



What did you learn in school today?

by Carina Henriksson

Abstract

This article conveys some of the findings from a hermeneutic-phenomenological study on lived experiences of school failure. The informants were students in Swedish senior high schools and teenagers in Swedish juvenile institutions. Contrary to the common belief that school failure is related to low grades or failing exams, the students' descriptions of lived experiences of failure had little to do with intellectual shortcomings. The students' interpretation of my research question did not encompass cognitive deficiencies. They rarely spoke of failure to understand, or failure to meet scholastic demands. Instead, the students offered stories about failure to behave according to expectations and the way in which they experienced their teachers' reactions to this 'deviant' behaviour. Thus, the question of school failure did not revolve around the students' cognitive knowledge and proficiency – or lack of thereof – but around the hidden curriculum. The feelings the students lived through while experiencing failure included lack of trust, confidence, belief, joyfulness, patience, hope, and serenity. The study has moral implications for pedagogical practice and the formative relationship between teachers and students.

Introduction

Two years ago I moved from Sweden to Singapore. It was quite a journey, geographically as well as culturally. The relocation from Sweden to Singapore also meant that I moved from one educational system to another. It has been, and continues to be, a fascinating journey into educational thoughts that are very different from those to which I am accustomed.

Educational systems, educational acts, and educational theory are all developed within certain cultural, economic, political, ethnic, and religious contexts. It is therefore hardly surprising that Swedish educational policy differs from Singaporean educational policy or that the Chinese educational system differs from the Anglo-Saxon educational system.

However, something happens in the movement from

theory to practice, from the macro level to the micro level, from governmental documents and guiding principles to the classroom. This is most obvious when we look at pedagogical practice with phenomenological eyes. Phenomenological research often points to the similarities of lived experiences in the lifeworld, while the differences in educational systems are pushed into the background. Lived experiences are not necessarily constricted by cultural, economic, societal, or individual differences. Instead, lived experiences show us our human similarities and can constitute the foundation for understanding across cultures. The fact that emotions, feelings and lived experiences can be of the same quality regardless of geographical and cultural borders is well illustrated by Li's (2002) phenomenological study which explored Chinese children's lived experiences of examinations. The lived experiences of the students in Li's (2002) study, involve the similar feelings to those described by the

students in my study concerning failure. Both research studies were able to identify feelings such as shame, distress, insecurity, and worthlessness. However, the personal implications and consequences of these feelings are likely to vary depending on the specific (i.e., Chinese or Swedish) educational system and cultural tradition of the country.

Methodology and Method

Certain forms of knowledge are not well recognized in educational theories and in pedagogical practice:

These are the corporeal, relational, temporal, situational, and actional kinds of knowledge that cannot always be translated back or captured in conceptualizations and theoretical representations. In other words, there are modes of knowing that inhere so immediately in our actions, in our body, in our relations, and in the things around us that they seem invisible. (Van Manen & Li, 2002, p. 220)

This is embodied, lived knowledge as opposed to cognitive, theoretical knowledge. This kind of knowledge is, in its invisibility, part pre-reflective, pre-theoretic, and pre-linguistic. It is possible to ask, and rightfully so whether, given the invisible, pre-reflective, pre-theoretic and even pre-linguistic nature of this knowledge, it can be researched at all. That is the aim and the challenge of hermeneutic phenomenology. As the Dutch phenomenologist Langeveld (1983) put it,

As we all know, nothing is so silent as that which is self-evident. Thus it becomes our task to render audible, readable, articulate, that which is silent. (p. 5)

Stated more explicitly, if we, as researchers, want to investigate these silent or pre-reflective aspects of human life we need to, as Van Manen (1990) says, borrow other peoples' lived experiences. We need to ask other people to describe how they experienced a specific moment in their lives so that we can describe and interpret their lived experiences. Through this process we give voice to their experiences. In this particular study my request to the teenagers to share a memory of a moment when they experienced school failure, represented the first time someone ever asked them to describe how and not why they experienced what they did. For the first time they could give voice to their experience of failing in school, not to their explanations of why they failed in school.

The study

The primary aim of this study was to explore how students experience school failure and to disclose

taken-for-granted attitudes and unreflective understandings of these experiences. The students' oral and written lived-experience descriptions of moments when they felt that they failed in school were described and interpreted with the intention of exploring what is actually happening during these experiences and not what is seemingly happening.

