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Dignity and Democracy:
An Exploration of Middle School Teachers' Pedagogy

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Abstract

In an effort to learn more about pedagogy in the action present moments of teaching and in response to Schön's (1987) call for a "phenomenology of practice," this phenomenological study explored the pedagogy of 18 middle school teachers.

The researcher selected participants with a purposive sampling procedure. Participants taught for at least three years in a middle grades school—defined as any school that includes students 10-14 years of age and employs at least two structures in support of middle school philosophy. Fourteen participants chose to participate in a conversational interview about moments they *recognized and responded to when a student did not understand something during an instructional activity*. Four participants chose to write a lived-experience description of this same moment. The researcher identified meanings through phenomenological readings of the data. Meanings in this paper focus on the response portion of the experience and are discussed using Beane's (1997) notion of *high pedagogy*. Findings indicate that responses are experienced in continuous recognition-response processes, which often include a positioning that takes place prior to recognition. Furthermore, responses have a certain feel or manner, and are based on the teacher's perception of how a student will feel as a result of the response.

Introduction

During the last two decades, it has become popular to describe our most skilled teachers as "reflective practitioners." Some might promote reflective practice as metacognition; skilled teachers must think about their own thinking, while others might liken reflective practice to a dedication toward continuous improvement. Certainly, the field of education can agree that practitioners should be committed to continuous improvement. A more genuine question is what does it mean for a teacher to reflect?

Schön's (1983, 1987) work provides a theoretical basis for teacher education programs and professional development programs to imagine reflective practice. Following Schön is a rich set of literature for the teacher interested in *becoming* a reflective practitioner (e.g., McEntee, Appleby, Dowd, Grant, Hole, & Silva, 2003; York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2001), the teacher educator who is interested in helping future teachers become reflective practitioners (e.g., Norlander-Case, Reagan, & Case, 1999; Zeichner & Liston, 1996), and the school administrator who is interested in motivating teachers to do the same (e.g., Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). However, when taking a careful and critical look at Schön's early work and then reviewing some of the more recent work that has followed, a puzzling gap exists. What about Schön's call for a *phenomenology of practice* that at its center includes a reflection on reflection-in-action?

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the *phenomenology of practice* in middle school teaching. To address this purpose from a research perspective, this study invoked pedagogy through phenomenology (van Manen, 1990, 1991a). This first step led toward van Manen's (1991b) notion of the pedagogical moment—a situation in which "something pedagogical is expected of us, and in which we subsequently are oriented totally to that which is good for this child or these children" (p. 508). In response to Schön's call, this study identified a particular pedagogical moment, the moment middle school teachers recognize and respond when a student does not understanding something during an instructional activity, and sought to describe the essential meaning structure of this moment. Identifying these meanings helps the future teacher, the practicing teacher, the teacher educator, and the researcher of teaching to see how teacher thinking and acting take place in practice and may provide opportunities for teachers to think and act more pedagogically in future pedagogical moments.

Review of the Literature

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical foundation of this study drew from two traditions—reflective practice and pedagogy. As previously mentioned, Schön's (1983, 1987) work regarding reflective practice is at the center of this theoretical foundation, followed by a host of scholars (e.g., Daniels, 2002; Griffiths & Tann, 1992; Norlander-Case, Reagan, & Case, 1999; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2001; Zeichner & Liston, 1996) who worked to make theoretical and practical sense of what reflective practice looks like in education. Often, this effort tends toward *reflection-on-action*, one of Schön's types of reflection, in which the practitioner pauses or even stops (Dewey, 1910/1997), and then, thinks back on the action and tries to make sense of what took place. This study, however, makes a different theoretical move and returns to the heart of Schön's theory—*reflection-in-action*. This type of reflection is different in that it involves an *on the spot* type of reflection that requires a rapid thinking and acting on the part of the practitioner. Hence, the reflection can still influence the situation. Schön refers to this reflection as being in the *action present*.

Two primary challenges emerged when responding to Schön's call for a *phenomenology of practice*. The first issue was determining what Schön believes a *phenomenology of practice* should look like in middle school teaching when none of his seminal work was conducted in classrooms. Second was the issue of accessing the *action present*, when by its very nature, the action needs to take place first and then be studied second. To address the first issue, the researcher summoned van Manen's (1991b) work on reflectivity and the pedagogical moment. By invoking the notion of the pedagogical moment, as described above, reflection-in-action in teaching practice could be studied pedagogically. The researcher dealt with the second issue by employing phenomenological data collection and analysis methods after the action, through an unstructured interview or lived experience description. In effect, prompting reflection on reflection-in-action.

Pedagogy in Middle Schools

To examine pedagogy in middle school classrooms, middle school pedagogical practices and broader notions of pedagogy were considered. In relation to middle school pedagogical practices, Roney (2001) identified effective middle school teachers, in part, as those who possess characteristics, such as adapting curriculum and instruction to developmental needs, using varied activities and materials, asking varied questions, and promoting thinking. Brodhagen and Gorud (2005) described teaching approaches (e.g., parallel teaching and station teaching) that are predicated on the middle school teachers' recognition of their students' diverse learning needs. To recognize their students' learning needs, middle school teachers often use preassessment strategies. Miner and Finn (2003) found that math, language arts, science, and social studies teachers frequently used example activities, observations of student responses and discussions, and observations of student performance on a project or product to preassess their students' learning needs. Jackson and Davis' (2000) call to *ensure success for every student* implied that middle school teachers must not only identify their students' learning needs, but also adjust their pedagogical practices to address these needs. Interestingly, Miner and Finn reported that only some teachers in their study (between 16% and 41%) modified students' work group arrangements, the type of product required of a student, and/or the content of learners' activities on a weekly basis. Additionally, Wenglinsky (2004) suggested that certain middle school teachers'

instructional practices, such as time on task in math class and working on projects, appeared to reduce the achievement gap for African American (time on task in math class) and Latino (working on projects) students.

