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Phenomenological research in educational sciences *or learning how to cope with ambiguity.*

Literature research

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1. Introduction: uncertainty and ambiguity

This paper presents the phenomenological research approach within educational sciences. Educational sciences based on the phenomenological tradition attempt to answer questions such as: *What is the experience of a physically disabled child?* (Bleeker & Mulderij 1990) *How does a secret affect the life of a child?* (van Manen & Levering 1996) *How does the child experience his school, leisure time and family?* (Van Gils 1992) *What does cheating mean for students?* (Ashworth 1999) or *How do students experience their introduction to qualitative research?* (Hein 2004).

We already get an impression of what phenomenological research could be when some research questions are listed. Yet, the question '*What is exactly meant when one speaks about phenomenology, phenomenological approach or research?*' cannot be answered unequivocally.

As early as in 1962, Pierre Thévenaz already pointed out the ambiguity and obscurity that prevails about the precise meaning of phenomenological research (Thévenaz 1962: 37):

> *"Phenomenology seems to be a Proteus which appears now as an objective inquiry into the logic of essence and meanings, now as a theory of abstraction, now as a deep psychological description or analysis of consciousness, now a speculation on 'the transcendental Ego', now as a method for approaching concretely lived existence, and finally, as in Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, seems to blend purely and simply with existentialism."*

This ambiguity still exists. According to Karel Mulderij, the term phenomenology or phenomenological research can indicate

- *A metatheory*, namely a philosophical view that seeks to put a foundation under all our human knowledge;

- *A movement within social sciences* in which subjective semiosis and experience are central;

- *An analysis technique* to explicitly formulate the cores of experience.

Moreover, adjectives are added such as existential, interpretative and hermeneutic. *"To increase the confusion even more,"* as Mulderij notices, *"the term phenomenological research is sometimes also used in a very general way when instead of qualitative research one speaks about phenomenological research (or environments research, field research, interpretative and, descriptive, naturalistic or ecological research) and one means. in that case. 'philosophy', theory, data collection method and technique at the same time."* (Mulderij 1999:295).

According to Lisa C. Ehrich, the widespread term causes confusion, and her attempts or, rather, her *'intellectual struggles'* provide in the end no clear image of phenomenology and phenomenological research but more a definition of a network, a web (Ehrich 2003: 48).

Nevertheless, in this paper we want to attempt to position, explain and illustrate phenomenological research in educational sciences through literature research.

We will, therefore, start from phenomenology as a philosophical movement. Though elaborating on the philosophical foundation of a research approach is often seen as making it unnecessarily complicated, it remains important to give the proper vision enough foundation, or as Marilyn Ray expresses it: *"To attempt a phenomenological study without having knowledge of its*

philosophical foundations (…) would invalidate or severely impede a study's credibility" (Ray 1994: 123). When phenomenological research is performed, it is important to at least know within which approach the proper investigation can be positioned (approximately). This is the only way in which it can be ensured that one's own research can be placed within the context of the existing, scientific research and thus form a founded contribution.

According to Max van Manen, thi,s of course, does not imply that every phenomenological researcher has to be a philosophy professor. The investigator, however, has to be aware so he can articulate the epistemological and theoretical implications (Van Manen 1990: 8).

Despite the fact that going over a philosophical movement in a few pages absolutely does not do justice to the depth of that philosophy, we will nevertheless discuss the most influential representatives and the most central notions here.

Subsequently, we will examine phenomenological research in educational sciences as it has been shaped in the past when we will be examining the *Utrechtse School* to a greater depth. The Dutch pedagogues have had an important influence internationally. Recent studies that are based on phenomenology to a certain extent are also discussed.

Thirdly, we look closer at the discussions about the methodology of phenomenological research.

Finally, opportunities and limitations of the phenomenological approach for educational sciences are discussed.

The section related to the bibliography lists magazines and internet sources in which recent phenomenological research is discussed as well as the references themselves.

2. Phenomenology as a philosophical movement

The word phenomenology comes from the Greek word 'phenomenon' which means 'show himself' (Ray 1994: 119), and this summarises the intention of phenomenology, namely the study of the essence of an experience.

In general, phenomenology is described as a movement in philosophy, founded at the beginning of the twentieth century, that, based on the direct and intuitive experience of phenomena, tries to deduct the essential characteristics of experiences and the essence of what we experience from it.

However, we cannot reconstruct a continuity history of phenomenological thinking and research. An undisputed canon of phenomenology does not exist. Motives and concepts have changed over the last few hundred years where new ones have been added that are sometimes even so radically different, that one can speak of a constant revision of phenomenology (Lippitz 2000, Todres 2005:104). In the past century, phenomenology has spread itself geographically as well as in several sciences. Hence, phenomenology is one of the most important philosophical movements of the 20th century (Embree e.a. 1997: 1).

Within the broad field of phenomenological philosophy we can distinguish a large variety of phenomenological schools and movements such as transcendental, hermeneutic, existential, linguistic and ethical phenomenology (Embree e.a. 1997: 3-7; van Manen 2005: 32-35). We will only further explore the first two movements in this short overview.

Although the origin of phenomenology can be traced back to Emmanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, the German mathematician and philosopher **Edmund Husserl** (1859-1938)[1] is considered to be the founder.

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[1] **Edmund Husserl** was born on 8 April 1859 near Brno in the current Czech Republic to a Jewish family. He studied mathematics, astronomy and philosophy. In 1887 Husserl converted to the Lutheran Church. He was a private tutor in Halle and professor in Göttingen and Freiburg as well as holding other posts. Because of his Jewish background, he was relieved from all his posts in 1934. Despite large difficulties, he did not want to leave Nazi Germany up to the end of his life. After his death, Husserl left behind tens of thousands of pages with unpublished studies that could be saved by professor Herman Leo van Breda from Leuven. The documents were transferred to Leuven where they are stored in the Husserl archive, edited and have been published gradually under the title Husserliana (Dethier 1993: 416, Mazzu 2003: 266). Also see www.hiw.kuleuven.be/hiw/eng/husserl/index.php.

Most important works:

Philosophie der Arithmetik. Psychologische und logische Untersuchungen (1891)
Logische Untersuchungen. Erste Teil: Prolegomena zur reinen Logik (1900)
Logische Untersuchungen. Zweite Teil: Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis (1901)
Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft (1911)
Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie (1913)
Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1928)
Formale und transzendentale Logik. Versuch einer Kritik der logischen Vernunft (1929)
Méditations cartésiennes (1931)
Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzentale Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie (1936)

We should position his work within the context of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. This period is characterised in philosophy and social sciences by a conflict between sterile positivism and subjectivism. Both approaches did not seem to offer an answer to actual social questions. Husserl lsearched for a new philosophical method that could offer absolute security with regard to a disintegrating society within this context of being in an ideological crisis.

Husserl did not agree with the deeply rooted thought in philosophy that we have to acquire reliable knowledge of a world independent of human consciousness. According to Husserl, this caused science to lock itself up in a closed world without intentionality. Instead, he argued that people can only be sure of how objects are represented in their consciousness. To achieve certainty, everything outside of direct observation has to be excluded. This will ensure that the external world is brought back to the essential content of the conscious phenomenon. In other words, we have to let the phenomena speak for themselves. "*There is no reality behind the reality*" *and* we must just accept reality as we find it our normal experience.