In this process it was observed that there is a certain connection between pedagogy and hermeneutic phenomenology. Pedagogy simultaneously requires a phenomenological sensitivity to children's lifeworlds and an ability to interpret the pedagogical significance of living with or educating children. Moreover, "pedagogy requires a way with language in order to allow the research process of textual reflection to contribute to one's pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 2).

The students

In order to conduct this study I turned to two groups of students. One group consisted of former students in an Individual program¹ in senior high school. The other group consisted of teenagers in juvenile institutions. My reasons for selecting these two groups are described below.

Former students in an Individual program

In an earlier study (Henriksson, 1999) I interviewed four former students in an Individual program. The aim of that study was to develop an understanding of why students drop out of a National program. The study also aimed to understand how students might experience the consequences of dropping out of school. During my first interview with a female student I had the distinct impression that she wanted to tell me something; that she was prepared to answer a question that I had not yet asked. This feeling grew stronger with each student interview, especially when our talks touched on the students' relationships with their teachers. For several years, I was unable to dismiss the feeling of having missed something important and when I started to look for informants for my study on school failure I returned to these transcribed interviews and reviewed them with phenomenological eyes. Of the four interviews, two provided me with interesting information concerning experiences of school failure.

Students in juvenile institutions

Between May 2001 and May 2002 I was responsible for the further education of twenty teachers in

¹ Students who are placed in an Individual program have not yet met the requirements for a National program, i.e. their grades are not good enough.

juvenile institutions, a course that took place at Växjö University in Sweden. During this period I was asked by The National Board of Institutional Care to conduct a survey on the educational conditions at 30 juvenile institutions. These two projects provided me with a lot of information concerning juvenile institutions, the teenagers taken into custody, and the teachers' daily struggle with students who, from a very early age, had experienced failure in school. The knowledge I gained also made me eager to gain more *in situ* knowledge. During spring 2002 I repeatedly visited two juvenile institutions in order to collect experiential accounts from the teenagers. Eleven students, six boys and five girls, agreed to participate in the study. The students were asked to write a lived-experience description of a particular moment when they had experienced failure in school.

Once I had received and read the students' descriptions, I returned to the institutions to conduct interviews in order to explore the descriptions and gain a deeper understanding of the students' experiences. This double approach to the gathering of experiential data was used because I sometimes failed to see the point in the written accounts due to the poor quality of the writing. I therefore needed more information in order to fully understand what the students wanted to express.

Method

In this study I made use of students' written accounts, interviews with students and a combination of both these sources of data. My first step involved asking students to write an experiential account of a moment when they experienced failure. My instructions to the students were: (1) Try to recall one specific moment when you felt that you failed in school; (2) Describe the lived experience from within, i.e. write in the first person; (3) Try to write it down as precisely as possible; (4) Try to recall what you felt, saw, heard, smelled etc.; (5) Do not embellish your story; and (6) Do not try to explain why you experienced what you did.

Some of the stories I received described the lived experiences so vividly that I could use them without exploring the matter further. However, some of the other stories were not so well written and I struggled to understand what the student wanted to say. I followed up these stories by conducting interviews upon interviews. In the interviews I simply asked the students to describe their experiences a bit further and with a bit more detail. There were also students who, for a variety of reasons, did not want to write down their experiences. I conducted interviews with these students in order to allow them to share their experiences with me. Once I had collected all the lived-experience descriptions, my first task involved

editing the experiences into anecdotes.

Within phenomenological research the term anecdote was first used by Van Manen (1990). The word anecdote has its origin in the Latin prefix *an* (not) and the root *ekdotos* (published). The word therefore refers to something that is secret or private, and can also refer to a previously unpublished narrative or historical detail (Oxford University Press, 2003). This definition is worthy of interest. In this study the editorial work of transforming the lived-experience descriptions into anecdotes was carried out in varied ways and to different extents. In order to facilitate this process I needed to create linguistic concepts that somehow demonstrated this reconstruction of the raw material. Based on the term anecdote I created the notions *synecdote* and *conecdote*.

