Deep swimming and murky waters: Phenomenological interviewing - reflections from the field

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Abstract: The overall aim of this exercise is to reflect on the merits and caveats of phenomenological interviewing as an educational research tool. To this end, I endeavor to conduct small-scale research using phenomenological interviewing and analysis and to reflect on the process. The phenomenon being researched is junior secondary pupils' (13-16) lived experience of teacher-pupil mentoring as part of a 2011-2012 school based mentoring initiative in a mixed gender community school in South East Ireland. Issues related to the use of phenomenology in educational research shall be presented, leading to the derived research question. Interviews as a research instrument shall be discussed, with particular emphasis on phenomenological interviewing, followed by sampling and ethical concerns. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and discussion of findings are presented, followed by conclusions drawn from the study. Finally, I shall reflect on whether the process has succeeded in answering the research question whilst also offering my opinions on the promises and pitfalls of phenomenological interviewing and suggestions for future practice.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Interviewing, Teacher-Pupil Mentoring

1. Introduction: Phenomenology – Issues in Educational Research

1.1. Phenomenology: What it is – or is it?

'The difficulties of stating point-blank what phenomenology is are notorious' [1]

The differences that exist between phenomenological philosophers problematize the describing of any one approach to qualitative enquiry as phenomenological. In essence, there are as many phenomenological philosophies as there are phenomenologists [2]. Further to this, there is disagreement over whether phenomenology is an approach or a method [3], making it difficult to map out a definitive research process. This lack of congruence may equate to lack of rigour and trustworthiness of any study claiming to be phenomenological. Conscious of these issues I shall attempt to crystallise for you, the reader, what I perceive phenomenology to be and the philosophical position I am taking for this study.

Phenomenology means the study and description of phenomena [4]. Phenomenologists believe in the importance and primacy of subjective consciousness, accepting that this consciousness is meaning bestowing and

that this meaning can be accounted for through reflexivity [5]. The researcher seeks to remain oriented to investigating the nature of the phenomenon as an 'essentially human experience' [6]. This involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning [7] A phenomenon in this context is simply anything that appears or presents itself [4] and this research relates to how mentoring appeared or presented itself within an Irish secondary school. Polit et al [8] argue that this approach is well suited to studying a phenomenon that is not well described. There is very little description of formal teacher-pupil mentoring in an Irish context, further justifying the use of the method.

1.2. Why it is Valued in Educational Research

A number of conceptual proposals can support use of the phenomenological approach in educational research. Firstly, the method allows for the reality of a set of human experiences to be revealed through rich, subjective descriptions from the people being studied [9]. Secondly, educational researchers are attracted to this method as it fits naturally to the school environment and preserves the integrity of the situation where it is employed [5]. A

number of writers have made valuable contributions to educational research through phenomenology [10,11,12,13,14]. Mitchell [11] used phenomenology as a philosophical tool to help him understand educational leadership while Stanage [14] engaged phenomenology to illuminate concerns central to adult educators. Phenomenological descriptions are derived from experience and are validated by experience. This insight addresses an aspect of this study's purpose as this insight and awareness of participants' inner worlds and their experience of the mentoring phenomenon could have significant impact for future programme implementation.

The phenomenological researcher leans on their 'intuition, imagination and universal structures to obtain a picture' [15] of the experiences under investigation. The researcher's subjective judgement is considered a valuable component of the phenomenological approach [16]. Further to this, when the researcher has shared experiences with participants it arguably adds heightened significance to the data obtained [17]. I was attracted to this method by the possibility that my own experiences and intuition as a teacher mentor and coordinator of the mentoring scheme in question could be utilised to enhance the authenticity of the findings.

1.3. Bracketing

This latter proposition, however, should be regarded with caution. The potential of the researcher to significantly contribute to the richness of the study through intuition and shared experience is governed by the degree to which he/she can design and apply procedures for the operation of bracketing. In order to become open to the meaning implicit in respondents' experiences and to collect data as cleanly as possible, the phenomenological researcher must set aside, or bracket their presuppositions, biases and prejudices [18] Failure to do so, from the very beginning of the research, could lead to contamination of the data as the researcher imputes meaning to the findings based on their own preconceptions. This is the philosophical stance taken by Husserl, the founding father of the phenomenological movement. A transcendental phenomenology is proposed in which researchers can, and must, stand outside the research process and attain a state of 'pure consciousness' or epoch, freeing pure consciousness to discover its essence [19].

Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology differs from that of his teacher Husserl on the operationalization of bracketing. He argues that 'nothing can be encountered without reference to our background understanding' [20] for all knowledge originates from people who are already in the world and seeking to understand others in that world. Our way of interpreting our 'being-in-the-world' cannot be separated from ourselves through philosophical enquiry, as Husserl would suggest. Our knowledge and beliefs, as they are an integral part of human beings, are an integral part of the research process and as such should not be omitted. Further to this, Ashworth and Lucas [21] are skeptical of the ability to attain the objectivity needed for authentic bracketing when one has experienced the phenomenon

being researched. Bracketing, it can be argued [22], may also apply to participants. From a Husserlian perspective, they may need to put aside their interpretations to allow phenomena to appear free from prior understanding. Given that experienced phenomenologists have difficulty with deciding a common ground on how to bracket, it is possibly unrealistic for us to assume respondents can understand and carry out bracketing.

Attempts have been made to bridge the gap between Husserl and Heidegger with a pragmatic view on bracketing. Accounting for the need to approach a study with minimal bias but also acknowledging the influence of researcher assumptions, it is argued that: 'bracketing in contemporary research actually represents an understanding about the relationship between the data and an external reality….from this perspective, instead of attempting the questionable feat of 'bracketing' all preconceptions, the researcher acknowledges that many voices, including the researchers', describe individual realities in research of the social world. This is consistent with the phenomenological aim to understand experiences from the participant's perspective [23].

In order to be as objective as possible in bracketing, the researcher must initially define their concerns and explain their worldview, which can be achieved through a process of critical self-reflection. Experience should not be denied, but rather made explicit to the reader for inspection when validating the study. In openly acknowledging their viewpoint, the researcher guards against imposing this viewpoint on the participants during collection of data [24] and adopts a willingness to become open to the experiences of others.

Methodological transparency is lacking when phenomenological interviews are described without explication and clarification of the philosophical stance taken by the researcher [23]. Further, it is argued that 'since the products of phenomenological interviewing are co-created by interviewer and participant, the demonstration of rigour and trust-worthiness depends on researchers fully explicating their preconceptions and their contribution to the interview process' [ibid]. I adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to this study; highlighting my assumptions entering into this research but not trying to philosophically separate myself from them. I took a contemporary approach to bracketing in which I attempted to understand my relationship to the data I was collecting rather than separate myself from it. Since I was the primary instrument in this qualitative research, I needed to begin by examining, identifying, and acknowledging my values, experiences, and expectations in relation to this investigation, my reasons for being interested in the topic, and my relationship to the topic of teacher-pupil mentoring and the mentoring scheme in question. These were explained in a 'Researcher as Instrument Statement'. By freely admitting my own biases and beliefs, I strove to avoid allowing these ideas or preconceptions to influence the interpretations of the participants' descriptions of their own experiences and views during data collection or data analysis.

2. Framing the Research Question

In conducting research, one embarks on a decision-making journey [25]. These can be decisions about orienting the research (who is it for, what is its purpose, the time scale, and so on), research design and methodology, data analysis and presenting/reporting the results [5]. Whilst these decisions may or may not be sequential, it is accepted that framing initial research questions should be the first step in the research process [26]. These questions help to define the investigation, set boundaries around what is and is not included in the research, provide direction and focus and act as a frame of reference in assessing your work [25]. Following collection and analysis of data, the researcher may find the need to re-focus the research and ask new questions as part of cyclic approach to the study.