For Husserl to be able to penetrate the essence, putting within the 'brackets' (epoch) was important: letting go of our own presuppositions. Later on, Husserl spent more attention to the fact that our consciousness could never be fully purified and his attention shifted from consciousness to the environment – the whole of axioms that shape our experience.

The objective of phenomenology is the return to the original experience as summarised in the slogan *'Zu den Sachen selbst'* (not to be understood as a form of objectivism, it is indeed about the experience!). So realities are merely seen as 'phenomena'. And it is based on those phenomena that knowledge can be generated. Husserl called this method phenomenology, the science of phenomena.

The philosophy of Husserl is generally referred to as transcendental phenomenology. Husserl's notion of phenomenology has triggered a movement that grew into a compelling voice in philosophy despite or, rather, thanks to the many and varied criticisms that it caused. (For an introduction to Husserl see: van den Berg 1997; Embree 1997, Levering 2001 and Mazzu 2003; this is not a comprehensive list).

The most important phenomenologists from the 20th century are:

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)[2], student of Husserl who reviewed the phenomenology perspective of his master and expanded it from a philosophical discipline that was focussed on

[2] **Martin Heidegger** was born on 26 September 1899 in the German town of Meskirch. He studied theology, later maths and physics and to conclude philosophy. Between 1920 and 1923 he was an assistant of Husserl. In 1927 he published his most important works 'Sein und Zeit'. This made him famous and led to him being appointed professor in philosophy at the university of Freiburg in 1928 as the successor of Husserl. When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Heidegger was elected rector of the university. In this position, he held a number of speeches in favour of Nazism. He became disillusioned with Nazism around 1940 and his rectory came to an end. Because of his pro-Nazi-attitude, he had to resign in 1945 from all positions at the university. He led a reclusive life near Freiburg from this point on (Dethier 1993: 446-447).
Most important works:
Sein und Zeit (1927)
Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik (1929)
Einführung in die Metaphysik (1935)
Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis) (1936-1938)

consciousness and the essence of the phenomena to an existential and hermeneutic (interpretative) philosophy. He criticised Husserl because he allowed the being of things to correspond with consciousness without questioning critically the nature of consciousness. With Heidegger, the philosophical search for the truth is destroyed. Truth can only continue to exist as something to be aimed at: as a future project (Dethier 1993: 446).

The relationship between the individual and the environment is central in Heidegger's thinking. The idea of 'environment' is that we exist in an everyday world that is filled with complex meaning that forms the background and decor of our daily actions and interactions. That is why we do not study human subjectivity in itself, but what the narratives suggest about the experiences of people. Heidegger's phenomenology can be understood as a way to interpret experiences of shared meanings and practices embedded in specific contexts. Heidegger himself described his work as "thinking about being" (McCall, 1983: 66).

Phenomenology has been further developed by, for example, **Maurice Merleau-Ponty** (1908-1961)[3] who strongly influenced the development of existential phenomenology and existentialism in France (see Jean-Paul Sartre).

Merleau-Ponty built further on Heidegger's notion of the 'environment'. The environment contains the world of the objects around us as we perceive them and our experience of our self, body and relationships. This environment is pre-reflective – it happens before we think about it or before we convert it into language. The term environment refers to the lived situation of the individual more than making reference to an inner world of introspection. *"There is no inner human being,"* states Merleau-Ponty, *"the human being is in the world, and only in the world he knows himself."* With this, he refers to his important contribution to phenomenology, namely the introduction of physicality. According to Merleau-Ponty, the human being can only experience from his body and thus give meaning (Levering 2001: 76).

Other important representatives of phenomenological philosophy are:

- The German **Alfred Schultz** (1899-1959) who expanded phenomenology past the individual so that the social world was also considered. He concentrated especially on the problem of intersubjectivity and how it came to be.

Die Frage nach der Technik (1949)
Identität und Differenz (1955-57)

[3] **Maurice Merleau-Ponty** was born on 14 March 1908 in France. He befriended Simone de Beauvoir, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jean-Paul Sartre while studying philosopy in Paris. After 1945 he taught at the University of Lyon. He was also the director of Les Temps Modernes, a magazine he edited together with Sartre and Beauvoir. His philosophical political position during the Cold War caused some uproar because it stated that more humanity was possible in the communist system. Merleau-Ponty broke with Sartre halfway through the 1950s because of his sympathies with communism, which he believed was too profound. After his death in 1961, he disappeared from the philosophical scene. His work has only been again appreciated recently (Dethier: 459-463).

Most important works:
Phénoménologie de la Perception (1945).
Humanisme et Terreur (1947)
Les Aventures de la Dialectique (1955)
Le Visible et L'Invisible (1964)
La Prose du Monde (1969)

- The German philosopher **Hans-Georg Gadamer** (1900-2002), student of Heidegger, thematises the importance of the cultural-historical context with phenomenological research.

- The French philosopher **Paul Ricoeur** (1913-2005) gave depth to the discussion about the use of 'stories' (poems, diaries, novels) in phenomenology. He is at the origin of the *narrative turn* in social sciences and hence also in pedagogy (Levering 2006).

3. Key notions of phenomenology

Experience and reality: The reality image of phenomenology involves that what is experienced by humans as real is real. What is real, doesn't have to be true, it's about the meaning people give to it, it's about whether the thus defined reality has consequences for human actions (Levering 2001: 83).

Lifeworld, sensemaking and sense derivation: Phenomenologists prefer not to talk in terms of object and subject, but in terms of me and the world. Me and the world cannot be separated, but are related. There is no world without me, because the world we talk about exists by the grace of human meaning. This does not mean that me and the world coincide. The world is not in my head. Consciousness is always the consciousness of something (**intentionality)**. The idea of sensemaking is at the basis of the recognisability of the world. Besides giving meaning there is however also sense derivation. I give meaning, but the world also forces its meanings on me (Levering, 2001: 75-77).

Subjectivity and intersubjectivity: That every human individual has his own view on reality is linked to the prejudices and preferences we shaped through our own personal history. Besides this subjectivity there is also intersubjectivity, the whole of shared meanings that people give to the world. Those shared meanings are fixed in social rituals, habits and the shared meanings that are contained in language and that are bound by time and culture (Levering 2001: 83).

Language: Language plays an important role in the relationship between me and the world. Language enables us to give meaning to the things in the world. However, my language already existed before me. Intersubjectivity precedes subjectivity (from Levering, 2001: 75-77).

Body: The most fundamental connection between me and the world is, however, the body. The body is in that case not an object but object and subject at the same time. According to phenomenologists, people proportionate their world concretely from their physicality (Levering, 2001: 75-77).

Phenomenological reduction or epoch: The phenomenologist wants to know something about the experienced reality. For this reason he/she places his/her own prejudices and presuppositions 'between brackets' as much as possible to be able to observe as unprejudiced as possible (Levering 2001: 83). The reason for this is that theoretical prejudices may not 'contaminate' the description of the experience (Ehrich 2003:46).

4. Phenomenological research in social sciences

The confusion that prevails about what phenomenology and phenomenological research is, did not stop science theorists to attempt to formulate a workable definition. Nevertheless we cannot enumerate pure phenomenological research or researchers because the question is whether it exists or has existed. Phenomenology as treated by all the different users, has many faces and is difficult to define (Levering 2001: 81).