The word *synecdote* has its origin in the Latin prefix *syn* (joint) and the root *ekdotos* (published). This term is used for the stories that are the result of an amalgamation of written description and interviews. The students' written lived-experience descriptions were used as a foundation and the editorial work consisted of integrating the oral accounts from the interviews with the written accounts. This resulted in the production of a richer description of the experience.

The word *conecdote* has its origin in the Latin prefix *con* (together) and the root *ekdotos* (published). The *conecdotes* used in this study were the result of the editorial work of reconstructing transcribed interviews into coherent stories of lived experience. This delicate work involved distinguishing thematic statements, which were brought together without jeopardizing the original meaning of the interviewees' experiences (Henriksson, 2008).

The notions anecdote, *synecdote*, and *conecdote* refer to a 'figure of mind' that manifested itself during the editorial work and for which I needed linguistic concepts. These concepts were methodically necessary in order to explicate the process from lived-experience descriptions to coherent experiential accounts. However, in the analyses I did not take the way in which the stories were constructed into consideration. During the analyses, my focus was on how the experiences were lived through. However, validity and trustworthiness call for a thorough depiction of the research process. Thus, the concepts also helped in making my method transparent for the readers as well as for other researchers.

The Study

First impressions

As I read the lived experience descriptions from the

students, I was immediately confronted by my own pre-understandings. My research question was thus formulated based on my own experiences as a student, stories I had been given quite informally by others, my previous interviews with students in Individual programs, and theoretical conceptions. I had also already painted a mental picture of what an experience of a failure in school is like. With hindsight, it is obvious that I saw the notion of school failure in the light of dropping out and also that my understanding was coloured by my role as a teacher. My pre-understanding suggested first, that it is easy to call to mind a specific moment of failure, and second, that this failure has to do with cognitive inadequacy. However, the students' lived experience descriptions proved me wrong. The once narrow context of the research question entered into dialogue with a new, wider context: The students' interpretation of my research question did not encompass cognitive deficiencies. They rarely spoke of failure to understand, or failure to meet scholastic demands. Instead, the students offered stories about failure to behave according to expectations, and their experiences of their teachers' reactions to this 'deviant' behaviour. Thus, the question of school failure did not revolve around the students' cognitive knowledge and proficiency (or lack thereof) but around what is known as the hidden curriculum. What occurs in classrooms is not just that the students learn (or do not learn) a specific subject. Much of what occurs in classrooms has to do with learning something about oneself. My research question was therefore not just about seeing school failure as failure as a student, but also as failure as a human being.

Teaching does not merely require cognitive and pathic knowledge in the pedagogue. Teaching requires awareness of the inherent unequal nature of the relationship between student and teacher. A positive pedagogical relation may be interrupted and destroyed within seconds through unawareness of this asymmetry, or through misuse of power on behalf of the teacher (Croona & Jenner, 2001). Teachers are often highly skilled in identifying ethical dilemmas, but it is not as easy to identify, or even be aware of, ethical issues in class while teaching is under way (Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993). My study shows that the moral messages sent by the teacher (or even between peers) are likely to be subtle, frequently unintentional and sometimes invisible to both sender and receiver.

Friend or enemy?

When we send our children to school, we trust adults other than ourselves to educate and guide them. We assume that teachers educate our children, and for the most part this is what happens. However, numerous

questions remain: What do they teach? What do children learn, besides different subjects? What do they learn about themselves and their teachers? Susan's *conecdote* points to the fact that learning a subject might not be the most important lesson learned:

My teacher, Mr Nielsen, was standing by the black board, explaining something for the class. He was talking, and talking, and talking, but I still didn't get it. I raised my hand:

"No, I don't understand"

So, he repeated what he just said, but I still didn't understand. He explained exactly the same way the second time — and the third time, but he only made it sound more complicated. He sort of went around the problem all the time, instead of just saying "this is the way it is". He didn't try to make it any easier. I said again:

"I still don't understand!"

You feel like an idiot when you ask several times and still don't get it. Of course, he got angry with me.

"Are you paying attention? Do you listen to me? Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"I do listen, but I still don't understand!!!"