Pedagogical practices—what middle school teachers do during instruction—also beckon a broader consideration of pedagogy. In fact, the research question that guides this study is about a particular pedagogical moment, and aims to make sense of pedagogy more generally as it is lived, by teachers, in middle school classrooms as they try to create dignified, democratic spaces through their responses to students. *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2003) explicated what constitutes the *ideal* middle school context in explicit terms—"for students to be successful, the school's organization, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs must be based upon the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of young adolescents" (p. 1). Importantly, the pedagogy teachers exercise must meet the needs of young adolescents.

This paper imagines a moral consideration of pedagogy by invoking van Manen's (1991a) theory of pedagogy. At first glance, a theory of pedagogy might seem perplexing, primarily because the U.S. education system has often treated pedagogy practically rather than theoretically. This treatment is not problematic since van Manen's understanding of pedagogy is profoundly concerned with the practical everyday lives of teachers and students in relationship with one another anyway. What may be more problematic are the specific *ways* in which pedagogy tends to be appropriated.

Often, pedagogy is used to define the skills and strategies teachers employ. Other times, pedagogy is used to describe methods for how a teacher brings the content to the student. In either case, educators attempt to identify the methods, skills, and strategies for teaching, thinking that the "list" alone constitutes pedagogy in its entirety. This seems logical, especially when considering Shulman's (1987) seminal work regarding pedagogical content knowledge,

> because it identifies the distinctive bodies of knowledge for teaching. It represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction. (p. 8)

Here the focus is on organization, representation, and presentation, which is not problematic. In fact, this work places a necessary importance on pedagogy. This is not to say that teachers do not or should not organize, plan, and present; however, it does present a problem of appropriation and meaning. Van Manen considers pedagogy along moral lines *and* through practical considerations of method and strategy. What is most challenging is that if pedagogy is considered to be an utterance like "any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 69), then pedagogy must be traced back to its earlier "uttered" roots in order to grasp van Manen's theoretical understanding. First and foremost, van Manen's notion of pedagogy "describes all those affairs where adults are living with children for the sake of those children's well-being, growth, maturity, and development" (van Manen, 1991a, p. 28). This is a moral consideration, with a deliberate focus on leading the learner toward growth.

This We Believe (NMSA, 2003) stresses the importance of middle school educators' pedagogical decision-making that is "based on the needs, interests, and special abilities of their students" (p. 9). This statement has profound implication for what teachers need to know pedagogically. For instance, in order for teachers to engage students in active learning, they must recognize developmentally responsive instructional practices and then place students at the center of the learning process. For Beane (1997), placing students at the center of the learning process means that teachers create a place of *high pedagogy* that consists of key characteristics such as teachers respecting the dignity of young people and the teacher believing that young people should be extended the same democratic rights that adults receive. Again, it seems that Beane is looking at pedagogy along moral lines, much like van Manen. Beane is specifically focusing on a teacher's commitment to curriculum integration. While integration is not an aim of this study, Beane's notions of treating young adolescents democratically and with dignity are certainly of interest.

Whether the discussion is framed around *This We Believe's* principles related to pedagogy or Beane's *high pedagogy*, a common challenge is present. What does the teacher actually do in practice to live out pedagogy (morally and practically) within middle school contexts? Moreover, what does it mean for the teacher to exercise this pedagogy? Researching in this manner is a challenging, but necessary task. In this study, I attempted to respond to Schön's call for a phenomenology of practice by conducting a phenomenological study in the tradition of van Manen (1990) with some reliance on the work of Dahlberg, Drew, and Nystrom (2001).

Research Methodology

Schön's call for a phenomenology of practice was envisioned as a general call that includes innumerable subsets of practice. Pedagogically speaking, my attention turned to issues related to pedagogical moments in teaching—when the teacher and his or her students are interacting with each other (Schön's action present). Since the teacher is faced with many pedagogical moments on a daily basis, it was inappropriate to treat pedagogical moments as one experience or even one set of experiences. Instead I studied a *single* pedagogical moment. What pedagogical moment might be of interest to future teachers, practicing teachers, teacher educators, and researchers of teaching? Logically, this was the first of four research activities that constituted the methodological structure of this study:

1. Turning to a phenomenon that seriously interests us and commits us to the world,
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it,
3. Reflecting on the essential themes (meanings) that characterize the phenomenon,
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.

Turning to a Phenomenon That Seriously Interests Us and Commits Us to the World
The research question. As previously mentioned, the phenomenon of interest in this study was a pedagogical moment—the moment when the middle school teacher recognizes and responds to students who do not understand something during an instructional activity. This led to the research question: What is it like for the middle school teacher to experience this pedagogical moment? This phenomenon seemed like a central part of pedagogy. If the aim was for students to understand something, then the pedagogue would want to recognize and respond to moments in which the student did not understand.

Explicating assumptions and preunderstandings. One of the challenges for the phenomenologist is that he or she needs to know enough about the phenomenon of interest to have the credibility and the perceptivity to properly study it, while simultaneously bracketing (Husserl, 1954/1970) this same knowledge. However, a "total and complete" bracketing did not feel realistic. To attend to the participant's descriptions, I opted to bridle (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003) my preunderstandings and assumptions of the phenomenon by writing in a research journal prior to and during data collection and throughout data analysis. Bridling, in short, is more about taking a controlled approach and attitude to the research as opposed to the more "mathematical" finitude of bracketing. In other words, it required that I acknowledge the limitations of being able to set "totally" aside my biases, assumptions, and preunderstandings, and instead committed me to being disciplined about how these biases, assumptions, and preunderstandings might have influenced the data collection and analysis.