In each case, meaning and the giving of meaning is central. *"Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. Phenomenology asks "What is this or that kind of experience like?" It differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomising, classifying, or abstracting it."* (van Manen 1990: 9). In phenomenological research one will for example not pose the question: *"How do children learn this specific material?"* but instead it will ask: *"What is the nature, the essence of the learning experience?"* (van Manen 1990: 10). It studies reality as a lived and experienced reality. It is a method that does not work with, for example, questionnaires but with life descriptions. It is about the appearing or experienced reality.

The central objective of phenomenological research is to describe the daily world as we experience it directly. It accentuates how a person experiences the world, how a patient experiences an illness, how a teacher experiences a pedagogical encounter, how a student experiences failure (van Manen 2005: 31).

Phenomenological research does not avoid ambiguity, but sees uncertainty and ambiguity as a part of social reality and, thus, the intention of scientific research (Jardine, 1990: 215).

According to J. Williams, this still does not mean that phenomenological research only occupies itself with the subjective perspectives of social actors. According to him, this description is not sufficient. He states: "*Properly understood, phenomenology is prescientific, an attempt to ground the social sciences in human experience, a subjective appreciation of the human condition. (…) If we are to understand social reality all social scientific constructs must not only be linked to what people experience, but how they experience it. Scientific understandings must be connected to the experiential process through which people in their everyday lives actually experience the world."* (Williams 2001: 11362).

Roughly, we can distinguish two main currents within phenomenological research (Lopez & Willis 2004).

Descriptive or transcendental phenomenologists inspired by Husserl try to study the 'essence of the phenomena as they appear to our consciousness'. They do not look so much for an explanation, but want to come to the best possible essential description. They depart from a perspective free from assumptions and preconceptions.

Hermeneutic researchers, on the other hand, inspired by Heidegger focus on the reflexive and existential aspects by studying the experience of the self, place, time, physicality and relationships of a person. They do not see the researcher either as a white page, without

prejudices or presuppositions, but accentuate rather the importance of being clear about how interpretations were achieved during the research process. The detached and impartial researcher – usually indicated with 'one' or 'we' – is replaced by a subjective, clearly visible researcher who describes the research results from the first person singular (see, for example, Stanley & Wise 1993).

5. Phenomenological research in educational sciences

Teaching is even more difficult than learning. We know that; but we rarely think about it. And why is teaching more difficult than learning? Not because the teacher must have a larger store of information, and have it always ready. Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than learning.

Martin Heidegger (cited in: Dall'Alba, 2009)

5.1. Contextualisation

In reference works of scientific research, the most common division is the one that, based on the used methods, places qualitative research opposite quantitative research. Qualitative research wants to arrive at a profound understanding of human behaviour and of the causes that drive this behaviour. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is based on the reasons behind the different aspects of behaviour. In short, it examines the 'why' and the 'how' of decisions, compared to the 'what', 'where' and 'when' of quantitative research (Flick 1998: 4-7; Maso & Smaling 1998: 9-10; Denzin & Lincoln 2000; Silverman 1993; Meire 2005).

A historical overview of the evolution of both research methods usually states the following: Qualitative research methods only started to get real recognition in the 1970s within the research world. Until then, the term qualitative research was hardly used, unless as a subdiscipline within anthropology and sociology. During the 1970s and 1980s, qualitative research started to rise in the other disciplines and became even dominant, or at least very important, in women's studies, disability studies, health studies, etc. In the 1980s and 1990s, we see, under the stimulus of the sharp criticism of quantitative researchers on qualitative research, that there is more attention for methodology to deal with problems regarding, for example, reliability or data analysis (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

The Dutch epistemologist Ilja Maso places the rise of phenomenological research within this development. According to him, this research can be seen as a reaction to the scientific approach of many socio-scientific studies with which social reality is reduced to measurable variables.

This contextualisation especially counts for the period after 1970, but is not applicable for the educational sciences. Within the educational sciences the qualitative research approach is present much earlier.

The existing pedagogical theories can be placed within the so called 'Three-River Land' of the pedagogical scientific ideals. One distinguishes in it the hermeneutic-humanistic ideal, the empirical-analytical scientific ideal and the emancipatory-critical scientific ideal. Within every scientific ideal the underlying philosophies can vary, and moreover there are also approaches

that try to integrate the different ideals. That there are so many directions within pedagogy, is not strange. The pedagogical sciences have a long tradition to let themselves be inspired by other sciences, such as medicine and biology, but also philosophy, psychology and sociology (Meijer 1996).

The hermeneutic-humanistic ideal that is qualitative of nature and in which we can situate phenomenological research, has a long tradition and could even enjoy the almost exclusive right until the 1960s. The acceptance of phenomenology by pedagogy can be situated in the second half of the twentieth century. The introduction of the work of Heidegger was very important for this. He was the one who has influenced educational sciences to a far greater extent than Husserl (Levering 2001: 74).

Besides the work of Heidegger, the German philosopher **Wilhelm Dilthey** (1833-1911)[4] is also considered as an important founder. Like Husserl is considered to be the father of phenomenology, so is referred to Dilthey as the founder of the humanistic and phenomenological pedagogy (Dilthey and Husserl knew each other too and maintained an intensive correspondence (Biemel 1968)). Two basic motives are central in Dilthey's thinking: 1) the understanding 'Verstehen' of the human as a historical being, and 2) the attempt to prove the methodical independence of the humanities and to give her an epistemological basis. He placed the key concept 'Verstehen' besides the 'Erklären' (the causal explanation), which, according to him, is typical for natural sciences. In the pedagogy of Dilthey two concepts are central. Firstly, a teleological tendency exists in the development of the human being. This means that the development of the human being is efficient and purposeful. For pedagogy this means that every individual has to be brought to his perfection. Secondly, Dilthey gave a lot of attention to the notion historicity, the human being can only be understood against the background of his historical place and social cultural context in which he is studied (Bollnow 1974: 804; VUB-psychology without date).

Besides the work of these philosophers, it is however the so called *Utrecht School* who, from the middle of the previous century, has made phenomenological research in the educational sciences grow and flourish.

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[4] **Wilhelm Dilthey** was born in 1833 near Wiesbaden. He studied theology, philosophy and history at the university of Heidelberg. He taught consecutively at the universities of Basel, Kiel, Breslau and Berlin.
Most important works:
Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften (1883)
Über dieMöglichkeit einer allgemeingültigen pädagogischen Wissenschaft (1888)
Schulreformen und Schulstuben (1890)
Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie (1894)
Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik (1900)
Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung (1906)
Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt (1910)
Schulreformen und Schulstuben (1890)

5.2. The Utrecht School

For the Dutch-speaking area, but also far beyond (see Lippitz 2000; van Manen 2005: 35), the importance of the so called *Utrecht School* on the diffusion of the phenomenological approach within the educational sciences has been extremely large. Under the influence of the German humanistic pedagogy, this *School* tried to lift the contradictions between the society groupings in the Netherlands and to contribute to a more humane society.

The *School* consisted of psychologists, criminologists and educators and was especially active between 1945 and 1965. The psychologist F.J.J. Buytendijk is considered to be the leader of this school. In the Festschrift *Persoon en Wereld (Person and World)*, following his 65th birthday, he wrote a 'manifesto' of the *Utrecht school*.

'We want to understand the human being from his 'world', which means from the meaningful basic structure of the totality of situations, events, cultural values, to which he directs himself, of which he is conscious, to which his behaviours and thoughts and feelings relate – the world, in which the human being exists, which he finds and forms in the course of his personal history by the significations he attributes to everything. The human being is not 'something' with characteristics, but an initiative of relationships to the world, which he chooses and by which he is chosen.' (van den Berg & Linschoten 1953: 7).