In composing a good research question, O'Leary [ibid] advises to consider the topic of the research, followed by the context, goal, nature of the question (how, who, what, etc.), the relationship being investigated and finally to develop the question. The topic I am interested in researching is the phenomenon of teacher-pupil mentorship in the context of secondary education (specifically a case of formal teacher-pupil mentorship in one secondary school). The goal of the study is to take a phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experiences of people involved in teacher-pupil mentorship. A suitable definition, at this time, for the phenomenon of mentoring being considered is 'a supportive relationship between a youth or young adult and someone who offers support, guidance and concrete assistance as the younger partner goes through a difficult period, takes on an important task or corrects an earlier problem.'[27]. Researching as a phenomenologist, it is important to acknowledge that this definition is not rigid and set but may evolve throughout the study based on information gathered.

In the case of this exercise, decisions had to be made in framing the question that determined what was and was not included in the research. Given the limited word count, time to complete and write up this report, and the fact that the gathering of information took place into school holidays, it was decided to base the research around pupil perspective. Thus, I acknowledge that other voices, such as perspective of mentors for example, are missing from the research. I am interested in looking at what the mentoring experience meant for pupils. The relationship to be considered is that between the mentoring the pupils experienced as part of a formal teacher-pupil mentoring scheme and the meaning they attached to that mentoring. From these considerations, the following research question is posed: 'What did the mentoring experience mean for pupil participants?'

Having framed the research question, I now wish to consider the appropriate tools for the job, the research instruments. For this exercise, I have chosen to use interviewing as a means of gathering information on this question. Issues related to interviews as a research instrument, and the type of approach to take, are considered below.

3. Interviews as a Research Instrument

3.1. Conception and Types

In collecting evidence by interview, one moves away from the idea of respondents as sources of manipulable data to regarding knowledge as generated between humans, often through conversations [28]. To inter-view is to engage in an interchange of views between people on a topic of shared interest [ibid]. Thus, an interview is not exclusively either subjective or objective, it is intersubjective [29]. Interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live and to offer their personal view on situations. In this sense the 'human embeddedness' [5] of an interview is inescapable. As a flexible instrument for collecting evidence, interviews enable the use of multi-sensory channels ranging from verbal to non-verbal responses such as body language and gestures. Whilst they are expensive in time, are subject to bias and can sometimes pose an inconvenience for respondents, they are powerful tools that allow researchers to dig deep for responses on complex issues. It is important to remember that an interview is a socially contrived rather than naturally occurring event, rendering it different from an everyday conversation. Having said that, the interview is still a social encounter rather than a site for information exchange and both 'interviewers and interviewees co-construct the interview' [30].

The type of interview relevant for this study is the research interview. This has been defined as 'a two person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information, and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation' [5]. The research interview can be conducted in a number of ways; from structured to unstructured and from non-directive to focused. There are pros and cons of each approach. For example, the structured interview has a tight sequence of questioning ensuring that all topics being investigated are covered but its closed nature leaves no room for freedom of expression by interviewer or interviewee. The unstructured interview, in contrast, is one in which the content, sequence and wording of questions is entirely in the hands of the interviewer [31]. However, given the open nature of this type of interview it too must be carefully planned to ensure sufficient evidence is collected. The approach chosen for this study was the focused interview, which is an evolution of the non-directive interview devised to suit the needs of social and educational research. Merton & Kendall [32] claim that prior analysis of the situation in which the respondents have been involved is the distinctive feature of the focused interview approach. Respondents are known to have had a particular experience, elements of which are deemed significant to the study being identified. Using an analysis

of these experiences as a basis, the researcher constructs an interview guide and uses this to focus the interview on the subjective experiences of the respondents.

A tacit tension exists between the need for an interviewing framework and the essential naivety required for phenomenological interviewing. It is suggested that phenomenological interviews are intended to be 'in-depth'; an approach reflective of an open-ended style of interviewing that seeks to elicit genuine feelings and views from respondents [33]. This may seem to conflict with the idea of a pre-determined interview structure, be it rigid or semi. However, there are phenomenologists who purport having an interview guide as a useful reminder to ask about certain issues [34].