Investigating Experience as We Live It Rather Than as We Conceptualize It
One feature that separates phenomenology from other research traditions is the notion of the lifeworld (Husserl, 1954/1970). Phenomenologists believe that we do not experience a fixed, already existing world, but that we experience the world as we live it, as we are conscious of it. Methodologically speaking then, phenomenologists are interested in accessing lived experience in its pre-reflective or "given" state. The obvious limitation is that one can never capture an experience "precisely" as it is experienced. The temporality and spatiality of our experiences and the limitation of our language and our faculties in recalling what happened always hinder us. In that vein, I acknowledge that, at best, I was able to get transformations of the experience or *material* (van Manen, 1990) through people who have experienced the phenomenon of interest.

Finding participants. I identified 18 participants through a purposive sampling procedure (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) that drew upon Polkinghorne's (1989) participant selection requirements for phenomenological research. First, the participants had to have *experienced the phenomenon under investigation*. Each participant was teaching or had taught in a middle school. For the sake of clarity, I defined a middle school as any school that included students 10-14 years of age and employed at least two structures in support of the middle school philosophy (e.g., interdisciplinary teaming, advisor-advisee, exploratory curriculum, looping). Based on prior interactions with potential participants, I felt that these practicing teachers had recognized and responded to a student who did not understand something during an instructional activity. That said, Polkinghorne's second requirement, *that the participant have the capacity to provide full and sensitive descriptions of the experience*, became more challenging. It seemed that teachers who had taught longer had experienced more moments when their students had not understood something and had built up a repertoire of how to respond. Therefore, I focused on teachers who had taught at least three years in a middle school.

Also related to this second selection requirement was the participant's capacity to think through their experience and articulate it in an interview or write it through a lived-experience description. To assess this, it became necessary for me to have had some type of prior professional relationship with the participants. Having worked with the potential participants as their instructor or colleague, I had an understanding of their capacity to think, speak, and write within these professional contexts.

Setting—aiming for contextual variation. In this study, there were multiple settings. Practically speaking, each teacher's classroom was a unique context. I anticipated that the context (e.g., years of middle school experience, the grade level, the content area, the geographic locale) influenced the teacher's recognition of and response to the moment when a student did not understand. This study was not aimed at isolating these various contextual components and "testing" them; rather, it was aimed at investigating the meaning of the phenomenon in light of these contextual components, as a whole, as they were lived. Realizing that context does matter, I attempted to attain some contextual variation (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nystrom, 2001) around the phenomenon. Tables one through four display this contextual variation.

Table 1
Gender and Experience (N=18)

Women	Men	Years of Middle School Teaching Experience
12	6	4.5-18 years

Table 2
Grade Level (N=18)

Multiple grades (6-8)	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9
1	1	9	5	2

Table 3
Content Areas (N=18)

Science & Social Studies	Science & Math	Social Studies	Science	Literacy	Alternative Education	Health
1	1	5	4	5	1	1

Table 4
Geographic Locale (N=18)

Rural	Suburban	Urban
4	13	1

In sum, 12 participants were women and 6 were men, ranging from 4.5 years to 18 years of middle school teaching experience. The group of participants taught across a number of content areas— science and social studies (N = 1), science and math (N = 1), social studies (N = 5), science (N = 4), literacy (N = 5), alternative education (N = 1), and health (N = 1); worked in different geographic locales—rural (N = 4), suburban (N = 13), and urban (N = 1); and taught across a number of grade levels—Grade 6 through Grade 8 (N = 1), Grade 6 (N = 1), Grade 7 (N = 9), Grade 8 (N = 5), and Grade 9 (N = 2). All of the participants were white.

It is important to note that since this was not an ethnographic study, there was no entry into the classroom context in a literal way. I was not interested in observing experience as a participant or as an observer and studying the classroom as a culture. Rather, I was interested in accessing what it is like for middle school teachers to experience the phenomenon of interest. I was interested in the teachers' perceptions.

Data sources. The two primary sources of lived experience data in this study were the *conversational (unstructured) interview* and the *lived experience written description*. Participants selected one of the two methods of participation. Fourteen teachers chose to be interviewed, while four teachers chose to craft lived-experience descriptions using van Manen's (1990) protocol. The purpose of the *conversational (unstructured) interview* was to gather experiential material about the phenomenon. My goal was to keep the participant close to the experience, so I asked the participant to be as concrete as possible. Throughout each interview, I prompted the participant to think of a specific situation, student, and event. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes.

The *lived experience description* provided good access to the phenomenon and served as a second data source. To help participants craft a lived experience description, I contacted participants using email that included a protocol (adapted from van Manen, 1990) for writing lived experience descriptions and one example of a lived experience description.

Data Analysis: Reflecting on the Essential Themes (Meanings) That Characterize the Phenomenon
Interview data and written lived experience description data were analyzed for their meanings in relation to the phenomenon of interest. Each transcript (or description) was first read in its entirety to get a feel for and a sense of the whole experience, followed by a number of line-by-line readings. The first line-by-line reading included careful note taking and marking of excerpts that appeared to contain initial meanings, while I exercised openness (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nystrom, 2001) to the phenomenon. Subsequent line-by-line readings involved articulating the meanings based on the markings and margin notes. To attend to the participants' descriptions, I continued to bridle (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003) my own preunderstandings and assumptions of the phenomenon throughout data analysis.

