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Unlearning to learn: Investigating the lived experience of learning English

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ABSTRACT: What is the journey of acquiring language? What is the journey of sharing it? These are the questions that compelled the hermeneutic phenomenological investigation (Gadamer, 1960/2004; van Manen, 1997) that led to this paper. Guided by the voice of Heidegger (1954/2008), I discovered the necessity of "un-learning to learn" in order to hear the voices of the elementary English learners who were at the heart of my study. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on lived experience, led me to a re-examination of my own language learning experiences as a point of connection to my participants. Through conversations and visits with elementary English learners, I sought to discover their experiences of learning English in a United States public school and to uncover insights with pedagogical and methodological implications. Through my phenomenological journey, I came to question my previously held conceptions of English learning and teaching. I have been transformed by this study through an un-learning of what I thought I knew and I am now working to re-learn what it means to teach.

KEY WORDS: English language learner, learning, literacy, lived experience, phenomenology, transformative inquiry.

> Using ideas as my maps
> "We'll meet on edges, soon," said I
> Proud 'neath heated brow
> Ah, but I was so much older then
> I'm younger than that now[1] (Dylan, 1964)

> In summary, I am suggesting that interpretive inquiry can lead to what I have termed "transformative inquiry", and that what characterises the transformative enterprise is an understanding that spirit and spiritual development are at the heart of personal, scholarly, and organisational life, and therefore, of change. (Anglin, 1996, p. 99)

> As such, it is an attempt to discover what lies at the core of our being. (Hultgren, 1987, p. 36)

INTRODUCTION

As a graduate student in my first semester of doctoral studies, I was guided to hermeneutic phenomenology on the recommendation of a peer who had been drawn to it. Five years later – my last day on campus – I encountered him again. In our final conversation, we agreed that the essential questions we have to ask ourselves about our research include not only the implications our discoveries hold for pedagogy and the field, but also how our engagement with the study changes us as researchers and as human beings. As noted by Ajjawi and Higgs

[1] "My Back Pages" written by Bob Dylan. Copyright © 1964 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1992 by Special Rider Music. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. Reprinted by permission.

(2007), hermeneutic phenomenology "in addition to adding to the body of knowledge" also may enable "researchers to engage in their own learning journey towards a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being researched, the strategies adopted, and themselves as researchers" (p. 633). Although the study opened up in this paper is an investigation of how elementary English learners experience schooling in English, it is simultaneously the story of my own phenomenological journey as I experienced a transformation of my beliefs. Here, I seek to share not only the things that reveal themselves about the lifeworlds of my young participants but also the ways that undertaking and engaging with this investigation changed me as a researcher. The stories are intertwined, for as van Manen (1997) reminds us,

> To present research by way of reflective text is not to present findings, but to do a reading (as a poet would) of a text that shows what it teaches. One must meet with it, go through it, encounter it, suffer it, consume it and, as well, be consumed by it. (p. 153)

I made my first foray into the world of hermeneutic phenomenology by investigating the lived experiences of teachers of English language learners in elementary and secondary schools as an assignment in my initial course in the research approach. As I began to thematise the content of my conversations with teacher participants, I was devastated to find that we fell into an easy discourse: talking about the students through numbers, labels and acronyms that served to distance ourselves from the children of whom we spoke and to dehumanise them in the process. Thus, I continued my phenomenological journey knowing that my research needed to include the voices of the students whose educational experiences I hoped to improve. Although I had been teaching English learners for about ten years when I embarked on the study shared in this paper, I was afraid that I would *hear* the voices of my young participants without *listening* to them. I feared that my hubris might render me deaf me to their voices, that I might be so wrapped up in ideas that I would fail to meet with students as equals in my investigation of their experiences of learning English. What songs might my elementary English learners be singing that I, with my focus on instructional goals and assessment, might be unable to heed? I undertook this study intending to continue to grow as a phenomenological researcher, as a teacher, and as a human being, as well as with the hope of bringing to the surface new understandings of how elementary English learners experience the instruction of academic English at school.

QUESTIONINGS AND METHODICAL STRUCTURE

Guided by the work of Heidegger (1954/2008) and Gadamer (1960/2004), which provides the philosophical underpinnings of this paper, and informed by the work of van Manen (1997), which offers concrete steps for engaging in phenomenological research, the study I share in this paper continues to inform me as a researcher, even when I am working in other methodologies, as it continues to inform my way of being in-the-world. Gadamer (1960/2004) tells us, "The need for a hermeneutics is given precisely with the decline of self-evident understanding" (p. 183). Much of the richness of phenomenological work is the necessity of opening up one's own understandings of the phenomenon in order to create the space for considering the lived experiences of others. Through the phenomenological journey, I am urged to revisit my own experiences to find ways that they may bridge to the lived experiences of English learner students. I also reflect upon my assumptions around the

experiences of teaching and learning English in order to create a space for meeting, conversing and hearing. I reflect on my understandings, consider the phenomena, and seek the lived experiences of young English learners to ask: What is the lived experience of learning English at school? Additionally, given the transformative possibilities of engaging in phenomenological research, I open myself to the potential impact that this investigation may work upon me and ask: Given the primacy that phenomenology places upon the voices and lived experiences of participants, what might I learn from the children and from this investigation that will inform me as a researcher, teacher and human being? Gadamer (1960/2004) writes, "We cannot have experiences without asking questions" (p. 356). It is in the asking of the questions that my transformation begins.

