly. Indeed it has been said that *the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics is that there is no method.*

Interestingly, prior to this statement, van Manen goes to great lengths to discuss how phenomenology and hermeneutics have a certain “*methodos*” or “a way”; however, these

methods are not determined by “fixed signposts” because these need to be “... discovered or invented as a response to the question at hand ...” (pp. 29-30) by the researcher. Although van Manen acknowledges that phenomenology is a part of broader tradition found in the continental tradition of philosophy where there is no clearly outlined method like a recipe or step-by-step guide, we would argue that he has misunderstood the general phenomenological movement in Europe because Husserl provided the foundation for other philosophers to interpret phenomenology differently (Moran, 2000). So in a sense, other philosophers that proceeded Husserl, like Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and so on, either revised, extended on, or took his work in a different direction, but this does not mean it was a free-for-all and there were no constraints in their work. Our point that we wish to emphasize, is that phenomenology is not a type of solipsism where the interpreter of events is the final arbiter about what is true or false because of personal preference. Indeed, phenomenologists or anyone who wishes to engage with phenomenology in any meaningful way are bound by the same checks-and-balances, or judgements as anyone else when it comes to claims being made about notions of meaning and associated truth or truths.

This serious concern about notions of interpretation are intensified in van Manen’s work because at no time is due consideration given to judging whether different interpretations of the same event (i.e. say interpretation A) are equally true with other accounts (i.e. say interpretations B, C, D, and so on), or one interpretation, is say more truer than others. Clearly, this is a significant problem, particularly when there are no criteria outlined to judge whether interpretation A is true, say compared to interpretation B, C, D, and so on, which may also claim an alternative or different truth. Of course, we are concerned with interpretation here, but van Manen’s (1990, p.

27) answer to this problem relates to a “... good phenomenological description ... [being] ...validated by lived experience ...”, and at the same time endorses the idea that phenomenological description carries a “moral force”, and thereby given a certain level of authority. Indeed, we agree with Paley (2016) that phenomenological conclusions that have been deduced from phenomenological descriptions (i.e. “meaning”) that assume that there is only one interpretation is deeply problematic, particularly when “moral force” has been assigned to say interpretation A, over interpretations B, C, D, and so on. Without a way of determining the “moral force” of interpretation A, compared to other interpretations (i.e. interpretations B, C, D, and so on) is quite a scary proposition to contemplate because it would inevitably lead to scenarios where notions of “meaning” have already been decided, and alternative points of view are not allowed or even considered. Likewise, an even more troubling idea underpinning van Manen’s work is the assumption that *all* experiences are the same when it comes to studying people’s experiences of A, B, and C. The fallacious reasoning that underpins this assumption are discussed by Stolz (2020) and Thorburn and Stolz (2020); however, in this case, the fallacy of false cause (*non- causa pro causa*) brings to our attention how we can be tempted to presuppose, or led to presuppose some specific cause-and-effect relation when in fact it does not really exist in the act of understanding the “phenomenon” being studied.

The tension between descriptive and interpretative phenomenology seem to be left unresolved to the point that notions of “meaning” are viewed as an idiosyncratic and personal construction that are entirely dependent on the agent or individual’s own “say-so” or warranted assertion. When combined with van Manen’s *methodos* approach, which starts with an account of the lived experience (description), and is then reduced to a thematic analysis of the language used

(interpretation) seems logical; however, the issue seems to revolve around the transition from description to interpretation. Not only does it involve a selective approach in the reduction, and when merged with a biased interpretation surrounding the “meaning” of an experience, it inevitably leads to a dangerous situation where a conclusion has already been pre-determined, and the interpretation of the experience is invented or constructed to fit with a pre-determined conclusion. On a number of levels, this is unmistakably problematic, and at the end of day we are no closer to understanding the object or phenomenon that is being studied.