Most participants responded in writing to the initial meanings. These data helped clarify the meanings of the phenomenon *within* and *across* participants. Then, I removed the meaning from the text to see how its absence influenced the essential meaning structure of the phenomenon. Meanings that seemed to have a strong influence on the essential meaning structure (i.e., their absence changed the structure of the phenomenon) were preserved. Next, I wrote a phenomenological description based on the essential meaning structure and its meanings.

In this paper, I describe meanings in relation to the response portion of the phenomenon. During the description phase of the writing I attempted to remain as close to the participants' descriptions as possible by bridling

pedagogical theories. This meant that I did not use the theories to interpret the descriptions at this point. However, following the description phase I used Schön's (1983, 1987) theory of reflection-in-action and Beane's (1997) theory of high pedagogy to illuminate (Dahlberg, 2005) the response portion of the phenomenon.

Findings

Describing the Phenomenon Through the Art of Writing and Rewriting

During this stage, I became an author of a phenomenological description, which is "an example composed of examples [that] permits us to 'see' the deeper significance, or meaning structures, of the lived experience it describes" (van Manen, 1990, p. 122). As previously mentioned, data analysis focused specifically on the response portion of this phenomenon and this paper focused specifically on what it *means* for the teacher to experience these responses. Therefore, what follows is more about how it is for the teacher to respond to the needs of learners through their pedagogy and less about the content of the response alone.

What it means to *respond* pedagogically when students do not understand during instruction is described in three meanings that relate to how the participants responded when students did not understand something during instruction. I described each meaning with paraphrased language from participants' interviews or descriptions, some participants' verbatim excerpts when appropriate, and some of my interpretations. While Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2003) would ask the researcher to bridle interpretations at this point, I found it necessary to interpret to some degree as I described the meanings. That said, I attempted to bridle the very pedagogical theories that I use in the illumination section of the paper.

Meaning #1: Responding to students when they do not understand is a continuous recognition-response process that often ends with little certainty of whether the present response(s) will help students in the future. In part, this lack of certainty is marked more by hope than a satisfaction that a specific outcome has been reached.

Teachers have hunches about whether a student does or does not understand a particular concept or task, but are not "sure" what or why the student does not understand. Tim's description of working with a boy in his grade 7 science class illustrates this meaning. Students in Tim's class were using a balance to calculate the mass of various objects. While the entire class was beginning to participate in the lab exercise, Tim noticed that one boy did not know how to complete the task.

> Tim: I kind of let him see if he could figure it out for a while but … after keeping my eye on him I could tell just by looking at him that he needed help.

Tim's initial response then was to *withhold* an overt response to help the student, opting to take some time to be sure that the student could not complete the task on his own. Nonetheless this move appears to be pedagogic. Tim seemed to believe that it was necessary for the boy to try to demonstrate his knowledge on his own. Once Tim was more confident in his initial recognition that the student did not understand, he began an overt response.

> Tim: So I go over and … I take the thing off and I put it back on and I ask him … What's the mass of this? And, I'll begin to move stuff around and by doing that he can't really cover up, because generally if it's in a question or a discussion that we're in he can avoid.

Notice how Tim steps in and handles the materials himself. Tim's purpose here, or his response to this particular student, was not to model how to work "properly" with the materials, but to test the boy's understanding and not allow him to cover up his lack of understanding. This seems to imply that Tim's responses were based on a history that he had with the student. Tim emphasized how he felt that the boy typically was able to avoid acknowledging his lack of understanding; almost "hiding" his lack of understanding. Using his prior recognition of the boy's avoidance or "cover ups" informed this response. At first glance, one might wonder how pedagogic it is to respond to students in this manner. It seems in this particular case, the student had a history, at least

through Tim's recognition, of avoiding tasks for which he did not understand. Coming to see this student in this way, Tim made the decision during his instruction, rather quickly it appears, to "help" the student learn by not "letting" him avoid. When considered in this manner, Tim's move might be considered pedagogic (for this student, in this particular situation).

Continuing the response process, Tim began to respond more explicitly, taking more time to work with this particular student—time that he does not typically have.

> Tim: We basically kind of walked through it together, kind of go back to the beginning … with me standing next to him … I can help him, talk his way through it.

Tim now worked closely with the student to understand "how" to complete the task of working the balance. Tim guided the student through the task. The next step in Tim's response illustrates how Tim used a *withholding response* again instead of a *telling* or *showing response*. In a sense, Tim was releasing some control for the sake of the student's learning.

> Tim: Then I'd give him a different one … I let him talk his way through it. He's standing there, like help, he's desperate but I usually let him, you know, fend for himself for awhile.

Tim's description makes it seem as though the student was anything but confident. Although Tim recognized this lack of confidence, even labeling the student's look as "desperate," pedagogically speaking, Tim felt it was important for the student to continue on his own while Tim positioned himself next to the student.

Then Tim referred to a notebook that students use during labs. This notebook was used primarily as a resource for students to refer to when completing tasks such as how to use a balance to measure the mass of an object. Tim left this situation *hoping* the student would use the notebook as a resource, but was not "sure" that the student would be able to do this on his own. This suggests that, in part, responding when students do not understand means that the teacher must accept that he or she will not be certain that their response influenced the student in a sustained way.

Collette, a grade 8 social studies teacher, described a similar process with a student. The emphasis was more on a process *over time* of learning what responses will work with a specific student, rather than one particular moment in time. While Collette did not describe a step-by-step process, she did talk about how she *learned* about the student throughout her interactions with the student *over time*.