Was it my fault that I didn't understand when he was explaining? A teacher shouldn't just be a teacher. A teacher should be someone to remember, someone you can talk about and say, "Yeah that was a good teacher". A teacher should make you want to try hard to please him. You see, if my teacher is pleased with my work, I am pleased too. Some teachers, like Mr Nielsen, are just like, "let's pound some knowledge into your head, and then we're done with you" or "I really have tried to teach you, but you are worthless". They really shouldn't be our enemies; they ought to be our friends.

Susan says that "A teacher shouldn't just be a teacher". It is interesting to try to understand what she means by that and why she wants to remember her teacher. Her statement about what teachers should be like points to the fact that she has an image or a mental picture of what a teacher should generally be like. This image may stem from experiences of other teachers, it may have its roots in societal norms, or it may be an anticipation of what Susan as a young person needs or wants from a teacher. Susan's image obviously does not correspond with the teacher, Mr. Nielsen.

When Løgstrup (1971) discussed the source of what he calls the silent demand, he argued that the mental pictures we form of other people may break down when we encounter that person face-to-face. The

personal presence erases the image and this means much more than just changing our image of the person:

It means that the actual presence of the other person leaves no room for a mere picture. His presence and my picture of him are irreconcilable. They exclude each other, and it is the picture that must give way. (Løgstrup, 1971, p. 14)

Susan appears to have experienced her teacher as a mere instructor, a supervisor and a detached adult. Something is apparently missing in this particular student-teacher relationship. Susan experiences Mr Nielsen's teaching style as utterly pragmatic, even technical, and she reacts negatively to this approach. She not only rejects this kind of teaching style, she also senses that there are alternative teaching styles, and verbalizes this in the statement that teachers "ought to be our friends". Friendship, if seen as a relation between equals, is by no means the same as a "teacher-student relationship". The relationships do, however, have some common features and it is not difficult to understand what Susan is trying to express. In much the same way as a caring and good friend, a sensitive pedagogue evokes feelings of relationality, bonding, warmth, security, and trust. However, Susan's picture of teachers as being more than just teachers is erased when she encounters Mr Nielson. Implicitly, Susan identifies Mr Nielsen, and other teachers like him, as adults who evoke completely different feelings in their students. They are the enemies.

In his moving poem, *First Day at School*, Roger McGough (n.d., cited in Warwick, 2000) gives voice to a first grader's initial impression of school. The child is standing in the schoolyard, waiting for the bell to ring:

And the railings.
All around, the railings.
Are they to keep out wolves and monsters?
Things that carry off and eat children?
Things you don't take sweets from?
Perhaps they're to stop us getting out.
Running away from the lessins. Lessins.
What does a lessin look like?
Sounds small and slimy.
They keep them in classrooms.
Whole rooms made out of glass. Imagine.

(McGough, n.d. as cited in Warwick, 2000, p. 53)

The word enemy is etymologically related to the Old Norse word *vargr*, meaning wolf and the Lithuanian word for misery, *vargas*. So the word enemy does not only describe a person who is hostile, but it also has

the denotation of someone who attacks you and causes you misery. Imagine what it must be like to spend several hours a day trapped in a room with your enemies, with wolves that attack you. It is unsurprising that some children decide to break away from school, either mentally or physically.

Silent speech

Everyone has both positive and negative experiences and memories from school. Interestingly, these recollections rarely include memories of exactly what was taught. Susan's lived experience description vividly shows that what we remember is how the teacher taught and how the teacher made us feel. Susan does not even mention what class she was in. It could have been social science, it could have been maths. It is possible that she does not even remember. How often do we engage in conversations such as, "Do you remember when we were supposed to learn the German prepositions?" or "Did we not learn a lot during our assignment about the Sami people?" Instead, we are more likely to talk about how angry our language teacher became when we constantly mixed up the prepositions, or how we laughed in surprise when our social science teacher summarized our assignment by singing a Sami folk song.

It is therefore not explicit formal knowledge and curricula but more implicit informal knowledge and the hidden curricula that stay with us for a long time. My conversations with students in Individual programs and inmates in juvenile institutions underscored the fact that experiences of school failure mainly relate to the interaction between teacher and student and not to the interaction between the student and his or her acquisition of knowledge. From a student perspective, experiences of school failure consequently came to encircle the teachers' ethical standpoint and moral manner.