In other words, it is about how the human being in all his complexity stands in the world. This complexity cannot be reduced to a division into fragments, in sub-characteristics. Because the whole is more than the parts.

The most important representative for the educational sciences was **Martinus J. Langeveld** (1905-1989)[5]. Langeveld himself referred to his method as phenomenological. Wilna Meijer (1996) poses the question how we have to understand the indication 'phenomenological' with Langeveld. She distinguishes clearly Langeveld's theoretical pedagogy on the one hand from his child psychological and child anthropological work on the other hand. Meijer considers the theoretical pedagogy of Langeveld more as an 'objective phenomenology'. By which she means that he wants to interpret the phenomenon education as such, from itself. In his standard work

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[5] **Martinus J. Langeveld** was born on October 30, 1905 in Haarlem. In 1939, Langeveld was appointed as extraordinary professor pedagogy at the University of Utrecht and after the war, in 1946, as full professor in pedagogy, general didactics and development psychology. In 1943, he was also appointed at the University of Amsterdam as extraordinary professor pedagogy by the *Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen* to replace the (Jewish) professor Philip Kohnstamm who was fired by the German occupier. This also happened at the insistence of Kohnstamm, who wanted to see the existence of this chair ensured until after the war, and see it in good hands of his own student (Catalogus Professorum Academiae Rheno-Traiectinae).
Most important works:
Taal en Denken (dissertatie) (1934)
Inleiding tot de studie der paedagogische psychologie van de middelbare-schoolleeftijd (1937/1947)
De opvoeding van zuigeling en kleuter (1938/1969)
Beknopte theoretische pedagogiek (1945 / 1979)
Verkenning en verdieping (1950)
Capita uit de algemene methodologie der paedologie (1959)
Ontwikkelingspsychologie: beknopte historische en systematische inleiding (1963)
*Studien zur Anthropologie des Kin*des (1964)
Schule als Weg des Kindes (1966)
Scholen maken mensen (1967)
Elk kind is er één: meedenken en meehelpen als het misgaat bij groot worden en opvoeden (1974)

Beknopte theoretische pedagogiek (Concise theoretical pedagogy) (1945), he puts the starting point of the (theoretical) pedagogy with what is found in the everyday world: the education practice, the education reality. The aim is to clearly clarify what is already there as a vague familiar notion. It is about understanding the education "from itself" (Meijer 1996: 42).[6] In Langeveld's child psychological and child anthropological work, it is about an empathic description of the situation of the child: *How does the child experience his world*? An example of his phenomenological research is his contribution to the aforementioned book *Persoon en Wereld (Person and World)*. The title of that chapter is entitled *De 'verborgen plaats' in het leven van het kind (The 'hidden place' in the life of the child)*. In this work, Langeveld investigates the life of the child. Decisive is the ability to empathise with children and subsequently also the art to articulate this in such a way that readers can empathise in their turn with this childlike environment. It is about understanding the meaning making and experiences of children. When one uses concepts from, for example psychology or sociology, then a meeting with the concrete, specific child becomes impossible (Vandenberg 2002: 593).

It is this interest in the proper attribution of signification of the child that was continued in the seventies and that led in the Netherlands to the so called *Second Utrecht School.*

The most important representatives of this *Second School* were **Ton Beekman**, **Karel Mulderij and Hans Bleeker**. They especially tried to democratise phenomenological research. They assumed actually that everyone had to be able to learn it, while phenomenology at the time of Langeveld supposed an exceptional erudition, literacy and literary talent (Levering 2001: 82).

Beekman, Mulderij and Bleeker maintain the principles of the *Utrecht School*, but position themselves a lot more as the advocates of the child. It is especially about life world research (see below) that visualises the "threatened" children's perspective. In *Wat heb je aan je benen? (What are legs good for?)* (Bleeker & Mulderij 1990) a vivid picture is presented of the world of disabled children, who in their growth to adulthood have a lot more to conquer than life with a disability (Levering 2001: 88-89).

The original *Utrecht School* as well as the *Second* has received a lot of criticism during its existence. The most important criticism relates to the lack of a concrete methodology. The representatives of the *Utrecht School* have never been very explicit about the rules and the procedures of the phenomenological method. According to Bas Levering, this has partly to do with *"the fact that phenomenology is actually nothing without content, but the reference that Langeveld used to give when one asked for his method, by saying that one should read 'De vrouw' ('The woman') by Buytendijk from 1951, was of course very uninformative"* (Levering 2001: 82) (for all clarity: in this work by Buytendijk we still do not find a discussion about the methodology). Frederieke Schenk criticises in a similar way in her study of the history of the *Utrecht School*. She gives an image of a 'cabinet of antiquities' and uses qualifications as 'failure' and 'myth'. She too cannot find a

[6] In Langeveld's pedagogy, the relationship between child and educators was central. This relationship is marked by the task of the educator to learn the child to take responsibility for his actions. The objective of the education is according to Langeveld the assertive personality. The role of the educator is the one of the substitute conscience as long as the child is not yet capable himself to carry the responsibility for his actions. The educator is the model of a 'self-responsible personality', characterised by features such as conscientious, loving, selfless and sincere. The emphasis on the own responsibility and social involvement with the social life is certainly not equal to social adjustment. It is a plea for moral self-determination in a moral order that lets ourselves behind as responsible. The responsibility of the child towards his parents has to shift gradually from the parents inwards, so that the child can come to self-responsible self-determination. The objective of the education is the personal freedom and the education into persons who can stand behind their moral judgments (van Doorn 2007; Levering 2001: 83-86).

phenomenological research program: *"The Utrecht School has never made clear what was and what wasn't phenomenological research"* (Schenk 1982: 13).

In his reaction to Schenk, Ton Beekman reproaches her in his article *'De Utrechtse School is dood. Leve de Utrechtse School. Deel II' ('The Utrecht School is dead! Long live the Utrecht School')* to have given a too one sided and oversimplified image. As far as he is concerned, the *School* is with regards to pedagogy and pedagogical psychology, still very much alive after 1957 (Beekman 1983: 61).

After ten years, Bas Levering weakens slightly Beekman's somewhat too optimistic concept in his article *'The Utrecht School is dead. Long live the Utrecht School. Part II'* (1993). The *School* is in fact dead, although… According to Levering, the most characterizing fact for the *School* is that different interpretations are possible: *"For some the top of being unscientific, for others still a source of inspiration. (…) Basing yourself on Langeveld is possible for many, because his work is so wide and because his basic thoughts lend them so well for innovation"*. That's why his work is for the 'insider always new' and for the 'outsider hopelessly old fashioned' (Levering 1993: 8 and 10).

In her doctoral thesis *'De regels van het vak' ('The rules of the profession'),* Trudy Dehue discusses briefly the *Utrecht School*. She too questions the phenomenological nature of the *School*. Who searches in the Utrecht publications for coherent prescriptions regarding the exercise of phenomenological research, notes quickly that they cannot be derived from it, she states. She asks herself explicitly whether the *Utrecht school* hasn't called itself incorrectly phenomenological (Dehue 1990: 78-83).