Because of the hermeneutic nature of this investigation, the question *is* the beginning. However, before I step into the story, I offer an outline of the methodical structure that serves as the guide for the study as well as an overview of my research activities. Van Manen (1997) offers a structure that calls for a "dynamic interplay" among six research activities, including turning to the phenomenon, investigating lived experience, reflecting upon essential themes, describing the phenomenon as one writes one's way to meaning, maintaining a pedagogical relation to the phenomenon, and balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (pp. 30-31). By recursively entering into these activities, I come to the story I share now.

To enter into the lived experience of elementary English learners, I engage in audio-recorded conversations with two elementary English learners, Carlos[2] and Alejandro. They are students who were recommended to me by their teachers for participation in this study. Their parents gave their consent and both Carlos and Alejandro gave their assent. The approach of phenomenology creates a space for listening openly to Carlos and Alejandro without attempting to sort and label their assertions, anecdotes and descriptions into categories constrained and created by theories. I invite their stories, which serve as "a portal through which a person enters the world and by which his or her experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477).

I transcribe our conversations, then read and re-read them, dwelling with them. I reflect on them, delving into them as themes arise. I write my way through these themes in a journey of writing to meaning. I open up and interpret their voices. In discussing the hermeneutic experience, Gadamer explains that: "the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to expand the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally" (1960/2004, p. 291). Thus, an essential element of phenomenological research is the revisiting of one's own experiences and understandings as a bridge to opening up oneself to hear the experiences and understandings of others. Through phenomenology, my interpretations of my experience and of the experiences and lifeworlds of my participants are informed by anecdotal narrative, insights gathered from poetic texts, and word etymologies (van Manen, 1997). Through literature, poetry and song, the connections across experiences and implications for pedagogy begin to reveal themselves.

[2] All names have been replaced with pseudonyms for the purposes of confidentiality.

CONNECTIONS

As a teacher of English learners, I wonder what connections may link my life to theirs. I seek to find threads that link us so we may meet at the edges and I may come to know them as themselves.

> In the very earliest time,
> when both people and animals lived on earth,
> a person could become an animal if he wanted to
> and an animal could become a human being.
> Sometimes they were people
> and sometimes animals
> and there was no difference.
> All spoke the same language.
> That was the time when words were like magic.
> The human mind had mysterious powers.
> A word spoken by chance
> might have strange consequences.
> It would suddenly come alive
> and what people wanted to happen could
> happen—
> all you had to do was say it.
> Nobody could explain this:
> That's the way it was.[3]

Language has power – power that draws its strength from the connections it can make and power that is diminished by the opportunities that may be lost in its shared absence. Language allows us to connect. Language gives the freedom of voice. Language can serve as the bridge over a wall. The magic of language lies in its inherent possibilities, but that magic can be extinguished when language is not shared, is not recognised, or is not heard. The speaker in this poem imagines a time when the language of humans did not hold privilege over the language of animals – there was no privilege to be had, because the world was an open place of equal possibilities. Words can be magic and can hold great power. In the United States, a standard form of English is the language of power. Power can be shared and given through language. And people can engage language to empower themselves.

I was born into this language of English; it is a part of me as much as my skin and my blood. I have put most of my waking hours to exploring questions around language, coming to this place through my own moments of language, power and loss. Van Manen (1997) reminds us that, in order to investigate, we must hear the voices of those whose lived experiences we dwell upon. In my wondering, threads of connection reveal themselves. Although I have not had the experience of acquiring English in school, I have been and am a language learner. Olsen and Jaramillo (1999), who write about diversity among English learners, note that when working to sort types of students into clear-cut groupings, "like any attempt to 'categorize' real human beings, the lines and distinctions often begin to blur or merge" (p.

[3] "Magic Words" (1998) adapted by Edward Field from a text collected by Knud Rasmussen on his Fifth Thule Expedition. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Edward Field.

213). To better hear the voices of Carlos and Alejandro, I critically reflect upon my own experiences as a language learner so that I may be open to learning what they may have to teach. The bold lines separating me from students fade and unravel. What is the journey of acquiring language? What is the journey of sharing it? My gaze shifts to my own history of language and the moment I realised when I did not possess the power of words.