It is often assumed that teachers act in morally appropriate ways, that they recognize that they stand in positions of influence in relation to the children they teach, and that they act in the best interest of the child. However, teachers do not automatically become noble moral models simply because they work with children. Although what is considered the best interest of the child is always a function of cultural, historical, political, and religious discourses, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) shows that certain basic assumptions regarding the child's best interest are shared globally². Regardless of the UN document and other official ethical guidelines for teachers "many of the moral meanings inherent in teaching are unwilling and

² The US and Somalia are the only UN countries that have not signed the convention.

unintentional” (Hansen, 1986, p. 827). Although the teacher’s moral posture is sometimes based on reflection and articulated, it is sometimes also unreflected and tacit. Regardless of the exact way in which the moral message is brought forth and perceived in the classroom, I agree with Hansen’s (1986) statement that “many of the moral meanings inherent in teaching are unwilling and unintentional” (p. 827). Put simply, this means that no lessons are a-moral. The German philosopher Martin Buber (1953) holds that it is a fatal mistake for a teacher to teach ethics, since the student perceives what the teacher says as some sort of marketable knowledge currency. Morality is then treated as a commercial commodity, and cannot be used as a foundation for character building. Instead, the only thing that may influence the student as a whole being is the teacher himself or herself as a whole being. The pedagogue does not have to be a moral genius to foster moral beings but he or she does have to be a whole human being. This means that the teacher must communicate with his fellow beings in a direct way so that his vibrancy beams toward them and has its strongest influence precisely when he does not wish to influence them.

Various ethical norms, reflected and unreflected, are at work in the following story about Maggie’s experiences of a specific lesson. A moral message beams from the teacher toward Maggie and her peers.

As I am seated in my desk, I turn to have a look around in the classroom. More than ten of my peers are missing. Mr Jones notices the absentees in his book, and I expect him to make an angry comment on skipping classes, but he just frowns as if he is irritated and starts the lesson. Last week I skipped several classes but none of my teachers asked if I was okay. They did not seem to care at all. I wonder why no one walked up to me and said “Why are you skipping classes so often?” I feel that I do not matter to them. Sure, I was not bright enough for a national program, but I am not worthless, am I? Why do they judge me as ignorant? I guess their expectations of me are low. I am supposed to perform poorly, and I am expected to skip classes. Ok, then, I will skip classes and meet their expectations.

There are only a few children who are so visible and rapidly seen as those who fall outside what is considered normative by society. However, the look of the teacher is not like the look of everyone else. The look of the teacher is expected to have a certain professional quality. Teachers are supposed to have a pedagogical look, a look that is at the same time seeing and non-seeing. A child needs to be seen and recognized for his or her positive qualities in the present, as well as for his or her budding future, and a

child needs to feel the teacher’s worthwhileness. However, this seeing also occasionally needs to possess a certain blindness, a seeing that is blind to certain qualities or non-qualities in the student-teacher relationship.

Pedagogical seeing is protectively blind ... and constantly strives to strengthen and enable the student. The pedagogical look passes over what should be acknowledged and recognized but not called attention to. (Saevi, 2003, p. 12)

What is noteworthy in Maggie’s story is that the ethical message expressed by the teachers is silent. Mr Jones seemed to be irritated when many students were absent; Maggie wondered why the teachers did not care; she felt that she was doomed; the teachers’ eyes signalled that she was worthless; she guessed that the teachers expected her to perform poorly. The teachers in the story verbalize nothing of what Maggie expresses. However, through their gesture, posture, or tone they signal that they see the students as incompetent or even untrustworthy.

From a very early age, children are waiting, with all their senses wide open, for significant adults to guide them. Parents, who are usually the first significant others for a child, often experience the calling of a child as a call for moral direction. As adults, we experience how children naturally turn to us for guidance, and they seem to have a firm conviction that their parents know everything. We are also likely to be forced to accept that this early admiration is transferred from us as parents to other adults, especially to teachers. As parents and teachers we are significant adults because we matter to children, and because children stand in a dependent relation to us. Individuals do not scan the faces or read the gestures of people who are indifferent to them. Precisely because of their dependence, children seek confirmation of their behavior and recognition as human beings. This makes them into exceptional, but also vulnerable, cue seekers.