3.2. Phenomenological Interviewing and Interview Framework

Interviews, from a phenomenological perspective, are described as 'a specific type of in-depth interviewing grounded in the theoretical tradition of phenomenology' [35]. Jasper [36] stresses the need for specific research skills when using a phenomenological approach to get at the lived experiences of participants without contaminating the evidence. Issues in relation to bracketing have already been addressed. Other key skills deemed necessary include 'the use of reflection, clarification, requests for examples and description and the conveyance of interest through listening techniques'. This view is supported by Seidman [37], who stresses the need for phenomenological interviewers to hold an interest in the stories of others. It is also argued [38] that researchers must strike a balance between identifying with the interviewee and maintaining a degree of detachment necessary to elicit knowledge.

In their comparison of interviewing in phenomenology and grounded theory, Wimpenny & Gass [1] found there was not always congruence in the literature between the interview as an instrument for collecting data and the chosen methodology, rendering the interview a generic data collection tool. For example, phenomenological interviews often start with 'please tell me about your experiences of..' with clarification sought when necessary for further illumination. It is suggested [22] that this is in fact a common beginning for an interview regardless of approach taken and that answers to this question will not lead to manifestation of experience, in accordance with a phenomenological approach, but rather the respondent's subjective interpretation of the phenomenon

In developing an interview framework for a phenomenological interview, one is torn between relying on previous literature to inform the interview and, in keeping with phenomenology, remaining open to emergent experiences. While researchers' knowledge of the literature may impose preconceptions on and potentially hide explorations during the interview, this has to be viewed in contrast to the potential to conduct unethical, wasteful research [23] through an interview that lacks relevant focus. If the phenomenon under study has been previously studied

in part or whole, Heidegger would accept a review of this study, in part forming researcher preconceptions, thereby making the potential for bias irrelevant. In addition, if one attempts to attract funding for their work it may be relevant to validate their proposals with theoretical underpinning. Thus, I acknowledge that there is previous literature on the topic of formal teacher-pupil mentorship that may be used as a frame upon which to hang emergent themes in discussing the findings of this research. Given that theory is, in effect, the 'distilled experience of others' [39], it is acceptable to compare and contrast the experiences from theory with the experiences elicited from participants in this study.

Previous studies on teacher-pupil mentorship [40,41,42,43] identified benefits of being in a mentoring relationship for pupils, mentors and the school involved. Aspects of mentoring associated with perceived dissatisfaction are also identified, along with desired characteristics in a mentor and suggested impacts of mentoring. These allowed for the development of an interview schedule that looked to identify, amongst other things, what the mentoring experience meant for participants under these themes.

The hierarchical focusing interview approach [44] was adopted for this study. Given the desire to create openness in the interview, the main aim of hierarchical focusing is to pose initial 'access' questions and then follow this up in a non-directive way. For instance, the access question was 'What has the mentoring experience been like for you?' Prompt questions ('Can you do anything now that you couldn't before having been mentored?', for example) were used that linked to the theoretical themes identified above if deemed necessary to do so. In keeping with the open nature of the phenomenological approach, I also endeavoured to remain hyper-sensitive to new avenues or surprises that may have emerged during the interview and to be extremely careful not to import my own preconceptions into the interview process.

4. Sampling and Conducting the Interview

The method of sampling used was purposive sampling, which aims to select appropriate information from sources to explain meanings [45]. The researcher handpicks participants that satisfy his/her specific needs in answering the research questions. Sampling in this study was purposively based on the criterion that participants had experienced formal teacher-pupil mentorship as part of this 2011-12 initiative and were able to articulate their experiences. Due to constraints previously outlined and for convenience, one junior girl (16 years old) was chosen for interview.

The site chosen for the interview was the school in which the mentoring occurred. This was a conscious decision on my part as it was the most familiar setting for the pupil given her attendance at the school and her professional relationship with me as both a mentoring coordinator and

teacher. It was felt that bringing the participant to a new setting for interview would seem out of context with the theme of school-based mentoring. The interview was recorded on a digital Dictaphone. I acknowledge that introducing a recorder would add an inhibitive factor of an invisible audience, however I felt it would provide more powerful evidence in data analysis having the original statements made by the participant. The recorded verbatim interviews were listened to and transcribed without changing anything from the original format to ensure faithfulness to the statements. Next, ethical considerations in relation to this exercise are discussed.