How might my own experiences bring insight to my knowledge of the experiences of English learners? "To be aware of the structure of one's own experiences of a phenomenon may provide the researcher with clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon and thus to all the other stages of phenomenological research" (van Manen, 1997, p. 56). I revisit one of my own experiences as a language learner, the experience of being a newcomer. Newcomers are students who are new to the language and the culture in which they find themselves. While typically the term "newcomer" refers to first-generation immigrants, later generations experiencing an English-dominant environment for the first time may also encounter some of the transitions and shocks of the newcomer. Both of the students whose voices inform this investigation met such moments. Carlos experienced the challenges of being a newcomer when he first came to the United States from Mexico. Although born in the United States, Alejandro experienced some of the same challenges when he left the comfort of his Spanish-speaking Salvadoran enclave to enter into the English-only environment of his school. Seeking to critically open up my understandings of what it means to be a newcomer, I turn inward to my memories.

On a cloudy day in late March of 1998, I pressed my face against the tiny window of a small plane, trying to figure out the white specks scattered like grains of rice over the sharp hills below me. Just a moment before our descent, I realised that they were sheep, thousands and thousands of sheep scattered across gray-green hills as far as I could see. After that moment of clarity, my first hours as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Republic of Macedonia unfolded in a gray landscape of dreams, thickened by jet lag from my first international flight. On the bus to the hotel, the only way that I knew I was myself was because I recognised my hands as they wiped the condensation from the window. Even then, I questioned whether those hands were my hands. Casey calls this a "profound sense of placelessness" (2009, p. 302). Although I had intentionally, enthusiastically consented to this displacement, it did not ease the starkness of the experience. Casey writes of the fear "that no one, and in particular no place, will harbour me any longer. As a consequence, I experience myself as isolated from others, from place, and from myself in place" (p. 197). I knew no one in this country or even on this continent. If I were to lose myself from myself, who would notice and care?

Years later, I wish I had a picture of my face in those hours, and in the days that followed. I think I have seen this version of my face in the faces of others, when I am the one introducing the strange toilet, speaking the strange language, leading children down a hallway into rooms full of books in a foreign alphabet. Recently I visited a class of teachers to talk about English language learners. We talked about newcomers, and, driving back from my visit, I thought of the many newcomers I have known. When I first meet them, they all have one thing in common. My colleagues and I had a name for this commonality; it was the "look." The look may be found upon the face of a newcomer fresh from the plane, the boat, the train, the long walk across the desert. Sometimes the look carries the shell-shocked shadow of one displaced, torn up by the roots, and tossed down in a world of strangers, with strange houses,

a strange language, and often strange weather that sends prickles of icy cold down from the sky. How might critical reflection about my own experiences offer insights into the lifeworlds of newcomers?

I chose the circumstances of my displacement. English learner immigrants come to the United States because their parents are coming, and they must go along. They do not play an active role in their uprooting. For many of them, the leap into newness is a forced decathexis. I think of Hansel and Gretel thrust out into the strange forest:

> They wandered about the whole night, and the next day, from morning till evening, but they could not find a path out of the wood. They were very hungry, too, for they had nothing to eat but a few berries they found growing on the ground. And at last they were so tired that their legs refused to carry them any longer, so they lay down under a tree and fell fast asleep. (Lang, 1966, p. 254)

This tale echoes the exhausting experience of newcomers tossed into a strange climate, culture and linguistic forest. For the child newcomer, nothing is familiar. What can we, as teachers, do to make the world right again? And, as part of the process of mutual learning, what might *they* tell *us*? What wisdom might they share with those willing to listen?

My earliest experience of phenomenology are echoed by van Manen (1997): "Rather than teaching us to live our lives with children more fully, educational research so often seems to be cutting us off from the ordinary relation we adults have with children" (p. 139). If I do not seek the voices of those who are living the experience every day, how can I answer the question: What is the lived experience of learning English in school?

I return to students but in this moment they are the teacher and I am the learner. Carlos and Alejandro are not my students, but when I explain to them that I am a teacher trying to learn about the experience of learning English at school so that I and my peers may be better teachers, they are as delighted to share their worlds with me as I am to hear what they have to teach me. Carlos is a slim, small sixth-grader with delicate bird-like bones peeking out from under his thin, creamy skin. He is polite and professional, accepting his role in this research investigation with the gravity it calls for. Alejandro is in third grade; he quivers with enthusiasm when he welcomes me into his family's apartment. His desire to share is palpable and it is impossible not to smile in his sunshine, which diminishes occasionally across our conversation. I am privileged to have been invited into the lived experiences of Carlos and Alejandro through our conversations.

Although Carlos is not a newcomer when I meet him, he remembers well his experience of emigrating from Mexico near the end of his second-grade year. With the exception of mathematics, Carlos found his school subjects foreign both in content and in language. He found that mathematics held magic words and in mathematics he was fluent, whether he was in school in Mexico or in the United States. Describing mathematics, Carlos declares, "It's not difficult. You *just have to* ***deal*** with numbers." In other subject areas, there are worksheets in English to be figured out, "big chapter books" and "textbooks" of intimidating size and in an uncomfortable language, but in math, except for the complicated world of word problems, the language is one of familiarity and ease. When Carlos arrived in the United States, he had completed about three years of education in Mexico. He explains that he could

"do [math] in Mexico too because it's *just the same numbers*." For Carlos, reading, science and social studies require a linguistic codeswitching – they are a leap into strangeness, into a language whose power he has not yet fully come into. The language of math, for Carlos, crosses national and linguistic borders. Whether in Mexico, or the United States, the numbers remain the same. The names of the numbers may change, but their shape and meaning when placed against each other in calculation need no interpretation.

