



Editorial

Advancing Phenomenology as an Emerging Field of Research in Education in South Africa

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Phenomenology as a field of research is slowly on the move in certain Faculties of Education in South African universities, including Cape Peninsula University of Technology, University of the Western Cape, Stellenbosch University, Rhodes University, University of Pretoria and the University of KwaZulu-Natal. It is in these institutions of higher learning, although mainly in postgraduate studies, where small strides are being made to advance the field of phenomenology. This special issue under the theme “Exploring teaching and learning under the lens of phenomenology” is yet another attempt to give impetus to the field to encourage more South African academics to reimagine or reinvent the theoretical lenses for their research. The question that arises here is: “Why is there a need to advance the field of phenomenological research in South Africa?”

Kierkegaard (1973), who is considered by many to be ‘the father of existentialism’, averred that human existence cannot be accurately articulated in a conceptual system that reduces a person’s lived experiences to mathematical formulae. These mathematical analytical scientific methods, which many modern natural science researchers and positivist educational researchers often apply to provide depth and rigor to their research findings, are valuable research tools to enhance our understanding of many things in the world, but they are reductive and not very helpful in explaining the invisible interior of lived experience from

a distance. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard (1973) pointed out that the true meaning of human existence can only be found in the invisible depths of *living* – the fluid dynamics of the depths of lived experience. To phenomenologists, this realm of the dynamic structures of lived experience, with specific reference to a person’s relationship with themselves, with other human beings, with non-human living things and with non-living objects in the world, is what forms the most significant aspect of what phenomenologists are interested in knowing. This raises another interesting question: “How do phenomenologists plunge into the depth of lived experience to conceptualise and contextualise a phenomenon in order to articulate the nature of the lived experience precisely?” This is where the philosophical texts of the canonical phenomenological writers such as Husserl (1970), Heidegger (1967), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1988) provide phenomenological scholars with the philosophical tools to *describe* and *reduce* the *essences* and *intentionality* of a person’s lived experiences in the world. In Merleau-Ponty’s approach, the term ‘*description*’ refers to accurately capturing and explaining a phenomenon as the person experiences it. This means the adoption of Husserl’s mantra of remaining true to or returning to the ‘things in themselves’ (Husserl, 1970, p. 252). When a researcher *describes* an experience she enters into the realm of *reduction*, which requires her to bracket the *self*, by applying the principle of the epochè, which is to place the research participants experience at the

centre of the investigation. This is where the researcher must suspend all preconceived assumptions about a phenomenon, which gives the researcher more clarity and focus so that she can remain true to the “things in themselves” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). When a phenomenological researcher applies the concepts of *description, reduction and essences*, it takes her to the core meaning of an individual’s experience of any given phenomenon, that is, *intentionality*. As such, *intentionality* refers to the inner invisible system of thought behind human consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In simple terms, *intentionality* is the total meaning of an object that can only be found in consciousness. This is what Husserl means when he said that consciousness is not something that belongs to the interior realm because it pushes out towards the world. This is how phenomenology provides a method to understanding human existence.

Therefore, as an individual (research participant - learner/student/teacher/lecturer) stands at the center of the world (of teaching and learning), it is crucially important that researchers shift their focus to understanding what it means to be in her body. In other words what is it that happens in her mind? What is it that she feels? What does she think about? What is it that inspires or demotivates her? At this juncture we want to shift the focus to how these questions can assist in improving the quality of teaching and learning in South Africa. Can our failure to answer these questions accurately be attributed to why we have had numerous curriculum revisions over the last three decades in the South African educational context? As educational researchers it is important that we find ways to understand our teachers and students better, as they are the main active role players in the education system. Therefore, to develop a deeper understanding of human existence, given the complexity of the human psyche, which is shaped and influenced by experience as

lived and its (psyche’s) effect on teaching and learning, we believe that more phenomenological research is needed in South Africa. Such research not only allows the researcher to make visible the invisible conditions of subjective life as a teacher or learner, but also provides access to their respective inner landscapes to understand their reasoning, perceptive fields, behaviour, emotions and passions, among many other factors, which all form part of the broader plenum of the human mind.

Over the last few years, as educational researchers who ventured into the scholarship of phenomenology in our research endeavours, we have come to realise how dependent we were/are on European and North American scholars, where phenomenology as a movement in education continues to grow. Through the works of these scholars abroad, we were introduced to the work of Max Van Manen, a Dutch emigrè who brought the scholarship of phenomenology to Canada; Ted Aoki, a Japanese-born Canadian scholar who used phenomenology to expand the field of curriculum studies in Canada; and various other American scholars, such as Maxine Green, Dwayne Huebner, Madeleine Grumet and William Pinar, who all grounded their work in phenomenology. According to Pinar and Reynolds (2015), Dwayne Huebner was the first American scholar in the 1960s to introduce phenomenology into the field of curriculum studies. His colleague Maxine Green, like Huebner, also drew heavily upon phenomenology, in particular cognate philosophies such as existentialism, in her field of performance art. Green invoked the concept of a “phenomenology of the imagination” to articulate the nature of teaching and learning in America. There is a rich tradition of phenomenology in the global north that is continuously on the move. Therefore, we believe that time has come to establish a first generation of South African phenomenological scholars who could contribute greatly to expanding our

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understanding of curriculum issues with its two wings of teaching and learning in schools and universities. This special issue is a good start to give impetus to the phenomenological movement in education in South Africa.

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