5. Ethical Concerns

Robson [46] asserts that 'it is vital, at a very early stage of your preparations to carry out an enquiry, that you give serious thought to those ethical aspects of what you are proposing'. Every study involving human respondents raises a unique set of ethical issues [47].   In this exercise, ethical issues are further confounded by the fact that the participant is a child. Researchers have a moral obligation to conduct ethically sound research and to 'take all necessary precautions to avoid harming and doing wrong to anyone touched by their research' [48].

From the proposed outline for this exercise to the initial framing of research questions, I have taken a strong ethical stance. Ethical issues were addressed by seeking approval from the University of Sheffield Ethics Committee. The British Educational Research Association [49] advises that 'the securing of participants' voluntary informed consent, before research gets underway, is considered the norm for the conduct of research'. A participant information sheet on the research was provided to and written consent sought from the participating pupil prior to the beginning of the interview. However, I also enabled the pupil to give consent by informally requesting her cooperation. This is in compliance with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [50], which requires that children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express these views.

In relation to data gathered, the Irish Teaching Council advise that 'researchers must keep clear and accurate records of the research procedures followed and hold securely any data generated in the course of research' [51]. Thus, all documentation of interview data in both hard copy and electronic format were retained. The participant was informed at all stages of data gathering that some anonymous excerpts may be published in the findings.

6. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Interview Transcripts

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) researcher must approach their data with two aims in mind. The first aim is to try and understand their participants'

world, and to describe 'what it is like'. The second aim of the IPA perspective is to develop a m)ore overtly interpretative analysis, which positions the initial description in relation to a wider social, cultural and perhaps even theoretical context [52]

In keeping with this, Larkin et al [ibid] support the use of a range of analytical strategies in IPA that may be selected based on factors like researcher commitments, interests and the research question to be answered. These strategies are engaged to allow the researcher to manage some of the various elements of phenomenological analysis, such as description and interpretation, looking at individual cases and generating patterns. Further, Hycner [53] points to the reluctance of phenomenologists to focus too much on specific steps for fear they may become reified. However, as a novice in phenomenology, I felt it pertinent to embark on my analysis using a proven framework. This involved bracketing and phenomenological reduction, delineating units of general meaning into first and second order constructs and finally clustering themes relevant to the research question.

6.1. Phenomenological Reduction

This is a different conception of the term bracketing than that used in 'bracket the phenomenon' during the data collection as here it refers to the bracketing of the researcher's personal views or assumptions during the analysis process. Again, the debate [12] is acknowledged that there can be no pre-suppositionless state from which we can approach the research process and to think that there is such a state 'ignores the contextualised nature of human understanding' [54]. However, rigour was strived for by keeping the description in its original format; I attempted to analyse the experience as lived without allowing personal or theoretical concepts to get in the way of the rigour with which the description was being analysed

The interview transcript was naïvely read and reread several times to get a sense of the whole [53]. Throughout this reading, I sustained an open attitude and readiness to accept any new avenues that may be illuminated. This experience allowed me to become sensitised to the respondent's thoughts prior to delineating general units of meaning from the transcript [21].

6.2. First Order Constructs

Hycner [53] describes how one can delineate units of general meaning through scrutiny of verbal and non-verbal responses to achieve 'a crystallisation and condensation of what the participant has said, still using as much as possible the literal words of the participant' [5]. A 'construct' was identified in this study as an abstract or general idea extracted from specific instances by systematically arranging ideas or terms to create a mental framework. Units of meaning were 'isolated' [15,53] and the clearly redundant units eliminated [7]. Units of participant statements that are kept in their original verbatim form are

named as first order constructs [55].

6.3. Second Order Constructs

Coffey & Atkinson [56] emphasize the transformation of verbatim text saying, "good research is not generated by rigorous data alone but by going beyond the data to develop ideas" With this in mind, the next step was to interpret the meaning from the verbatim text so as to illuminate the phenomenon in approachable terms [6]. I looked for convergence and divergence by interpreting the narrative, describing and arranging themes into categories [57], namely second order constructs. First order constructs are described by Taber [58] as how the participant under study conceptualises the phenomenon of interest whilst second order constructs are how the researcher makes sense of the phenomenon through interpretation.