Although Alejandro, born in the United States to parents from El Salvador, has never been a newcomer in the sense of immigrating to a new country from the old, he has been and is a newcomer in his own way, as he makes the daily transition from his cosy, familiar Spanish-speaking family home into the linguistically strange and textually complex foreign world of school. As he will share with us, text in school is a foreign land to him. Like Carlos, Alejandro also finds familiar territory in mathematics. For Alejandro, the connection to math is more personal. His father is a construction worker. For Alejandro, the pleasure of math is that "you get to, like, learn about how to build," giving him the skills that his father possesses. Math also opens up the space for fun in the classroom, as students play a game called "Around the World". Alejandro fairly vibrates with delight when telling me about this game:

> You have this big stack of cards and they have to go on to another person. And then she'll show a card like "5 + 5" and the first person that gets it right gets to go all the way around the classroom. They can sign the wall!

Math is freeing and fun. In Alejandro's experiences of mathematics, there is a possibility for success and recognition, as students sign the wall, leaving their names in a place of honour for posterity (or at least the remainder of the school year!).

Both Carlos and Alejandro teach me about the sanctuary possibilities of mathematics, where they find an island of the familiar in an ocean of the foreign. They find magic words in mathematics, a subject where they hold some power and may relish the experience of linguistic and academic success. Although both have had experiences of newcomers, they have found a content area in school where they are not linguistic strangers longing for familiarity. In my own experience as a newcomer, I spent the first three months of my life in Macedonia with a family who kept a Macedonian-English dictionary on the dining room table where we broke bread together at least once a day, who carefully labelled each piece of furniture and part of the house with neatly printed Cyrillic labels, who surreptitiously noted when I ate everything on my plate and diligently repeated those particular dishes as often as possible. Alejandro and Carlos had the language of mathematics and I had the affection of the Пингови family to create sanctuary in a strange new world. Perhaps we are not so different, my students and I.

REFUGEE

In addition to reflecting on the threads that may connect my lived experiences with those of English learners, the task of phenomenology urges me to examine my beliefs and assumptions around learning English, a phenomenon that for me is also bound up in my assumptions around teaching English. I return to the second question that compelled this

investigation: Given the primacy that phenomenology places upon the voices and lived experiences of participants, what might I learn from the children and from this investigation that will inform me as a researcher, teacher, and human being? Heidegger's (1954/2008) voice awakens me from dreams, reminds me that:

> It is important above all on the way on which we set out when we learn to think we do not deceive ourselves and rashly bypass the pressing questions; on the contrary, we must let ourselves be admitted into questions that seek what no inventiveness can find. Especially we moderns can learn only if we always unlearn at the same time. Applied to the matter before us: we can learn thinking only if we radically unlearn what thinking has been traditionally. (p. 374)

As I begin to learn to think about the questions that are calling me, matters that concern me, and claims that hold me, I open myself to listening to others – to children – and I set myself the task of un-learning that which I have been taught. If I do not consider the ways in which my own experiences as a learner and a teacher may inform or muffle my ability to listen to the experiences of others, my understandings cannot move forward. Van Manen (1997) points out that, "If we simply try to forget or ignore what we already 'know,' we may find that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections. It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions and theories" (p. 47). As a teacher, I see that I have gathered a coven of assumptions and beliefs around me like familiars. How did I get to this place? What must I do to shed them? I revisit the moment of my journey from language *learner* to language *teacher* to discover the core of my teacher-ness. As a Peace Corps Volunteer in Macedonia, my primary role was that of a teacher of English. However, given my status as a United States citizen living in the Balkans and as a learner of Macedonian language and culture, I, my students, friends and neighbours all recognised the fact that the bulk of the learning was *mine*.

One of the oddest moments of my life was when my Peace Corps Volunteer colleagues and I were described by a Bulgarian newspaper as "refugees". I remember scoffing at that word, thinking of my flashy blue and gold passport and the unearned privileges of border-crossing ease it carried. Seeking to uncover the experience of refugee, I find Lazard (1978):

> Welcome to you
> who have managed to get here.
> It's been a terrible trip;
> you should be happy you have survived it.
> Statistics prove that not many do.
> You would like a bath, a hot meal,
> a good night's sleep. Some of you
> need medical attention.
> None of this is available.
> These things have always been
> in short supply; now
> they are impossible to obtain.[4]

[4] From "Ordinance on Arrival" written by Naomi Lazard. Copyright © 1978, 1984 by Naomi Lazard. Reprinted by permission of the author.