Maggie never hears the teachers say that they are irritated, that they do not care, that they regard her as worthless, or that skipping class is acceptable. The message is mediated through a silent communication channel, sometimes consisting of body language and sometimes of gestures, but frequently the look of the teacher is enough for the student to grasp the message. Maggie’s story therefore highlights a most intriguing question: How do teachers look upon their students, and how do the students experience this look? It also highlights additional questions, such as: What takes place in the relation between teacher and student? What qualities or non-qualities does the look have? What Maggie articulates in her story is the

essence of the Thomas theorem: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572).

Maggie and her peers apparently experience the teachers’ disinterest as permission, or even a dare, to skip class. The consequences seem obvious. In the short run, the students continue their blameworthy behaviour despite the fact that the teachers do not seem to regard the behaviour as blameworthy. In the end, the teachers’ attitudes might create predicaments for future education and the students’ eagerness to learn. It is possible, from a wider perspective, that the teachers’ moral manner or lack of moral manner constitutes part of the youngster’s moral development and his or her self-identity.

The look of the teacher

Sartre has described how the ‘look’ is experienced as a form of possession. “The Other’s look shapes my body in its nakedness, makes it emerge, sculpts it, produces it as it *is*, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret — the secret of what I am” (Sartre 1969, p. 209). Sartre has been criticized for providing a one-sided description of the ‘look’, because the look can also be experienced in a positive manner such as in the admiring look of the lover, the inquisitive look of a teacher, or the encouraging gaze of the person who makes us feel successful. Regardless of the intention of the look, the other person becomes the medium through which I see myself. The look of the teacher thus constitutes a Pygmalion effect:

It is the educator himself, who makes a person, a child, a boy into a bad person, a bad child, a bad boy. It happens when one is supposing a vicious, bad, or at least crooked intention in everything that is done by the child or the boy in ignorance or without consideration ... Unfortunately there still are such calamitous individuals amongst educators; they always see little, nasty, insidious, lurking devils in children and boys, where others at most perceive an overabundance of fun or the results of a somewhat unbridled joy of life. Such ill-fated individuals, especially when they are educators, turn other persons or children, whether they are totally innocent or not, into culprits, by putting thoughts and actions into them which otherwise would be unknown to them. (Fröbel, 1951, p. 75 cited in Bollnow, 1962, p. 25)

Maggie and her peers perceive and comply with the expectation that they not only will, but also clearly should skip classes. However, the look of the teacher does not only create the student Maggie. Through the

look Maggie’s interpretation of her human value is created. The value that the teacher places on Maggie is obviously not the value that Maggie herself recognizes. Maggie says, “I am not worthless, am I?”, but obviously the teacher created that thought. In the eyes of the teacher she was worthless. It would, though, be highly unfair to hold that the look of the teacher only produces “the bad child” (Fröbel, 1951, p. 75 cited in Bollnow, 1962, p. 25), thereby suggesting that teachers are child wreckers by nature. The sensitive and thoughtful teacher also brings the opposite, the good child, into full being.

The next story shows how a maths teacher, Mr Lundgren, not only composes a good maths student, but also composes a student who has trust in herself, who feels recognized, and is willing to take risks. This student becomes a confident human being in the sphere of life.

My math teacher, Mr Lundgren stands by the window and severely scans the rows of desks. He is an extremely harsh man and his strict regime holds the whole class in awe. I am always on my toes because he can send any of us kids to the blackboard to solve a math problem. Will I be the one today? I hope not, because you never know what kind of problem you are expected to solve, and you feel like such an idiot when you stand there with the chalk in your hand and you have no idea what formula or digits to write and everybody just stares and holds their breath. But the feeling when you make an effort and perhaps even manage to solve the problem! The look on Mr Lundgren’s face is such a reward! He makes me feel smart and that I have earned his respect. Not just because of the math problem, but because I show that I am determined to do something with my life, that I want to get somewhere. I feel he has trust in me, that he believes me capable of making an effort.

This story leads us to ask questions regarding Josephine’s experience during her maths class. She has a teacher who apparently holds a tight grip over his lesson and over his students. In fact, the students seem to be somewhat scared by Mr Lundgren’s teaching style. However, the story is saturated with hope and feelings of competence.