6.4. Clustering of Themes

Themes are brought together through the grouping of second order constructs [7]. This requires the researcher to move back and forth between the parts and the whole to arrive at a crafted piece of work [6]. Derived themes are clustered into meaningful relation, creating structural synthesis of the core elements of the described experience. Table 1 below shows a sample data analysis sheet with development from first to second order constructs and derived themes.

Table 1. Sample data analysis sheet

First order constructs	Second order constructs	Derived themes
Yeah I just think it helped me probably to grow and hopefully get better grades and like enjoy school life more because third year is a really stressful year. It was nice to be able to take a bit of that stress away and know that someone is there to help you if you have any problems.	Mentoring helped pupil to grow as an academic, reflected in improved grades Mentoring helped pupil enjoy school life more through reduction of stress Pupil liked having someone there to help with problems	Mentoring impact: Academic growth Mentoring impact: Stress reduction Happier pupil Mentoring characteristic: Support Reliability Helpfulness

7. Discussion of Findings

On interpretation of the interview transcript as a whole, I feel the direct story that the participant is telling is that the mentoring experience for her is one that was a very helpful and good experience. The number of times the pupil refers to either her mentor or mentoring as a whole being helpful throughout the transcript (12 times) is evidence of this. The next step in the analysis was to try to position the participant's interpretation of this perceived 'helpfulness' and 'goodness' of mentoring within a theoretical framework, so as to gain a full picture of what the mentoring experience meant. Thus, themes were clustered under three key constructs defined in relation to the pupil's

interpretation of her mentoring experience:

- *Mentor Constructs* – relate to the participants' experiences of mentoring in the form of mentor-mentee interactions, inherently revealing what skills and characteristics the participant looked for in the mentor.
- *Pupil constructs*- relate to the participants' constructions of the effect and influence of mentoring as a strategy for development of skills and attitudes
- *Impact constructs*- relate to the participants' constructions of the impact of mentoring on her as an individual and on the school as a whole

The main themes clustered under these constructs are illustrated below in Figure 2.

In sum, the pupil feels mentoring has positively contributed to her growth as an academic through helping her to be more analytical, critically aware of and reflective on her exam performance throughout the year. She also feels the mentor helped to increase her work ethic and made school life happier through the reduction of stress. The pupil identified a number of mentor skills she positively associated with the mentor's role. These included having expertise in relation to exams and thus being able to offer reliable advice. She also highlighted a range of characteristics her mentor displayed such as openness and honesty with the pupil about her performance, as well as being supportive and showing concern throughout the year. The pupil was happy to have a familiar face around the school and positively noted a strong level of trust between her and her mentor. These findings support previous research on teacher-pupil mentoring [40,41], however it must be noted that these studies were not conducted using a phenomenological approach.

Table 2. Clustered themes from interview analysis.

Mentor constructs	
Skills of the mentor	*Characteristics of the mentor*
	Honesty
	Openness
	Concerned
Exam expertise	Helpfulness
Offer advice	Supportive
	Familiarity
	Reliability
	Friendliness
	Trust
Pupil constructs	
Skill development	*Attitude development*
Analytical Critical awareness Reflection	Increased work ethic
Impact constructs	
Positive	*Negative*
Reducing stress	Dissatisfaction with unreliable mentors
Helpful Academic growth	Intimacy development in one-to-one situations
Happier pupil	

The pupil also hinted at a possible issue in relation to reliability of other mentors. When asked to clarify an earlier comment she made on other mentors not turning up for meetings, she responded:

'[SHIFTS IN SEAT/PAUSES]…Like with some of the

mentors in my year [HESITATES] the meetings didn't actually happen and it was kind of nice that I knew that my one [my mentor] would actually do it.'(Respondent A, 10th July)

Her verbal response hints at dissatisfaction of other protégés with unreliable mentors, which also is reflected in the literature [40, amongst others]. However, her non-verbal cues suggest a certain level of discomfort in being asked about this issue. This may be reflective of embarrassment, but may also be a response in awareness of the fact that I am a coordinator of the mentoring scheme. Ribbens [59] notes that the willingness of certain people to talk varies, particularly in relation to issues which may challenge the status quo. If this was the case here, then one must question the trustworthiness of this pupil's responses.