A number of English learners come to school as refugees. Of these children, Handscombe (1989) writes, "Their gratitude for having been granted a safe place to live is often tempered by the sense of loss they feel in having had to leave their homeland, family, and friends, with only the remotest possibility of ever returning" (p. 2). The end of their journey out of conflict places them at the beginning of a new series of conflicts. As Lazard suggests in her poem, escaping the war and surviving the journey may be only the first part of an ongoing campaign. I learned much from Abiola, who had arrived in my elementary school as a refugee from Africa. When I first met him, he had not yet held a pencil or scissors. In coming to know him, I began for the first time to reconsider my held assumptions about what it means to be literate and to critically reconstruct my narrow definition of literacy. I think I learned more from Abiola than from any student. Abiola and I regularly had lunch together and then would spend the rest of the lunch period co-writing and co-illustrating stories. I taught Abiola how to grip pencils and to write his name, and he taught me novel perspectives and the possibilities of rethinking.

How may I connect with Abiola and other English learners who come as refugees? One thread between us, however thin, may be my experience and work in Macedonia, which ended suddenly after a waiting-period in Bulgaria to see if the inconsistent peace of the Balkans would come in time to allow us to return to our posts. It did not. I left the region reluctantly and bitterly, disgusted by war and with the bile of imposed exile lingering in my mouth. I felt that I had been ejected from my own life. Soon after leaving Macedonia, at a train ticket counter in Italy, I inadvertently slip into the linguistically familiar when trying to make a swift query so that I will not miss my flight. I do not understand why my pleas are ignored until the gentleman behind the window puts up his hands, "Lady, why don't you speak English? You can speak English here." I stare at him in shock. Homeless, I have spoken the language closest to my heart at that moment; I have spoken Macedonian. The threads between students and I grow stronger, intertwine; I am coming to know my own self. Reflecting on my experiences and the experiences of the English learners I have known, I believe that in a small way, all language learners are refugees. Thrust out of the familiar, we are all seeking sanctuary and connection in a new world. In coming into that strange world, we have to learn to make sense of ourselves in it, to accept that the life we thought we would live will not unfold, and to find a new way of being in a surreal and sometimes hostile territory.

I learn from Alejandro that in his own way, he daily lives the experience of refugee in school, longing to flee the reading class he experiences as a dangerous place. To address this danger, Alejandro has constructed a duck-and-cover response to teacher questions. He shares his shame when he is called upon in class to read. "I get nervous because I have to read in front of all the people out loud. The other kids look at me," he explains, and looks away, laughing and shrugging. "Then, if I can't, can't read – somebody [else] get called." Alejandro has even developed his own strategy for not getting called upon. Pointing out that the people who get called on the most are the ones that raise their hands, he demonstrates to me the way that he places his arms and hands flat on the sides of the desk in front of him, looking down, when the teacher is searching for a student to call upon. "I like to keep my hands down," he laughs, "so I can't read. I keep my hands down like this cause I don't want the teacher to call on me." To Alejandro's dismay, the teacher sometimes calls on him anyway. "She picks from a can. It

has sticks and numbers, and I'm number 10, and if she picks somebody's number, they get to read." He goes on to show me the horrified look that crosses his face when he hears the dreaded "10" being called out by his teacher, like a bullet that he has no opportunity to dodge. Alejandro wants to leave, to find sanctuary elsewhere, but he is stuck.

Looking in literature and song to find Alejandro, I see him hiding in a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, *The Ugly Duckling*. As the Ugly Duckling fled his flock, likewise, Alejandro seeks to hide his singular presence in a classroom full of children. I don't know how to show him that he is secretly a swan.

TEACHER

A self-ordained professor's tongue
Too serious to fool
Spouted out that liberty
Is just equality in school
"Equality," I spoke the word
As if a wedding vow
Ah, but I was so much older then
I'm younger than that now
(Dylan, 1964)

Teaching English learners is a profession I came to out of guilt, and then stayed with out of passion and love. You see, my neighbours in Macedonia had said that as long as I, the local American, was still there, they would not be afraid that the regional upheaval would come too near. The children of my village saw me with my backpack full the day I went to Greece, where I had been told to go and where the Peace Corps would provide transportation to a sanctuary hotel in Bulgaria. I had a headache that day. I think we all did. The roaring from the NATO jets was a non-stop tearing of the sky; there was nowhere to go to escape from the noise. "Where are you going, Pamela?" they asked as they followed me down the street. "Каде? Каде?" It was their regular question for their resident American**.** Most days my answer was truthful and uninteresting. On the day I left for Greece, I didn't want to scare them. I was tired, and not a little scared myself. "I'm going camping," I lied. And I carried that lie with me. I promised myself then that I would teach other children, immigrants, refugees, language-learners. If I couldn't keep my responsibility in Macedonia, then I could be part of the welcoming committee in my own country. I owed it to my Macedonian students to commit myself to serving other children who needed support which I could provide.