Ton Beekman and Karel Mulderij have tried to compensate the criticism on the first *Utrecht School* by the publication of their *Werkboek Beleving en Ervaring (Workbook Life world and Experience)* (1977), in which they extensively discuss the methodology of their phenomenological research. But also this attempt is criticised, among others by Simen Kooi. Kooi calls the research attitude of both pedagogues *"an attempt to popularise the phenomenology with a minimum of scholarship"* (Kooi 1998: 50). Here, the authors themselves minimise their theoretical foundation: *"Responding to such questions would lead us immediately in the depths of philosophy and few return from there to the everyday reality"* (Beekman & Mulderij 1977: 79). And ten years later: *"Our final product itself should convince, not the scientific justification of it."* (Bleeker & Mulderij 1988: 273). Because they do not want to participate in fundamental philosophical discussions, their qualitative-phenomenological research loses its expressiveness, according to Kooi. Moreover, this author continues, they lack an adequate and sound pedagogical research attitude. He calls their attitude paternalistic and intrusive, instead of open and honest. Their studies are more monologues than dialogues (Kooi 1998: 54).

5.3. Diffusion of phenomenological research in educational sciences

Despite these criticisms, the work of both Utrecht Schools has inspired several pedagogues in their research.

There are a number of pedagogues from other countries who connected with the *Utrecht School*.

Max van Manen, who is of Dutch origin, but who is active at the University of Alberta in Canada, was inspired by the *Utrecht School* as well as by the German tradition of Geisteswissenschaften. He wrote besides methodological work such as *Researching Lived Experience* (1990), also *The Tact of Teaching* (1991), in which teaching is expressly seen as a pedagogical activity. In *Childhood's Secrets: Intimacy, Privacy, and the Self Reconsidered* (1996), which he wrote together with Bas Levering, the basis is phenomenological, but also other approaches are tried. The importance of van Manen is in the translation he made of the philosophy to the context of pedagogical research. His vision on phenomenological research however makes a sharp distinction and even contradiction between immediate lived experience on the one hand and opinions, abstraction and detachment. We come back to that later on. Other American representatives within the educational sciences are among others educational philosophers Maxine Greene[7] and Donald Vandenberg[8].

At the university of Giessen in Germany, **Wilfried Lippitz** is active. In his doctoral thesis '*Lebenswelt' oder Rehabilitierung Vorwissenschaftliche Erfahrung* (1980), he articulated the philosophical foundation for his pedagogy, which is very close to the *Utrecht School*. Other important publications are *Phänomenologische Studien in der Pädagogik* (1993) and together with Christian Rittelmeyer *Phänomene des Kindererlebens. Beispiele und methodische Probleme einer pädagogischen Phänomenologie* (1990). He also translated the work by van Manen and Levering *Childhood's Secrets (Kindheit und Geheimnisse)* into German.

In his overview of phenomenology in the educational sciences, Donald Vandenberg also mentions the Brazilian **Paulo Freire** who with *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1968) found international recognition. Usually Freire is seen as the founder of the critical pedagogy, but according to Vandenberg, Freire used phenomenology intensely in his work by emphasising 'being in the world' and the perspective of students (Vandenberg 2002: 598).

In Flanders, the influence of the phenomenology on the educational sciences remained rather limited in the first decades after the Second World War, despite the fact that the archives of Husserl are stored since 1938 in Leuven (see footnote 1). In his historical overview of the educational sciences in Flanders, the historical pedagogue Marc Depaepe mentions in each case not phenomenology as an influential school, neither as a source of inspiration. According to

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[7] Some works by M. Greene: (1973) *Teacher as stranger. Educational philosophy for the modern age*. Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth Publishing; (1978) *Landscapes of Learning.* New York: Teachers College Press; (1988) *The Dialectic of Freedom.* New York: Teachers College Press.

[8] Some works by D. Vandenberg (1971) *Being and Education: an Essay in Existential Phenomenology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall; (1975) Openness: The pedagogic atmosphere, in: D. Nyberg (ed) *The Philosophy of Open Education.* New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 37–57; (1983) *Human Rights in Education.* New York: Philosophical Library; (1990) *Education as a Human Right.* New York: Teachers College Record; (1997) *Phenomenology & education discourse.* Johannesburg: Heinemann.

Depaepe (2002), the pedagogy in Belgium before and after the Second World War was, after an experimental phase, characterised by a strong predominance of the catholic pedagogy that especially tried to compose an own educational theory from other movements, without ever giving up on the church as the true educator.

For the post-war period we can only refer to the Austrian **Stephan Strasser** (1905-1991) who fled during the war with his family to Leuven, and managed there the archive of Husserl. Though he was appointed immediately after the war at the catholic University of Nijmegen, he kept in close contact with his colleagues in Leuven. His educational vision focused especially on the synthesis of "Führen und Wachsenlassen". Besides that, he expressed severe criticism on Langeveld's 'impressionism', his selective use of anecdotes and examples to support his thesis, and his preference for ethical truth above theoretical truth (Vandenberg 2002: 594; Mazzu 2003: 269 en 278). Strasser was important for connecting the geographically different phenomenological schools (Levering & van Manen, 2002: 277-278).

Phenomenology as a research tradition became gradually marginalised in the Netherlands, among others because of the rise of the empirical analytical research. Yet, Marieke Eggermont (1999) for example does see an important future for **life world research**, which is closely linked to phenomenology.

The revival of the phenomenological inspired life world research can partly be explained by the adoption of the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) in which is mentioned explicitly that children and youth have the right to be heard in matters that concern them.

But also the success of the so called *Sociology of Childhood* (Jenks 1996; James & Prout 1997; James, Jenks & Prout 1998, Qvortrup e.a. 2005) has given a new impetus to this research approach. In this sociological theory, childhood is understood as a social construction, and children are seen as active social agents (Qvortrup 1994; Verhellen, 2000): the contribution that children give to society, understood as a world that children and adults share, is appreciated and valued. Also in other disciplines, one finds this emancipating approach. It is indicated that certain groups in society, namely people in (deprivation) poverty situations, women, migrants, young people and people with a disability possess insufficient cultural and political capital to let their voice be heard (du Bois-Reymond 1986). Therefore, research has to give them "a voice" and do them justice (Bouverne-De Bie 1989, Van Hove 1999, Verschelden, 2001), indeed, just like the researchers of both Utrecht Schools did.

Important representatives of the life world research in Flanders are **Jan Van Gils** and his employees at the **Onderzoekscentrum Kind & Samenleving (Research centre Children & Society)** and **Griet Verschelden** of the University Ghent.

According to these researchers, it is important not only to study the knowledge or opinions of people, but also how they perceive and experience the world. Life world research is deemed to be especially useful in research with children, because children give more importance to concrete life world and experiences.

Eggermont describes the life world research in a way that does not mention the phenomenological roots of it explicitly. They are clear indirectly: *With research of the 'life world' of human beings is asked for the whole of feelings, appreciations and experiences of individual people (or children) regarding a specific situation or phenomenon, or in other words: for the way in which human beings give meaning to it.* (Eggermont 1999: 173). Van Gils (1991, 1992, 2000) sees life world research as a specific form of qualitative research that focuses on the different processes that people use to give meaning to their environment. So the human being in life world research is

recognised explicitly as actor. In a sociological perspective this means for example that the 'reference framework' of a certain group, like children, can be investigated. This framework is a whole of views, experiences and perceptions, shared by the members of that group, that are continuously developed through processes of attribution of meaning. Reference frameworks are the way in which one looks at reality, understands it and deals with it. To those reference frameworks belong very direct perceptions, more consistent experiences, and less context bound insights or opinions (Van Gils, 1992: 81-83). Life world research is done namely by participating observation, group discussions, interviews, but also through philosophy with children.