Apparently Mr Lundgren challenges all students equally. According to Josephine, anyone could be asked to step up to the blackboard to solve a problem. It also seems that Mr Lundgren’s focus is not so much on the problem at hand, as on solving the problem. His main interest seems to be directed towards the process of working out the problem, not the result itself. The teacher’s approval is not necessarily earned

only through a correct answer. Making an effort leads to recognition. When standing by the blackboard, Josephine experiences the look of the teacher in the now. The look is therefore context constrained. She experiences herself as competent at solving maths problems, or at least as competent enough to make an effort. That experience alone would be sufficient to explain Josephine's feelings of being recognized and her grades. However, there is also something else happening here. Josephine says, "He makes me feel smart and that I had earned his respect. Not just because of the maths problem, but because I show that I am determined to do something with my life, that I want to get somewhere". It appears that the look of the teacher is not solely context restricted. The look breaks through the borders of the spatial classroom and floods other spheres of Josephine's life. It becomes non-contextual, or meta-contextual. For Josephine, the teacher's recognition transcends both the specific lesson and the school context. It transfers her from concretely being in school into being in the world. Mr Lundgren's manner and pedagogical attitude towards Josephine and her peers, his fairness and trust in them seem to have created a feeling of confidence. It was not just that he showed the students that he had trust in them, he also made the students trust their own ability to learn math, he made them feel confident to learn life and to learn for life.

A pedagogical relationship

The question then needs to be asked of how teachers can create a pedagogical atmosphere in which children experience growth and the joy of learning.

Last day of school. The first eight pews in our small country church are reserved for the ninth graders. There they are; side by side with their peers. Our usually so lively teenagers are unusually quiet. Maybe they are still tired after the trip yesterday to the fun fair. Maybe they feel the same as I do, that the clerical atmosphere brings forth an inner stillness. After the ceremony, the hymns, and the headmaster's speech, it is time to hand over the envelopes with the final grades. In alphabetic order, the students and their teachers are called to the sanctuary to receive their envelopes. I look at our son's teacher, Thomas; tall and muscular and with shaved head, a former UN soldier. He joined our son's class last year and in two semesters he has created stability in a class, which for eight years has been known as 'unruly'. Now his last task in this class is to hand out the transcript and with a handshake send his students out in the world. Thomas smiles, tousles their hair or puts his hand on their shoulder as he hands

over the envelopes. Most of his students hug him, unworried about how the intimate act might be regarded by their peers. Some of the girls are tearful and even the boys, who have a reputation of being 'problem students' are noticeably moved by the moment. As the class returns to the pews, Thomas swiftly puts his hand over his eyes.

This leads to the question of what possible experiences in the class room are behind the students' and Thomas' farewell in the church. It also leads to questions regarding the kind of relationship they have and how this relationship was created and maintained. The students' hugs and tears seem to express a multitude of emotions. Perhaps they express thankfulness for being taught the French *passé composé* or for having learned about the number of members in parliament. However, it is more likely that the palpable feelings of appreciation between students and teacher express something that is much harder to put into words.

The responsibility to create an atmosphere of trust and security is embedded in the overall teaching assignment of carefully guiding the child through childhood into adolescence and adulthood. Trust and security are primarily created in the home. Parents are the first persons to create a sheltered domain in which the child can safely grow. As the child gradually moves from the shelter and reaches out for the larger world outside home, parents must rely on the teachers to safeguard their child. When parents and teachers provide a safe haven, then the child's trust in one specific person usually develops into a generalized trust in life. However, the child's trust in the teacher, and later in the world, is reciprocal. This means that the teacher must concurrently have trust in the child and his or her abilities to learn and develop.

By highlighting this reciprocal relationship, Bollnow (1962) distinguished trust from confidence. Confidence, he argued, is one-sided and relates to distinctive, mostly cognitive, abilities. For instance, the teacher or the child may be confident that certain assignments will be satisfyingly accomplished. In contrast, trust is relational and demands a response and refers to the emotional encapsulation of teacher and child. Both trust and confidence are crucial to the feeling of belief. The belief of the pedagogue strengthens the positive abilities which he or she presumes a child possesses.