In my teacher certification program and in the many workshops and professional development programs I attended in the years after Macedonia, I accepted information on the needs and pedagogy of English learner without questioning. My professors and administrators had all the answers – my job was to implement. Justice would be served and equity would be assured through my diligent implementation. I glowed with idealism and hope. I was a missionary following my vocation. I was working for equality. I was preventing failure.

But it never seemed to work out that way. I felt disconnection between the curricula and the lives of my students, and though I sought to bridge it, reflecting on my daily effectiveness raised questions about my teaching, about my students, and about the rules of the work of school. Heidegger (1954/2008) tells us that we must let students learn, declaring, "Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn" (p. 380). I was driven by the urge to teach and, though I created the space to let students learn, I did not do so with the intentionality that hindsight can provide.

> Lies that life is black and white
> Spoke from my skull. I dreamed
> Romantic facts of musketeers
> Foundationed deep, somehow
> Ah, but I was so much older then
> I'm younger than that now
> (Dylan, 1964)

What am I learning from my careful unlearning? Earlier in this writing, Heidegger (1954/2008) reminded me that I "can learn only if [I] always unlearn at the same time" (p. 374). The more I consider my questions around the experiences of English learners and the experiences of teaching them, the more I need to un-learn and shed my gathered and held assumptions. That which was black and white dissolves into gray.

Are we providing the space to let children learn? I am not sure my teacher-training program taught me how to let learn, although it certainly provided a strong foundation on how to teach. I am at the beginning of a journey to discover how we may let children learn and it is a process that requires my own un-learning. I am seeking to uncover my own intentions and the held understandings that have brought me to this point.

NAMINGS

As I shared earlier, I fell into a habit of using a dehumanising language to talk about my students. Labels and numbers may bring professionalism to discourse about students but they also bring distance. How easily I slipped into this when I was a novice teacher. Over a decade later, labels come easily and naturally to my tongue when I am in conversation with colleagues, but now my mouth often burns in the moment or in the memory. In the United States, the federal term to identify English learners is Limited English Proficient (LEP). Ovando, Combs,and Collier (2006) write,

> This term has recently been criticised for its negative connotations. It has been argued that the use of the word *limited* in the term limited-English-proficient reflects a focus on what the child cannot do rather than on what he or she can do, and that it implies a bias against non-English speakers as being less able than English speakers. (p. 14)

What do we mean by "limited"? Van Manen (1997) reminds us that "Being attentive to the etymological origins of words may sometimes put us in touch with an original form of life where the terms still had living ties to the lived experiences from which they originally sprang" (p. 59). A further look at limited, from the Latin *līmitem*, "a boundary" (Skeat, 1974,

p. 342) further reveals the location of English learners in the school. These students are often at the edge, in the borderland. They may be kept there at first by their inability to reach their teachers and peers through a common language and remain there by an identity thrust upon them by official documents, pushed back to the pedagogical borders, if not the physical ones.

Describing the students at the heart of my investigation becomes even more problematic when I face the language that we use to describe their literacy and their academic endeavours. Students who are not able to meet grade-level teaching objectives and standards without support are *struggling* or *poor* readers; they achieve *non-proficient* scores on school district quarterly benchmark and annual state assessments. Those scores fit into the categories of *Basic 1* or *Basic 2*, or may even fit into the box of *at-risk*. I am finding it difficult to write about students without using these terms but I wonder at the dangerous place this brings me to, where I think of my students not in terms of hopefulness and possibility, but of the preconceived limits I impose upon them through my naming of them. To set them free, I must re-write the text of their naming in my own heart.

Going deeper into my questioning of these taken-for-granted terms, I seek the roots of the word "struggle". We often speak of students who find the task of academic literacy challenging as *struggling* readers. I cringe when I think of the many times I have tossed this term around as easily as I do words like "student" and "teacher". An investigation of the word *struggle* brings me to the Old Norse "strúgr" meaning "ill-will" or "contention" (Onions, 1966, p. 877). If the act of engaging with text, or reading, is one of contention, I wonder what we have done to create school contexts that have made it so?

SEEKING MAGIC IN THE WRITTEN WORD

> The remnants of past life – what is left of buildings, tools, the contents of graves – are weather-beaten by the storms of time that have swept over them, whereas a written tradition, once deciphered and read, is to such an extent pure mind that it speaks to us as if in the present. That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us. In it time and space seem to be superseded. (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 156)

> ELLs have yet to reap the promised benefits of this educational reform; instead, the quality of schooling for ELLs may indeed have worsened, rather than improved, during the NCLB era. (Menken, 2010, p. 122)

> Most of the children in this study are experiencing disconnects between home and school practices, which Dewey (1902/1956) discussed a century ago. This leads one to question how much schooling has changed to meet the needs of children. (Kersten, 2007, p. 151)

As Gadamer tells us, literature is not a dead thing; rather, texts come to us rich with possibility and magic. When I was a child, I experienced books as portals into worlds of fantasy and hope. My reading life was often more present and relevant to me than my life in the "real" world. Entangled in students' lived experiences of learning English in school is their experience of learning to read and write in English. What are *their* lifeworlds of literacy?