> Collette: I think what I feel like inside is like more of a process of like trial and error and I figured out over trial and error examples of times that I need to be real specific with her and once I was specific, like it's in this paragraph somewhere or I want you to find the heading that says … the exact quote or whatever, then she could find things.

Collette's reflection suggests that effective pedagogical responses happen over time and are often not a simple "diagnose" and "treat" process. It involves living, experimenting with the student over time.

Meaning #2: The response often includes a "positioning" that takes place prior to the recognition. This positioning sometimes occurs in a "planned" way—almost a preemptive response in order to recognize.

Experienced middle school teachers have learned to respond before they recognize a particular need to respond. This involves a positioning of their bodies and their intentions so they might be poised for a response. Sally, a seventh grade language arts teacher, tried to "bounce around" during writer's workshop in order to get to the kids who did not understand. Ann, a seventh grade social studies teacher, recognized that a student was not confident so she was ready to "walk through with her" the steps in completing a task. This image of a teacher walking through something with a student seems to be about the teacher positioning herself to respond and continuing to recognize the needs of the student. Other teachers talk about paying

special attention to certain students based on what they have learned about these students' understandings, using language such as tending to *focus, lurk, or hover* over particular students. The teachers' attention and intention are poised to respond to some students, while the other students become more of a background.

The teacher's positioning also communicates an environmental "feel." In other words, the teacher wants the classroom environment to "be" a certain way and believes that his or her position in the classroom space does help create how the environment feels. For instance, Lacy, another grade 7 science teacher, reflected on positioning.

> Lacy: So, you know, we're just kind of talking about that and then you know as we are sitting there, like I said, sometimes I would just be in the front, kind of depends on the class. … I feel like when I'm sitting in the front addressing them, they see me more as authoritative or that you know we've got stuff to do and we need to be on track. If I go and sit in a pod, it's more time like to just discuss, you know it's got a different feel. I'm just sitting down, I'm the same height as they are, I'm not above them or in front of them.

Again, certain purposes for the positioning exist. In this case, Lacy seemed to flip the response (her positioning) in front of recognition rather than in a traditional sequence—first comes recognition and then response. Instead, the notion is that the response might come as something *anticipatory* or almost *preemptive*. One might say then, at times, the response (in this case the positioning) sets up the *opportunity* for recognition, and is not always the *result* of recognition.

Meaning #3: The response is often influenced by the teacher's feelings about students not understanding. Furthermore, the response often has a certain feel or manner that is based on the teacher's perception of how a student will feel as a result of the response.

Taking the teacher's initial feelings first, it seems that the teacher's feelings influence his/her response. At first read, this seems logical and maybe not worth stating. However, the aim here was to *open up* "how" the response was influenced. The aim was not to focus on the teacher's feelings as an end, but rather as a part of the experience of responding to students when they do not understand. Lacy described quite clearly what it was like for her immediately following her recognition, as she was beginning her response.

> Lacy: I'm like, really no one in this class has any idea, you know and so then, where do you go from there and then backing up to reteach or trying to find a way to reteach. The only part about that is you know … I mean I think I give my best lesson the first time around so, now I have no lesson, you know if they didn't get it the first time I taught it, that was the best lesson I had so, then you're really at square one.

Lacy appears to be at a loss, not knowing exactly what to do now that students seem not to understand. This feeling made it difficult to proceed. What should she do? Should Lacy give up or take some time for herself—perhaps tell the class to talk with each other as she deals with this? All of these seem like welcome possibilities and may be necessary for the teacher and the students at times. Generally speaking, however, teachers are not afforded this time. Lacy proceeded to describe a strategy she used when faced with this situation.

> Lacy: I use humor and I just say, "You know I'm sure I taught this concept. Obviously I didn't teach it very well or none of you were here, I was all by myself, it just looked like there were bodies in the chair" … then we try to discuss that or have them go back and look in their notes or reopen the textbook and read from the textbook … until we find the answer.

This use of humor seemed to "alleviate" the situation for Lacy and bought her time to collect herself and then to respond. Apparently, a message was being sent to these students: A "You should know this … were you paying attention?" without having to say so explicitly. Sometimes the teacher's feelings or emotions are so strong that they cannot be alleviated with humor or some other type of coping strategy. Jill, a grade 6 science teacher, described her feeling of anger when working with a student who appeared to be quitting.

> Jill: I think when I'm really mad and when he's really been quitting … I pull him in the hall and say "you know, you just have to do this, you know, you just have to try it" because a lot of times he won't even try, you know and then um, "you just have to try it and if you don't get something, you ask" and um, I said "you know what, chances are you'll get it" and then most of the time he does.

Jill's strong emotions can be felt as she uses language such as "pull him in the hall." With this student, Jill's anger took the response to a new level and literally to a new place (out in the hall). This positioning combined with her emotion was significant for Jill, as presumably other students were "trying" at the same time Jill dealt specifically with this student. In the same interview, Jill described a different student, perceived as a perfectionist, who wanted to be sure he understood everything correctly and in turn had all the correct answers. In this instance, Jill did not feel angry and did not find it necessary to talk with the student in the hall, but felt it was necessary to respond in a manner that communicated trust in the student and hopefully built his confidence and trust in himself. We might call this another example of a *withholding response*, similar to Tim's response earlier.

> Jill: There was a time when he asked me on a worksheet or something, "will you check this over and see if it's right" and I told him "no," and I said … no but I said "do you feel like you've done your best, do you feel like you've answered the question," and he said "yeah," and I said "then I'm not going to check it over, I trust you". And he was … mad, not mad but like, "I can't believe she just said no" … and I just thought well he's got to have confidence in himself, you can't just always go ask the teacher, "is this right?"