A thoughtful pedagogue would also create a sense of joyfulness in the child, since within joy rests not only a cheerful present but also anticipation of future experiences. The temporal aspects also imply the teacher's need to show patience. Impatience, according to Bollnow (1962) "is an unnatural human

temptation because it finds its roots in the attitude of anticipation, in the desire to skip the present and get at the goal as fast as possible" (p. 30). The educator who is patient and also shows patience creates a feeling of hope in the classroom. Where there is patience and hope, there is an atmosphere of serenity, a stillness that promotes the child's development.

For the students who shared their lived experiences of school failure with me, the notions of trust, confidence, belief, joyfulness, patience, hope, and

serenity are incomprehensible. They simply have not experienced these things. On the contrary, they have experienced chaotic classrooms, pedagogical situations containing no joy, and impatient teachers who neither showed hope for them nor created a sense of trust. Not only have these teachers participated in creating feelings of school failure, they are also the co-creators of human beings with little or no sense of their own human value.

Referencing Format

Henriksson, C. (2012). What did you learn in school today? *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 12 (Special Edition, May), 8 pp. doi: 10.2989/IPJP.2012.12.1.5.1113

About the Author



Carina Henriksson is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education, Psychology and Sport Science, Linnaeus University, Sweden. She teaches phenomenological pedagogy and the philosophy of science as well as qualitative methodology and methods. Carina's fields of interest include student school failure, student drop-out, the pedagogical relationship, hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology, research, and writing. Her most recent publications are *Hermeneutic Phenomenology in Education: Method and Practice* (2012, in press); *Klassrumsflyktingar. Pedagogiska situationer och relationer i klassrummet* [Classroom Refugees, Pedagogical Situations and Relations in the Classroom] (2009); and *Living Away from Blessings: School Failure as Lived Experience* (2008). Carina is also editor of the journal *Phenomenology & Practice*. After four years

at universities in Singapore, Thailand, and Brunei, Carina now lives in Canberra, where she continues to research her field of interest and lecture at different universities in Australia and New Zealand.

E-mail address: carina.henriksson@gmail.com

References

- Bollnow, O. F. (1989). Preliminary exploration of the notion of a pedagogical atmosphere. *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 7, 5-63.
- Buber, M. (1993). *Om uppföstran* (L.W. Freij, Trans.). Ludvika: Dualis. (Original work published 1953).
- Croona, G., & Jenner, H. (2001). Om makt och jämlikhet i professionella relationer. *Tidskrift for Socialpedagogik*, 7, 53-58.
- Hansen, D. T. (1986). Teaching as a moral activity. In V. Richardson (Ed.). (1986). *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 826-857). Chicago: Chicago University.
- Henriksson, C. (1999). *Gymnasieskolans individuella program - språngbräda eller slasktratt. Utvärdering av ett individuellt program* [The Individual program – springboard or slop pail? Evaluation of an individual program]. Växjö: Växjö University.
- Henriksson, C. (2008). *Living away from blessings. School failure as lived experience*. London, Ont.: Althouse.
- Jackson, P. W., Boostrom, R. E., & Hansen, D. T. (1993). *The moral life of schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Langeveld, M. J. (1983). Reflections on Phenomenology and Pedagogy (M. van Manen, Trans.). *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 1(1), 5-10.
- Li, S. (2002). *Pedagogy of examinations: A phenomenological inquiry into the pedagogical significance of Chinese students' lived experiences of examinations*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Alberta, Department of Secondary Education, Edmonton, United States of America.
- Løgstrup, K. E. (1971). *The ethical demand* (T. I. Jensen, Trans.). Philadelphia: Fortress. (Original work published 1969).
- Online Etymology Dictionary. www.etymonline.com
- Oxford University Press (2003). *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Author.
- Sartre, J. P. (1969). *Being and nothingness*. (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1943).
- Sævi, T. (2003). *The experience of "being seen" for persons with disability*. www.phenomenologyonline.com/articles/textorium
- Thomas, W. I., & Thomas, D. S. (1928). *The child in America. Behaviour problems and programs*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- United Nations. (1989). *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. www.unicef.org
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience. Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, Ont.: Althouse.
- Van Manen, M., & Li, S. (2002). The pathic principle of pedagogical language. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 18, 215-224.
- Warwick, A. (Ed.). (2000). *The nation's favourite poems of childhood*. London: BBC Worldwide.
-