Phenomenology and educational methodology: more encouraging possibilities

Influenced by the writings of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, and especially in a methodological sense by Husserl’s notion of ‘bracketing’, Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom (2008) review the benefits of a reflective approach to lifeworld’s, and of how methodologically data can be collected and analysed. The authors arrived upon the equine term ‘bridling’ to elaborate on the substance of their approach and crucially to highlight that they perceive ‘bridling’ to be forward looking and positive in tone ‘as it aims to direct energy into the open and respectful attitude that allows the phenomenon to present itself’ (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 130). Dahlberg et al., (2008) consider that the notion of ‘bridling’ represents the form of sensitivity and open attitude which expert horse riders use when training horses to dance. As such, it emphasizes in more everyday terms, the benefits of a ‘less is more’ approach for raising attention. This is in preference to a more restrictive view of bracketing which negates the importance that personal beliefs play in understanding meanings. As such, Dahlberg et al. (2008) argue that their bridling approach rises above pre-judgement and focuses on a disciplined form of interaction and communication which is similar to the type of evolving understanding horse riders’ use when training horses.

In applied terms the hallmarks of Dahlberg et al.'s (2008) approach is to argue for an openness where researchers (students) are curious, patient and able to dwell on matters in a manner that enables them to reflect on their contribution to the object of study and with others with whom they are sharing experiences. This approach enables students to discuss matters within particular disciplinary contexts, a further by-product of which is increased validity and objectivity. Furthermore, Dahlberg et al. (2008) argue that their approach is well suited to the caring professions including education as it aims to help students verbalize the hidden areas of human existence which are more difficult to capture and describe in other forms of research. Dahlberg et al. (2008, p. 116) do recognize however that 'despite all problems with it, language is the vehicle that communicates meaning in research and allows us to understand the lived experience.' This acknowledgement reaffirms in educational contexts how patience and time are required if students are going to be able to dwell on their experiences.

In more precise and specifically educational terms, Ryen's (2020) investigation of the role of teachers as makers rather than interpreters of content-driven curriculum imperatives merits review at this stage as does his consideration of the role of learners in contexts which demand some degree of reflection and review. Ryen's (2020) thinking builds on the German/Scandinavian tradition of *Bildung-centred Didaktik* (i.e. Didactics) to inform how meaningful content-led experiences can dovetail with the subjective side of students' lives. Ryen's (2020) canvas is a broad one as it includes references to the use and misuse of power in education and of the normative narrowness that often constrains a broader perspective on cultivating students' critical thinking in relation to ethical and social justice issues. This can

constrain the emphasis in *Bildung* on self-cultivation and identity within a broader society, where gains in both personal and cultural maturation are planned. In addition, it highlights from a pedagogical perspective the importance of content knowledge selection, and how meaning is created through effective teacher/student relationships which enable students to develop the key qualities of self-determination, co-determination and solidarity.

At an operational level, Ryen's (2020) critical-constructive probing's highlight for teachers the pedagogical need to consider when, where and how reflection and recording of experiences might best take place e.g. during activity, directly following activity, after a gap of some determinate amount of time. Progress on this basis might assist planning and consideration of how diverse experiences and identifiable occasions can become the focus of reflection and provide the basis for more extended and nuanced description (Thorburn & Stolz, 2020).

Furthermore, in relation to phenomenological methods, Stolz (2020, p. 14) emphasizes the need to provide a clear account of how first-person led recollections of experience 'are bound by the same checks-and-balances, or judgements as anyone else when it comes to claims being made about notions of being and associated truth or truths.' Stolz (2020) further highlights the importance of what is evident through our consciousness in terms of identifying what it is we can agree upon when reviewing self and shared experiences. In this way, accounts of experience can be shared as 'knowledge is constituted as objective' and not prone to undue subjectivism (Stolz, 2020, p. 11).