A withholding response was pedagogical to Jill because she was aiming to help the student have confidence in himself. Just giving him the answer, while validating, did not help the student grow in the direction that she believed he should grow. The other interesting thing was that Jill saw that the student could not believe that Jill was not responding. This withholding response elicited a certain feeling in the student. Staying with Jill's descriptions a bit longer, it is apparent that Jill's responses to students were aimed also at motivation. For instance, Jill described times when she found it necessary to respond in a "fake" way, almost appearing to stretch the truth a bit to help struggling students gain confidence. This, of course, was not a reactive response to a lack of understanding, but a recognition that certain students need to believe they can "get" something in order for them to "get it." In effect, Jill responded before she recognized whether or not students would understand something.

> Jill: You just have to convince them that they need to have confidence and I don't think you can provide it in a fake way, although I'm kind of starting to provide it in a fake way … "you will, you will get it, I know that you will!" so then um, "look at this one more time … look at the example you wrote down, look at this example, um, now put this together with… ."

The *fake* confidence Jill provided does not appear to be disingenuous, but motivating. Of course, there are times that students do not understand no matter how much confidence they have or how much their teachers have tried to set up the conditions for understanding. In other words, the teacher must respond "after the fact" as well.

The *manner* of teachers' explicit responses must be considered. Many teachers described being soft or gentle in their response so that students did not feel badly about not understanding. Harry described how he worked with a student who was very "social" in that she did not want her peers to know that she did not understand something. Having been her science teacher for nearly two years (grades 7 and 8), Harry was finally noticing that the student was not understanding what she read, but did not want to "call her" on it. Instead, Harry used questioning to have the student tell him what she did not understand.

> Harry: First was talk to her, ask her, I needed her to tell me that this was … not working, and she did with a little bit of questioning, never directly saying it. I just kept questioning and then

she finally said, "Mr. C. I can't concentrate, can't read, it doesn't make sense to me. I just, once I get to a certain point I see all this busy-ness coming around, I'll read it and I won't understand what I just read, I don't even know what I just read, I have no idea."

Harry's choice seems to be an example of a *sensitive* or *gentle* response. He chose to question the student until the student told him "what" she did not understand. In other words, Harry had recognized that reading was the issue, took into account that the student was quite social, and helped her say what she was experiencing when she read. In this case, Harry's relationship with the student and the manner of his response helped him understand what the student did not understand. Returning to Jill, we see another example of a *gentle* response.

Jill: And you know you try to be soft with all of them when they're wrong and they're contributing, you want them to contribute and you say raise your hand, you know it's not going to hurt you. Well it would hurt him if we said "ha, no that's wrong sorry." So I've just got to be real sensitive when he is wrong … the points that he makes sometimes are not directly on the topic or what I'm looking for so then I might say, "you know what that's right, let's talk about that later… ."

This time Jill realized that the student did not "quite" understand something but was making an effort. Therefore, the *soft* response served at least two pedagogic functions. First, it was a literal response to this student in the present situation. Jill did not want the student to be hurt at that moment. Second, Jill was interested in making it safe for this student to continue to contribute.

This safe environment also includes being *non-judgmental* about the student's understanding. Ann described how she interacted with one student who tended to get quite agitated when the student did not understand something. Notice how Ann described what she was saying to herself as she responded.

Ann: Try to be real non-judgmental and just pretend like okay, she's not upset, she's not hostile, um, let's go through it together and you know, "I know you can understand it if we just make sure that you are approaching it in the right way kind of thing. Alright so let's go back and let's start at the beginning."

A history or "knowing the student" seems critical to Collette's response to a student who tends to get upset when he does not understand a larger concept. Collette learned that *gentle* responses were most effective.

Collette: I might go and help him, I might use gentle prompts, "Uh do you need a pencil? Yah. OK, go into my desk you know" … just gentle things, cause those are the kind of things that will allow him, help him to get going … it's … when he perceives things to be really big that he just doesn't learn—then he has problems.

While gentle responses are critical, responses that are "less than gentle" might still be pedagogic, as far as the teacher is concerned. Tim described another student who continually resisted, according to Tim, what he asked her to do. Instead of being gentle, Tim pushed the student to write succinctly about a science concept.

Tim: I said "it needs to be one sentence" and so she'll write more and then I'll cross out … She gets really upset with me so then I hold back after that … But finally she after … many times … maybe 3, she was able to write a sentence and not get upset with me.

Tim seemed to gauge how blunt or straightforward his response or his continued response should be, based on his perceptions of the student's feelings about the response. Again, the "manner" of the response "mattered." Tim had determined what he felt and how he should respond to this particular student.

Considering the Whole of the Phenomenon
Working across these three meanings is at least one common element. For the teacher, responding when students do not understand is not a clear, simple stimulus-response relationship between teacher and student. In other words, the teacher is not just reacting when the student does not understand by accessing a prescribed set of strategies or skills in some mechanical fashion. Rather, the teacher is "living with" students through the response. The words recognition and response seem to connote an if-then proposition—*in order to respond properly, the teacher must first recognize*. However, it appears that the teachers involved in this study did not always experience recognition and response so cleanly. It seems that, at times, teachers were attempting to position themselves for recognition and an accompanying response. Teachers responded in a specific manner based on what they knew about the student. This "knowing" was developed and maintained over time and seemed to be "held" by the teacher. What teachers "knew" influenced their responses during the action, but not in some robotic, programmed manner (i.e., three weeks ago he did this, so this time he will do that) but in a holistic, lived manner—all at once. Teachers were following a *recognition-response process* that was coordinated (Dewey, 1896), not separated, and often culminated in *hope* that students would have future success, not certainty or even strong satisfaction. None of these meanings suggested a clear demarcation within the response or between recognition and response.