Research themes that were addressed by aforementioned researchers are very different: care, welfare and guidance (Verschelden 2000 en 2001), family, disruptive behaviour (Van Gils 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 2004), mobility (Meire 2005), public space (Vanderstede 2004), direct and indirect traffic victims (Lauwers & Van Gils 2004, Lauwers 2004).

However, we hardly find a reference to the phenomenological tradition in the aforementioned *Sociology of Childhood* or most life world research. Wilfried Lippitz (1999) reproaches the *Sociology of Childhood* its lack of historical awareness. He recalls the tradition of the phenomenologically orientated child research and concludes that the new child research is not as new as it presents itself. Moreover, it uses a fairly classic, rather Kantian idea of the autonomous human being, instead of the phenomenological approach in which the interrelational interdependence is central.

As we already saw, the theme of 'doing justice to the child' is not an invention of the *Sociology of Childhood*, but was originally a topic within the phenomenological child research of the *Utrecht School*.

According to Ehrich, the phenomenological approach in the educational sciences is rather marginal and in the periphery (Ehrich 2003: 65). This is indeed the case if we use a very strict definition. But as we saw with the life world research, we also observe in other approaches, such as the narrative studies, basic principles and notions from phenomenology. Likewise, Wilfried Lippitz notes a revival of phenomenological research under influence of the growing interest in qualitative research for the life world and participants' perspectives (Lippitz 1993).

In theoretical pedagogy, phenomenology remains an inspiration, as the work of Shaun Gallagher shows. In *Hermeneutics and Education* (1992), he tries to broaden and deepen through the educational sciences the hermeneutic phenomenology.

Though the phenomenology loses her central place in the seventies in the educational sciences (especially due to the success of the theory and methodology of the social sciences), it remains an important approach that is discussed in most basic courses about educational sciences.

6. The practice of phenomenological research

There is much confusion about what phenomenological research exactly is, and about how it can be conducted (Finlay 2009). Phenomenological research has a different meaning for different researchers. The explicit subjective and qualitative character of phenomenological research has led to it that some researchers see every strongly interpretative, qualitative research as phenomenological.

The prevailing ambiguity about the method of phenomenological research, has partly to do with one of the points of departure of phenomenology, namely the fact that knowledge and science are bound by time and culture. Phenomenologists also declare that there isn't one sacred method to achieve knowledge, and describe their method as characterised by a strongly searching and questioning attitude, and entering unknown territories.

Moreover, phenomenological methods differ according to the theoretical presuppositions that are the basis of the research. Some researchers declare that structured steps may not be drafted, while others think that the research has to be developed step by step based on what experience provides. Others state that researchers need a framework in which they can undertake their research and can develop a 'classic' methodology.

We already saw in the discussion about the *Utrecht School*, that Langeveld refused to elaborate a specific methodology for phenomenological research.

Several contemporary researchers dread to deliver some kind of cookbook (Levering & Smeyers 1999: 9; Holloway 1997). Hycner (1999: 143-144) even states: *"There is an appropriate reluctance on the part of phenomenologists to focus too much on specific steps [because] this would do great injustice to the integrity of the phenomenon."* They rather talk about a research attitude than about a methodology. For them the openness of the researcher towards the participants is essential. He or she has to approach the research and the participants with the necessary dose of 'scientific humility'. Otherwise the danger is real that the researcher makes statements based on known scientific reference points, while the essence of the experience of the participant remains hidden. Dahlberg and others (2001: 97) describe this humility as follows: *"Openness is the mark of a true willingness to listen, see, and understand. It involves respect, and a certain humility towards the phenomenon, as well as sensitivity and flexibility".*

David Jardine describes a phenomenological research attitude as follows: *"Thus, when the phenomenological inquirer enters a classroom, she can no longer do so with the assurance of exemption, domination and authority: something is already at play, and the living character of this setting is not waiting upon the inquirer for some beneficient bestowal of meaning. It is already meaningful, and these connections must not be severed in order to understand them; they must, rather, be delicately gathered in all their contingency, locatedness, and difficulty."*(Jardine 1990: 225). The intention is that the phenomenon can present itself to us, rather than that we impose presuppositions. This openness has to be maintained during the whole research and not just at the start.

Van Manen does not give either a step-by-step description of phenomenological research in *Researching lived experience*. He does not talk about data collection or data analysis, but only gives

suggestions (van Manen 1990: 54-74). For example: use personal experiences as a starting point; study the etymological source of concepts; use interviews, protocols or observe; also use literature and art. For van Manen phenomenological research is *'a method without technique'* (van Manen 1990: 131).

This makes it hard, especially for starting researchers. There are few fixed methodological anchor points to which the researcher can refer. Insecurity during the research is a usual complaint.

Still, some 'cookbooks' have appeared about the methodology of phenomenological research. In their attempt to democratise phenomenological research, Bleeker and Mulderij wrote at the end of the seventies a workbook phenomenology. In their workbook they address explicitly students and 'workers in the field' to guide them in the sometimes tricky research practice. They describe phenomenological research practice as functional as possible.

The method that is currently used at the University for Humanistic Studies in Utrecht is a combination of strongly simplified elements from phenomenology and humanistic psychology.

In 1998 appears as the last chapter in the work *'Kwalitatief onderzoek: praktijk en theorie' ('Qualitative research: practice and theory')* by Ilja Maso and Adri Smaling, the 'Empirische fenomenologie' ('Empirical phenomenology'). This approach is close to what we called earlier the descriptive vision, but presented in such a way that it can also be executed for empirical research. A broader version of it we find in the most recent work by Maso and two of his students: *De rijkdom van ervaringen: theorie en praktijk van empirisch fenomenologisch onderzoek (The wealth of experiences: theory and practice of empirical phenomenological research).* Here, cases are represented in a detailed way and commented upon. The scientific-theoretical basis remains however underexposed, despite the literature list (Maso e.a. 2004). Maso even dares, it may be somewhat provocative, to start a recent article with the saying: *"Empirical phenomenological research is very simple in structure and purpose. When you want to know something about a certain experience (…) you start to collect a number of those experiences. Subsequently you check why we see these experiences as experiences (of a certain phenomenon) (…). In the end you compare the result of this exercise with the literature (…) to check in which measure that literature and your research still have something to say. Based on such a research, governments can take measures in daily life (…) and scientific theories can be (re)formulated, which in their turn can be applied again in practice."* (Maso 2005: 35).

Also in overviews about qualitative research, we regularly find contributions about the methodology of phenomenological research. Thus Les Todres and Frances Rapport give a short but rather clear abstract of how one does respectively descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenological research (Todres 2005; Rapport 2005). Helene Starks and Susan Brown Trinidad compare three frequently used methods: phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory (Starks & Brown Trinidad 2007).

Collecting research data

Among the many methods of collecting research data, there are a few that fit phenomenological research better. There is, as it were, a certain affinity. Usually one uses interviews, diaries, participative observation, reflexive and introspective notes of the researcher himself (Finlay 2003 en 2005).

The psychologist Linda Finlay (2005) describes the most important task of the researcher in collecting research data as follows: *"The first challenge for phenomenological researchers like myself is to help participants express their sense of self/embodiment and lived relations with others as directly as possible. We then have to find a way to express this in language, a way that captures the complexity, ambiguities and nuances of the experience described."*

A practical and at the same time much nuanced description of undertaking phenomenological interviews is given by Jonathan Smith and Mike Osborn. Different aspects and difficulties are mentioned and suggestions are made (Smith & Osborn 2003).