As I was preparing for this study, I had lunch with a group of Filipino teacher colleagues and their bilingual (Tagalog/English) children, all of whom are "A" students, at or near the top of their classes. I asked the children about their experiences with reading, thinking that their academic success might equal a love of reading, as it did for me. However, their answers surprised me. One child noted that reading at school is work, "it just gets boring – it's just do this, and do that." Several of them informed me blithely that the purpose of reading is to complete worksheets, do well on tests, and get good grades. One kindergartener told me that she found school "hard" because her teacher was withholding words. The youngest child in her family, she saw the academic success of her older brothers and sisters and was impatient that she was so far behind, relegated to a class where the teacher doles out letters of the alphabet one at a time, successful so far only in her ability to follow the on-task behaviour chart, to "stay on the best colour all of the time". Her experience of school was one of constraint; eager to surpass expectations, she felt limited by them at the age of five.

After an organised, visually and linguistically rich lesson full of engaging activities and focusing on a playful book, a student teacher that I recently observed asked her first-graders, "Why do we learn?" Most of the children sat stumped and silent, puzzlement creeping across their faces. One child shouted triumphantly, "Because they might ask us questions about it!" Another called, "Because it might be on the test!" If reading and learning have been distilled to this for so many students, I wonder that children have not given up and turned off. Why bother? Yet, many students work gamely on, as a third-grade neighbour commented to me "because I can learn how to read better".

In my conversations with Carlos and Alejandro, I find that they too experience reading at school as work that must be completed. In summarising his experiences of reading and writing at school, Carlos offers a litany of tasks: definitions are things he "*had to copy*"; in parts of reading time "you just *have to listen* to the story and all you got to do is just *answer the questions*"; in social studies you get "a lot of worksheets at the same time and you *have to fill them in*". Carlos finds reading in social studies texts something to be dreaded, declaring, "If you don't understand one question [from the worksheets] *you have to read the whole chapter again*." Carlos sums up the entire experience of sixth grade as the answering of demanded questions, "every class is about – *we have to read the chapter, the textbook, and then we have to answer this worksheet*." Subjects anchored in words and texts comprise a series of tasks that *have* to be completed.

For Alejandro as well, reading at school is equated with work, rather than joy. Because Alejandro receives reading support from several teachers, he captures all of them with a single "they". For Alejandro, reading class is most salient in his school day because "they give you a lot of work". He explains that this class generally involves reading or listening to a story, "finding out what happens. It could be funny or sad" but inevitably after the story, he notes that, "you always have to answer questions about it". The questions are inescapable, not magical.

Through the voices of students, I encounter the experience of reading in a way that is new to me. Having always been drawn to texts, I have until now not been able to experience a world where books are to be dreaded, where reading is rote. Carlos and Alejandro, and the other young English learners who have shared their experiences with me, have given me the gift of

new understandings and revelations. I find reflections of their experiences in the work of Clifford and Friesen (2003), who write that for their students, "reading [has] become a school task, defined and regulated by school activities. It was what teachers expected, not what you, yourself would choose to do" (p. 180).

When Carlos describes his reading activities from earlier in his day, again he shares a list: "The character. The main character and the supporting characters and the setting and the conflict and the resolution." Again, an echo of this experience resounds in Clifford and Friesen (2003) who describe,

> students' perennial frustration with doing what one of them called "that shit" with books: those predictable teacher questions about plot, theme, setting and character; about how little that shit actually had to do with the real reasons anybody reads, anyway; about the stupefying round of worksheets and teacher questions that seem to mark so many students' experience of reading. (p. 180)

The mysteries hinted at by Gadamer are not present, not even in shadow.

TRYING TO GET THE "L" OUT

For Carlos, reading is "not hard, but it's not easy too. Because the vocabulary words, they're easy but when we have to read a lot of big chapter books it's not easy." When the topic of reading comes into my conversation with Alejandro, he is hesitant and shy. He laughs and looks down. He pulls the conversation towards Physical Education class, and the joy of playing with parachutes, with chasing classmates. I ask him if he can share his experiences of reading with me so that I can begin to understand.

> Looking determined, he turns to me and explains, carefully, as one would to a child, "I'm good at second-grade reading." I puzzle for a moment. Alejandro is in third grade. He sees my confusion and leans in, trying hard to explain. "I'm trying to get the *L* out."
>
> "The *L* out?" I have no idea what he's talking about.
>
> "Like get out," he tells me. He is looking intently at me, clearly hoping that I will understand.
>
> "Do you want to show me?" I can see that he wants to be understood as much as I want to understand.
>
> "I don't know where my thing is," he says, looking around the kitchen table where we sit in the apartment where he lives with his parents, two older siblings, and toddler brother. "There's a *B* and an *L*."
>
> "A *B* and an *L*." I repeat this back to him, hoping something will make sense to me, as he so assumes this is something I should know.
>
> "Um-hmm, that's like second-grade reading." He looks at me, waiting. I sit up, comprehending.