Thus far the paper has been primarily conceptual rather than an applied or empirical in nature. However, while aware that there are solid references which provide details on conducting

interviews and compiling field observations, and of approaches for ensuring descriptive and interpretive validity, see for example, Vagle (2014) we are also minded that Merleau-Ponty noted how 'phenomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological method' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. viii). With this in mind, we now through fusing the recent influences of Ryen (2020) and Stolz (2020), apply in subject terms the importance of the triadic link between: content knowledge accuracy/agreement; a clear structure for agreeing/sharing experience and capturing the diversity of individual experience. For example, in art, how we come to understand involves a focus on: style as a design element (content knowledge accuracy/agreement); how we experience art as a medium through the use of space and spatial relationships (a clear structure for agreeing/sharing experience) as well as personal reflections on emotions and moods that the piece of art work provoked and stimulated (capturing the diversity of individual experience).

In greater detail, for an English class in the middle years of secondary school education (age 14-16 years), a class might be studying one key theme from John Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men' (Steinbeck, 1937/2016) i.e. the impossibility of the American Dream. Therefore, agreeing content knowledge accuracy/agreement might focus on noting that like the majority of farmhands working during the Great Depression, George and Lennie's dream is to purchase a plot of land and work for themselves, where they would be free of prejudice and allow them protection from an inhospitable world. The idea of the dream is so intoxicating that other characters, such as Candy and Crooks become enamoured with joining George and Lennie. However, as the novel progresses, the impossibility of achieving the dream becomes evident. In terms of agreeing a clear structure for sharing experience, deploying the 'PEEL' construct as a shared pedagogical method and approach could enable consistency for students as the acronym

(i.e. Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link) helps identify the key sections of a critical essay paragraph. By adopting a common approach to essay writing skills, it supports students through trying to develop a clear focus in their writing when discussing their reflections of some of the issues associated with the themes of the text e.g. friendship and loneliness.

In terms of students' greater reflections about their progress across their years of compulsory education, such approaches should allow a sufficiency of time for students to engage in profiling their reflective-based progress and wider achievements. Unfortunately, the volume of time is insufficient for students to dwell, reflect and progressively record their thoughts on their education; its self and social dimensions and its connections beyond school life. As a result, some form of open but accurate and purposeful reflection would help students' record their ongoing sense of obligation and shared sense of empathy alongside their personal viewpoint on freedom and autonomy. And while the benefits of purposeful reflection might require language for recording (and if necessary assessing), the benefits of the process would be evident in students' judgements and actions. Coherent progress on this basis could afford students the opportunity to test ideas and build consensus through structured programmes in ways that are redolent of Cath's (2019) gold standard conception of comprehending phenomena in a phenomenal way.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that to date there has been inadequate engagement with one important aspect of phenomenology, namely how can a phenomenology of the self, dovetail with a phenomenology of the shared and social. We have highlighted how Merleau-Ponty's work is

capable of developing a more cohesive ontology, as he was particularly aware of the need to recognize a middle ground between the subjectivity of the 'I' and the 'We' objectivity of thinking of humans as objects in the world. In this light, we have argued that further conceptual probing is particularly relevant for educational contexts, where intersubjectivity has been insufficiently reviewed in relation to human action, situational structuring and constructions of reality thus far. Accordingly, we highlighted the centrality of the animate body (*Leib*), authenticity, the reciprocal nature of experiences and of making experiences more visible when trying methodologically to emphasize how a self and social phenomenology could become more central educational aims. If authentically enacted and experiences are comprehended in a phenomenal way, we see considerable benefits for students in being able to directly attend to the properties of their experiences, especially in regard to how new habits can be formed and in terms of reviewing and reflecting on the plurality of their self and shared experiences.

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¹ This paper aims to open up a debate on a new and emerging research agenda in an area of phenomenological importance relevant to education. Other research papers are planned which progress these intentions e.g. Stolz, S.A & Thorburn, M. (in press) Phenomenology, embodiment, and education: first-person methodologies of embodied subjectivity. In S.A. Stolz (Ed). *The Body, Embodiment, and Education: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Manuscript in preparation).