Illuminating the Phenomenon

What Can Be Learned From These Particular Meanings?
To review, this particular phenomenon of interest was a specific pedagogical moment and its genesis was in response to Schön's broader call for a phenomenology of practice that at its center includes a reflection on reflection-in-action. Considering the three meanings as parts of the phenomenon, the degree to which there is evidence of reflection-in-action depends in large part on how reflection is imagined. Certainly, there is reflection *on* how participants experienced moments when they responded to students, simply based on the nature of the research design. Invoking Schön's image of reflection-in-action, which is an *on the spot* type of reflection that requires a rapid thinking and acting on the part of the practitioner and informs the practitioner's action as the action is taking place, it seems that something can be learned from these meanings. Teachers were *thinking* and *acting* pedagogically. However, I wonder whether their actions were actually reflections or whether the actions were more about *intentionality* (Husserl, 1954/1970), in that the teachers' consciousness and perceptions were "directed toward" (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nystrom, 2001) some student or some thought or feeling about the student. In some cases the teacher positioned him or herself for possible recognition or response, not only in reaction to a response. This seemed to be less about reflective thinking and more about the teacher's intentions, the teacher being oriented fully (van Manen, 1991a) toward a certain student or to the entire class of students at a point in time. In other cases, the teacher proceeded with an individual student in a process that oscillated between recognition and response, further suggesting that the teacher is orienting him or herself toward the student—*intentionally* toward that particular student at that particular time. Furthermore, it does not appear that teachers spent much time *considering* their response, rather they simply responded in specific ways that were rapid and appear to have been *loaded* with intention, emotion, history, and future. Although Schön talked about reflection-in-action as rapid thinking and acting, it seemed that the actions described here, at the very least, involved reflection *and* intentionality.

A second and more important consideration is the extent to which there was evidence of Beane's (1997) *high pedagogy*. Were teachers respecting the dignity of young people and did teachers believe that young people should be extended the same democratic rights that adults receive? Teachers were not asked these questions directly. However, the data can be illuminated through the lens of high pedagogy, especially if one considers that teachers were orienting themselves pedagogically to what was good for the student and teachers were being thoughtful in their responses (withholding, gentle). One might argue that this orientation is about treating the students with dignity.

What dignity means needs to be interrogated. First, the gentle response seemed to demonstrate sensitivity to the student. Most certainly, one would want teachers to be sensitive to the feelings, thoughts, and opinions of students. In this paper, there is evidence of this sensitivity when the teacher did not call the student's lack of

understanding out in front of the class or when the teacher recognized the student had offered an incorrect answer to a question. For example, Jill decided to be soft with the student because she felt the contribution should (at least) be acknowledged even though the answer was incorrect. Hence, Jill did not say the answer was incorrect. Is this treating the student with dignity? In one respect one might say no. Perhaps allowing an incorrect response to remain "uncorrected" does damage to the whole class and the individual student. In this instance, the incorrect information was reinforced. At the same time, one might say yes this treats the student with dignity. Jill knew this student; she had a history with him. She perceived that he would react emotionally—he would be hurt. Maybe the student would not contribute in the future. Is this treating the student with dignity? Is this honoring where the student is at—at this point in time?

Determining dignity during instruction is not simple. Presumably teachers can respond in a number of ways to situations like these. The point is that the teacher must act rapidly in the action present (during instruction) while considering a student and all students simultaneously. So, in these discrete moments during instruction, the teacher acts in ways that may or may not dignify students. Furthermore, what it means to dignify students in these moments is difficult to ascertain.

Many young adolescents are concerned with how they "appear" to their peers. A sensitive middle school teacher recognizes this about middle school students in general, but also must be attuned specifically to individual students in this regard. In Collette's description, she learned over time that when one of her students got very frustrated she needed to use gentle probing responses. This was especially true when the student was faced with learning larger concepts. Do Collette and other middle school teachers need to respond in this manner for each student? In other words, does the teacher perceive that every student needs these gentle responses? Ostensibly, the answer would be no. The point here is that one must proceed cautiously when trying to break down what it might mean to create spaces for Beane's high pedagogy in middle school classrooms.

Extending this point, a *withholding* response, at first glance, might not seem like a dignified pedagogic act. Why would a teacher withhold something from a student, when the teacher recognizes that the student needs assistance? Is the teacher actually trying to be sensitive? Multiple explanations could exist. I will offer a few possibilities. Taking the most extreme negative stance, maybe the teacher is not interested in being pedagogic (leading the learner toward growth). If this is the case, this might be considered *pedagogic malpractice*. Taking a less dramatic attitude, maybe the teacher is tired and just cannot muster the energy to respond right now, but will try to get to it later. Related, maybe the teacher is pulled away by another student or group of students by a question or a behavior issue. In this case, the teacher wants to respond but the harsh realities of teaching a large number of students takes the fore. Those who have taught middle school students probably can imagine some moments like these. Nevertheless, what was different about the *withholding* response as imagined in this paper was that it appears to have a specific pedagogic purpose. The response aimed to help lead the learner toward growth.