Phenomenological research can be applied to a single case or to several accidentally or consciously chosen cases. Though studies based on one certain case make it possible to bring forward discrepancies, it is still harder to make positive deductions if one does not dispose of a minimum number of participants. In research with several participants, the power of the conclusions will be reinforced as soon as an aspect of the experience returns with more than one participant. Here, we have to make a clear distinction between statistic and qualitative validity: phenomenological research is good in indicating the different aspects of a certain experience, but one has to be careful to extend the conclusions to the entire groups from which the participants come (Lester 1999).

Analysing research data

Also for the analysis we find different approaches in the literature. On the one hand we find supporters of an intuitive, and even poetical approach with which writing talent is more important to do justice to the experience than a thorough analysis. On the other end of the spectrum we find elaborated methods in which researchers are guided and can go through the process of analysis step by step.

The more intuitive researchers do not even want to regard it as an analysis. They prefer to use the word 'explicitation'. Hycner thinks the term analysis is useless in phenomenological research, because the word indicates a division, a breaking up in parts and hence a loss of the phenomenon as a whole. Explicitation implies rather a study of the components of a phenomenon, while the totality remains noticeable (Hycner 1999: 161). Important is that the research data are read thoroughly so that the researcher develops a 'feeling', a sensitivity for what the participants tell. Max van Manen thinks the understanding of the perspective of others is necessarily done in an intuitive way: *"Phenomenological understanding is distinctly existential, emotive, enactive, embodied, situational, and nontheoretic; a powerful phenomenological text thrives on a*

certain irrevocable tension between what is unique and what is shared, between particular and transcendent meaning, and between the reflective and the prereflective spheres of the life world" (van Manen 1997: 345). David Jardine tells researchers not to look for similarities, but for analogies, correspondences. Only this way we do justice to the social life which we study (Jardine 1990: 227).

These vague notions are, again, not very easy to grasp for inexperienced researchers in phenomenology. Kate Caelli gives in her article for starting researchers a frank, and especially understandable report of her quest in phenomenological research practice (Caelli 2001).

Linda Finlay (1999) presents a method of analysis that can be followed step by step, but that still does justice to the phenomenological approach by having attention for the components as well as for the whole. She divides her analysis in two parts, i.e. 1. the analysis of the individual interviews and 2. the analysis of all interviews together. Within each phase there are successively some steps to go through in which one goes from encodings to codes to themes. This methodology is strongly inspired by the *Grounded Theory* of Strauss & Corbin.

Also Jonathan A. Smith and colleagues (Smith, Jarman & Osborn 1999) present a plan with steps to do phenomenological research. His *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA) addresses specifically researchers who have interest in phenomenological research, but who have hardly experience with its methodology and analysis.

The analysis remains, no matter which method one follows, necessarily 'dirty', because the data do not fall automatically in nicely delineated categories. A problem is also that phenomenological research generates usually a very large quantity of interview notes, recordings or other documents, that all have to be analysed. For qualitative research several computer programs were developed that can help coding the research data, think for example of Kwalitan, Atlas.ti, Maxqda or Folio Views. But it remains, no matter what, the researcher himself that has to interpret connections and place the research data in a larger perspective. The result of phenomenological research is always a reflection of what that specific researcher could see and understand.

Reporting

The most important thing of the entire research practice however is for a lot of authors, and namely for van Manen, the final research report. It is here, in the writing itself, that one has to do justice to the phenomena. The description has to literally grasp, catch the reader. Käte Meyer-Drawe (1997) for example describes van Manen's writing style as poetical and holistic. Holistic, because it reveals a depth and an insight in the human condition, and poetical, because it is sensitive and reflective. It invites the reader to reveal a certain aspect of the human experience through the described images and feelings. Van Manen, in his own words, wants to touch the reader. This can be done among others by the use of anecdotes. Anecdotes may not have validity in empirical research, in phenomenological research they help to grasp and to make someone understand the meaning of an experience (van Manen 1990: 115-120).

Wilfried Lippitz and Bas Levering start their article about the first day of school as follows: *"I remember my first day in kindergarten about fifty years ago as if it were yesterday. During the preceding weeks, before my mother took me to school she had told me about what was going to happen. In those*

days the first day in kindergarten was often the first moment that mother and child were separated. It was an emotional event when the mothers had to leave the classroom and the children were left alone with the teacher." This way the authors try to draw an image, to involve the reader with the subject to reach an understanding, rather than an explanation. The real research question is only addressed later in the article, namely how strangeness influences the pedagogical relationship. (Lippitz & Levering 2002: 205-206).

In '*From meaning to method*', van Manen describes, based on a phenomenological study by J. Linschoten about the experience of falling asleep, how a phenomenological text is created, how one can describe a certain phenomenon, a description that is profound, but also concrete, evocative, intense and revealing (van Manen 1997).

7. The contribution of phenomenology to educational sciences: an attempt to reach a conclusion

The ambiguity described above about the content as well as the objectives of phenomenology and phenomenological research led to it that both terms became container concepts that can include research that has hardly anything to do with the philosophical principles of phenomenology. In a large number of studies, one confines the research to a pure description of what participants told about a certain experience.

Apart from the improper use of the notion phenomenology, there is also a more fundamental criticism on this research approach, though it is not easy to summarise. Again, by the multiple and polyvalent use of the terms phenomenology and phenomenological research, a certain criticism on a certain research does not necessarily apply to other 'phenomenological research'. We make an attempt below.

An important subject of discussion is the claim of being scientific. Is phenomenological research scientific? Does an intuitive research method deliver scientific research? Isn't it more a form of journalism, a subjective report of what people tell about a certain experience? This research provides, according to these critics, only statements that apply within a limited environment, without being able to generalise or apply these statements within a broader framework (Meijer 1996).

Another point of criticism was already formulated in the beginning of the seventies by the 'critical pedagogy'. These pedagogues envisioned especially the lack of attention for the social context. Representatives of this movement see education as a social phenomenon that contributes to the reproduction or self-preservation of society. And though the assertiveness of the child in phenomenological research, and broader in the other humanistic approaches, is central, the critical pedagogues think that that emancipation is doomed to remain idealistic. Because by focusing only on how the participants describe a certain experience, the larger context is ignored. Because of that also power relationships that can colour the perspective of a participant strongly, aren't considered. Louis Cohen and others formulate it as follows: *"The ability of certain individuals, groups, classes and authorities to persuade others to accept their definitions of situations demonstrates that while social structure is a consequence of the ways in which we perceive social relations, it is clearly more than this."* (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000: 27).

In line with this argument is the criticism on the almost exclusive focus on lived experience. This focus is among others by Max van Manen justified, because in the lived experience there would be 'a more direct access to the world' (van Manen 1990: 9). Significations that were abstracted, or that are speculative, are in other words considered as unreal and thus inferior. Robyn Barnacle calls this a very naive way to look at the world. As if there could exist a kind of pure, more authentic non-mediated knowledge (Barnacle 2004: 62). Also Rennie Johnstone and Robin Usher state that experience may not be considered as a privileged access to knowledge, but on the contrary should be problematised. *"Individual, or indeed collective experience does not*

and cannot stand alone as an authentic knowledge source but is constructed and reconstructed within history, context and discourse." (Johnstone & Usher 1997: 14). In other words, experience cannot be seen as a platform from which one can observe culture, history and discourse, because it is precisely created within and from these contexts.