> O, Divine Master,
> Grant that I may not so much seek
> To be consoled as to console;
> To be understood as to understand;
> To be loved as to love.
> (From the *Prayer of Saint Francis)*

I hear what Alejandro has been trying to tell me. I understand the surface of what he is telling me. He wants to get out of his second-grade reading level and into the ease of reading like a third-grader, of being able to easily dive into and comprehend the difficult and frustrating texts of his classroom. As a third-grader reading at a second grade level, the books his teacher gives to him will have a "B" and an "L" on their spine – *BL* for *Below Level*. If his teacher were to respond to his assertion that he wants "to get his *L* out", it is likely that she would say, "No, Alejandro, the *L* stays, but you want to turn your *B* for *Below* into an *O* for *On* so that you will be reading on the third grade level."

Perhaps understanding Alejandro's passion for getting his *L* out must extend below the surface. What would it mean to get the *L* out? I wonder if Alejandro has just taught me that which I needed to learn all along. As a teacher, I have come to view students by their level first – that sets the foundation for the lesson I will plan. Although tossing out the *L* is not a solution because of the essential role it plays in planning effective reading instruction, how may one find space for both the level and for letting learn? Reflecting on her instruction, primary teacher Debbie Miller (2002) discovers that "the children I teach are limited only when I choose to limit myself" (p. 125). Perhaps the one who needs to get her *L* out is me.

In my conversation with Carlos, I find that he is also acutely aware of his level. Talking about the other students in his reading group, he explains, "They don't help me that much because we are the same level. And we know the same things. But they can't help me and I can't help them because they know what I know." I did not ask Carlos if he knew anything about the educational theories behind heterogeneous cooperative learning groups, but I think he has made the point as well as any educational researcher.

Both Carlos and Alejandro teach me that I don't understand the *L* as much as I had thought. They also teach me that the idea of "level" is as ever-present for students as it is for teachers. Levels and comparisons may often drive the way that students and teachers think about school. Alejandro declares that school would be so much easier if you could read "the level that you're good at". In the discourse of reading instruction, we call the reading level of texts that are above a student's instructional level "frustrational". In my conversation with Alejandro, a technical term comes alive.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

In exploring the phenomena of learning and teaching the English language in US public schools, I find that with each return to writing and each reading of a conversation transcript, my questions encounter more complexities. I feel that rather than answers, I have found more questions. Heidegger (1954/2008) reminds me, "The answer to the question, like every genuine answer, is only the final result of the last step in a long series of questions. Each answer remains in force as an answer only as long as it is rooted in questioning" (p. 195). I am beginning to learn by accepting the new questions as they arise, and pursuing them to allow emergence anew. The answer I can confidently take from this investigation is that I must create the space to let students become my teachers. Their voices are often absent from educational research. When students' voices are present, what they have to say may be muffled by theory. Part of the power of the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology is the

way it necessitates that we be fully present in the conversation, that we open up and clarify held assumptions, that we hear with clarity the lived experience of others. As I grow as a researcher, creating investigations informed by phenomenology as well as undertaking research in other methodological traditions, I find that my work in phenomenology has taught me to be a better listener and thus a better researcher. I am better able to contain my urge to steer the conversations to ask the questions I want to ask in order to be open to the stories that need to be told. I seek the perspectives of students and I enter into research hoping to be taught by them.

> Yes, my guard stood hard when abstract threats
> Too noble to neglect
> Deceived me into thinking
> I had something to protect
> Good and bad, I define these terms
> Quite clear, no doubt, somehow
> Ah, but I was so much older then
> I'm younger than that now
> (Dylan, 1964)

When I first began to study to be a researcher, in my blindness, I sought understanding about only one small part of the experiences of learning English in school with the perspective of a teacher of English literacy focused on level and instructional strategies. In their wisdom, the children I spoke with led me to open my questions to consider their experiences more wholly, to un-learn my own assumptions about what is important in the experiences of teaching and learning English, and to consider their experiences in completeness, rather than limiting my understanding of them to their time sitting at desks in school. I allow myself to be drawn into the hermeneutic experience, as Gadamer (1960/2004) reminds me, by letting myself "be guided by the things themselves" and this is "obviously not a matter of a single, 'conscientious' decision, but is 'the first, last, and constant task.' For it is necessary to keep one's gaze fixed on the thing throughout all the constant distractions that originate in the interpreter himself" (p. 269). When, in hindsight, I wish I had known when I first entered into the world of educational research what I am beginning to know now, I am comforted by Heidegger (1954/2008), who tells me, "Things that really matter, although they are not defined for all eternity, even when they come very late still come at the right time" (p. 247). I un-learn to learn, leaving aside my assumptions to open myself to listening to what I may hear.

PERMISSIONS

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