I opened my description of Meaning One with Tim's description of a time he noticed a student who was not able to complete a task. Tim talked about letting the student go for a while to see if the student could figure it out on his own. This withholding response allowed the student to exercise some independence (something young adolescents crave) in trying to understand a difficult concept and allowed Tim to confirm that the student did indeed not understand. One might say that this move dignifies the student, by providing the student with some independence (some space) to "figure it out" on his own, but also acknowledges that the teacher should not continue to let the student *not* figure it out. As Tim's interaction with the student continued, one can see more evidence of withholding. Tim worked alongside the student, talking the student through the process as the student worked with the materials and then even had the student demonstrate on his own how to work with the materials, even though Tim perceived the student as being "desperate" for his assistance. Tim's description makes it seem like he perceived that the student just wanted to be told how to do it, and not have to endure this seemingly painful learning process. Again, one might wonder how this interaction between teacher and student is dignified or democratic. Perhaps, it is democratic for the middle school teacher to let the young adolescent student "go" for a while. Maybe this struggle is a central part of learning; something

independent learners in dignified, democratic learning spaces must experience. As young adolescents *learn* to be independent in their learning, they must venture off on their own a bit. After all, in ideal democratic spaces the middle school student would be allowed to exercise independence but also be given the responsibility to do their individual part for the good of the whole. They would be expected to be responsible democratic citizens in their classrooms.

Wrestling with what it means to teach in a dignified, democratic manner is important. When working with young adolescents, a middle school teacher's commitment to treating them with dignity, honoring who they are, what they are struggling with, and what they are interested in should not be underestimated. In fact, *This We Believe* states that middle school teachers should be "sensitive to individual differences … [and] serve their students well when they model inclusive, collaborative, democratic … approaches to teaching and learning" (p. 9). However, as evidenced by some of the data in this study, one should also not underestimate the challenges teachers face in living out these commitments. The teacher gets frustrated at certain moments in time when students do not understand. Why don't these students understand this? Weren't they listening? I just taught this five minutes ago! I gave my best lesson the first time, now what am I going to do? The teacher finds him or herself "hoping" rather than being "certain" that the responses actually helped the student understand. The teacher must build up a history with his or her students *so that* he or she can be sensitive to individual differences, model democratic approaches to teaching and learning, and so on. This history takes time to develop. I am not suggesting that middle school teachers should not be expected to be sensitive to difference or to teach democratically. Rather, I am suggesting that living out these ideals occurs in small ways *and* that living out these ideals is challenging.

In this study, it seemed that another significant challenge for the teacher was to create democratic spaces where "students routinely assume the role of teacher, and teachers demonstrate that they are still learners, the conditions of a genuine learning community are present" (NMSA, 2003, p. 16). To be fair, participating teachers were not asked how they created democratic spaces like these. In fact, they were asked about times *they* recognized and responded to students. In a sense, the question alone preserved and even prompted a teacher-to-student hierarchy. That said, it is still worth noting that teachers, in general, described moments when they noticed something in the student, making the teacher-student relationship feel more hierarchical than fluid. The teacher was responding *to* the student. An exception would be Harry's relationship with the student who did not understand. We recall Harry having a pretty good idea that the student was having trouble understanding what she read, but not being entirely sure of precisely what was happening while she read. Sensing that this particular student would feel badly about having her lack of understanding "called out" by the teacher, Harry asked questions of the student and gave her opportunities to describe her difficulty. This dignified the student and one might even state that *asking* a student what they are experiencing rather than *telling* the student what the teacher sees is a democratic practice. It seems that Harry was really trying to *learn* about the student's learning. This commitment to this student dignified the student and modeled for the student what it might mean to learn or understand something. In this case, Harry treated the student as a fellow learner.

These issues and considerations cannot be fully resolved here. However, it is necessary to continue to explore what it means for middle school teachers to embody middle school ideals like creating democratic spaces for students to learn in. Ideals like this one must be lived in classrooms between teacher and student for them to actually be attained. In other words, commitments on paper must be experienced in classrooms for the commitments to be realized.

What Else Is There to Learn?
Quite candidly, there is much more to learn as this work has barely scratched the surface. First, the *entire* essential meaning structure of this phenomenon (recognition and response) needs to be fully explored. Related to this purpose is the need to extend the examination of reflection-in-action to include the recognition portion of this phenomenon. This is necessary because this paper merely suggests, at this point, that the phenomenon is more about *intentionality* than it is about reflection. This claim needs further scrutiny.

I also must acknowledge that I have used notions of dignity and democracy (through Beane and *This We Believe*) to open up discrete moments during instruction. I do not see this as problematic; in fact I contend that it is in these very moments that commitments to dignified, democratic practices are lived or not lived. However, I do acknowledge that original development of these notions has broader aims and I have appropriated them here for a specific purpose.

Finally, I must acknowledge that this study does not claim that participating teachers or any teacher for that matter always recognize and respond pedagogically when students do not understand. Teachers miss things. Teachers make mistakes. This study aimed to elucidate moments when the teacher actually did recognize and respond, and this paper considered how these descriptions might help those interested in middle school education to imagine dignified, democratic learning spaces. Furthermore, this study does not "answer" all questions of pedagogy in middle schools and is only a start to developing a phenomenology of middle school pedagogy. In fact, one might imagine a number of other pedagogical moments to study—the moment the student rebels or the moment a teacher realizes that he or she has *not* recognized and responded pedagogically to a student's lack of understanding during instruction. Another interesting study would involve asking similar questions of middle school students. What is it like for the middle school student to not understand something during an instructional activity?

This paper and the larger study began a response to Schön's call for a phenomenology of practice in middle school classrooms by considering what it is like for teachers to live through their own pedagogy. This work is helpful because it provides researchers, teacher educators, practicing middle school teachers, and future middle school teachers with an opportunity to learn and think about what practicing middle school teachers experience when they respond to their students' learning and may even allow teachers to act more pedagogically in future moments.

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