Also the vision on agency and autonomy is too simple according to the critics. Postmodern and poststructuralist criticisms see the subject as culturally determined and agency and autonomy as cultural products (see among others Foucault).

Finally, the strong involvement of the researcher is criticised, because an objective and critical positioning is no longer possible. From the inside one can describe and clear up the situation well, but it isn't possible to critically reflect enough about this studied situation (Meijer 1996).

Practitioners of phenomenological research have countered these critiques by highlighting the unique contribution phenomenological research can offer for educational sciences, and in addition to all social and behavioural sciences.

First, the criticism of the unscientific nature of phenomenological research is refuted.

According to van Manen, this research is scientific: "it is a systematic, explicit, self-critical and intersubjective study of a certain theme, subject, namely the lived experience" (van Manen 1990:11). According to van Manen, we also have to define objectivity and subjectivity differently than in the natural sciences. Both notions are not opposed in the human sciences, but they find their meaning and importance in the relationship that the researcher has with his or her 'research object'. So according to van Manen, objectivity means being orientated towards the object before him or her. Objectivity means that the researcher remains faithful to the research subject. Subjectivity means that one has to be perceptive, insightful and critical so that the object can be described and shown in its complete richness and greatest depth (van Manen 1990: 20).

Other authors point out the significant difference with the natural sciences and the scientific criteria that go along with it. According to Todres, phenomenological research does not lead to systematic conclusions, but rather to indications of possibilities and unique variations. Truth is in this research an ongoing conversation, that is not arbitrary, but that is foremost an endless quest that changes constantly according to questions and contexts (Todres 2005: 115). Phenomenological research offers the satisfaction of understanding.

Bas Levering considers the question whether respondents tell the truth is not relevant and even senseless: *"We do not ask whether stories are true or untrue, but whether they are convincing or unconvincing. (…) At best, phenomenological research does not hand us knowledge of factual human lives, but of possible human lives."* (Levering 2006: 462).

Other criticisms, such as the emphasis on lived experience or the simplistic view on autonomy and agency are refuted. Robyn Barnacle reminds phenomenological researchers to recognise lived experience as an important source of knowledge, but to accept at the same time that it is a problematic source that has to be questioned in a critical way (Barnacle 2004: 66). Bas Levering also points out that phenomenological researchers cannot view concepts such as identity, self, perspective, interpretation and understanding as evident, but that they have to explicate them (Levering 2006: 451-461). In a more recent article, he and van Manen, are convinced that the recent phenomenological studies meet this demand increasingly: *"They are now more sensitive to subjective and intersubjective roots of meaning, to complexity of relations between language and experience, to the cultural and gendered contexts of interpretive meaning, and to the textual dimensions of phenomenological writing and reflection."* (Levering & van Manen 2002: 283).

Certain researchers highlight the unique contribution of phenomenological research. Much of the appeal of this research can probably be found in the fact that it offers an alternative for the positivistic research model. The depth of the answers of respondents could never be reached with more 'objective' methods such as structured questionnaires. By aiming for the identification of the richness of possible experiences, this research approach can lead to very insightful research (Morse & Field 1995: 22-23).

Paying attention to the variety of experiences, and trying to describe these in your own words without relying on external perspectives or theories, means according to Les Todres that one takes people seriously, that one searches for a language that cares about people. It is a language full of human participation that allows us to share with each other the described experience (Todres 2005: 115).

As one gains insight in motives and actions of people, one can, according to phenomenologists, contribute to the practice, to supporting and questioning a policy (Lester 2004). For the educational sciences, the link between theory and practice is essential. Bas Levering is of the opinion that this concept of applied science means that pedagogy is more than a supplier of knowledge: *"The pedagogue recognises a moral responsibility towards practice. Phenomenological knowledge is time and culture dependent, and although it may seem at first glance in the context of universalist pretentions of sciences a bit flawed, gives pedagogy practical power. Langeveld expressed it as follows: 'It is about this child, in this situation, on this moment'."* (Levering 2001: 85).

Lippitz likewise considers the phenomenological approach an essential contribution to the way in which we look at children, growing up and adults. Phenomenology understands autonomy as the connectedness of children with the world, based on the interconnectedness of the world of things and men, women and children. There is no distinction between children and adults. Because, just like the adult, the child is not an autonomous subject. Meijer refers to a quote of Buytendijk to illustrate what it is about: *"The human being is not 'something' with qualities, but an initiative of relationships to a world, which he chooses and by which he is chosen."* (Meijer 1996:42).

Phenomenological research carries in it a strong appreciation for being in the world, for individual persons (children and adults) and their connectedness, for complexity, and even for ambiguity. It invites itself over and again to question the world around us, and thus also the scientific world. A social science, and thus also pedagogy, may and cannot deny the nature of what it studies, namely a social activity in which questions about meaning and values cannot be left aside and where interpretation and assessment play a crucial role (Smeyers & Depaepe 2003). Because phenomenology does not depart from preconceived concepts and theories of how people stand in the world, this approach can also make a lasting contribution to the theoretical pedagogy. The phenomenologists of today mingle themselves fully in the postmodernism-discussion. Phenomenologists are hereby not always exclusively recognisable as phenomenologist (Levering 2001:90), though that seems to be the result of the very eventful and ambiguous history and development of this movement. Moreover, it is also a sign of its flexibility and influence, which is expected to continue in the coming years.

Journals and websites publishing phenomenological research

Journals

Phenomenology and Pedagogy. A human science journal

Phenomenological research in the educational sciences had one separate journal that focusses specifically on this research approach.

This journal was published between 1982 and 1992 by phenomenological researchers of the University of Alberta, who were inspired by the works of Max van Manen.

Phenomenology and Practice

This journal started in 2007 and represents itself as the successor of Phenomenology and Pedagogy. The journal has the same objectives as the former, but wants to be broader than solely pedagogy. The journal can be consulted online: http://phandpr.org

*do not***Forum: Qualitative Social Research**

FQS is a peer-reviewed multilingual journal about qualitative research. Articles appear regularly that depart from or base themselves on phenomenological principles. This open source journal can be consulted on: http://www.qualitative-research.net/

Children & Society

Most articles published adhere to the sociology of childhood.

Childhood

Childhood publishes research about the culture, economic position, language, health and social networks of children, emphasize children's perspectives and rights.

Qualitative Health Research

This journal focusses specifically on health studies. They handle children's perspectives regularly.

Disability & Society

This journal publishes qualitative research on disability.

Children, Youth, and Environments

This online journal focusses strongly on participation of children and young people: http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/

International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

This magazine publishes different research approaches and methodologies. Especially innovating approaches are stimulated.

Websites

www.phenomenologyonline.com

This website of Max van Manen contains a treasure of information about phenomenological research. Present: the different theoretical approaches, meaning making, methodology, methods, the writing process and the research practice. A number of articles, among others of the magazine 'Phenomenology and Pedagogy' can be consulted online.

www.phenomenology.org

Website of 'The World Phenomenology Institute. World Institute for Advanced Phenomenological Research and Learning'. This institute was founded at the end of the sixties and has a strong philosophical focus.

http://www.ipjp.org/

Website of the Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology. Most articles from the archive are fully consultable. Besides the magazine itself, there is also space for announcements, conferences, links and such.

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