7.1. Summary of Research Findings

The initial research question posed was: *'What did the mentoring experience mean for pupil participants?'*

Following phenomenological interviewing and IPA, I conclude that the mentoring experience meant the pupil was part of a relationship in which she was helped, with expert counsel, to grow as an academic through the development of key skills and a strong work ethic. Possibly more important, however, was the positive relationship the pupil shared with her teacher mentor, to which she attributes her reduction of stress in a busy year and overall happiness in school.

8. Conclusion: Reflections on Phenomenological Interviewing

Larkin et al [52] argue that: 'The important point is that our success as phenomenologists will not ultimately be dependent upon our revealing the 'pure' experience of a participant; it will be dependent upon our being prepared to do the most sensitive and responsive job we can, given our inherent epistemological and methodological limitations'

Every effort was made to be responsible in the research through contemporary bracketing along with a hyper-sensitive attitude and approach to the interview. However, on completion, I believe I was limited in the extent to which I could answer the research question. Issues related to trustworthiness of the data have been outlined above. Also, whether or not I gained enough information to get at the heart of the pupil's lived experience of mentoring is questionable. This is partly due to the fact that, in trying to remain open to all possible avenues the pupil might want to explore, I didn't use my intuition to guide the questioning for more detailed responses on issues that I know from experience and theory are attributed to pupil perceptions of mentoring. Thus, although I was responsible in my attempts to remain open and sensitive to the unexpected, the findings may lack some authenticity that my own perspective could have contributed.

It is possible that further interviews focused on more specific topics such as mentor reliability and skill development would have helped to dig deeper in this study. However, one must question the extent to which this could still be branded phenomenology. If the researcher carries out successive interviews to delve further into the meaning of certain experiences, they may start out with a phenomenological approach but eventually would findings from preceding interviews impact on subsequent ones? Have they now transferred to an approach akin to grounded theory? In this sense, one could encounter 'methodological muddling' [1] and could not claim a true phenomenological study. From the purists' perspective this may be undesirable, but in taking a contemporary approach to phenomenology this seems to accrue with good practice in getting deeper into the meaning of experience. In the same way as Heidegger would condone the use of previous theory in beginning a phenomenological study, should it not be acceptable to allow emergent theory generated within a study to guide the research?

A number of pitfalls of phenomenological interviewing have been outlined above. However, it is also a potentially promising approach. At the outset, I titled this exercise as a combination of deep swimming and murky waters. I feel this aptly reflects my experiences in the field with my attempted use of phenomenological interviewing. My guiding ambition was to get deep into the lived experiences of the participants of this study; to get 'back to the things' as Husserl [1] would say. I believe phenomenological interviewing has a lot to offer in this regard. However, in swimming deep one may encounter muddy waters, in a methodological sense. This may arguably occur due to contamination of data with researcher assumptions brought about by failure to appropriately bracket or through methodologically blending the phenomenological approach with others such as grounded theory. Nevertheless, I argue that a certain degree of intuitively or methodologically muddying of the waters is not only acceptable but may prove very valuable in getting to those deeper meanings in people's experiences.

Despite the availability of ample guidance on phenomenology [4,22,7,6], I still experienced great difficulty in deciding how to accomplish this study and I have been left wanting with the findings. Van Manen offers a view of the phenomenological process as seeking the answer to the question, 'Is this what the experience is really like?' My intuition tells me that I need to swim deeper in this study, philosophically, methodologically and interpretively to answer this question. Having engaged with phenomenological interviewing and analysis, I concur that 'this is tough stuff, very abstract, and very conceptual' [60]. Despite this, I still feel phenomenological interviewing has the potential to be a very effective qualitative research instrument. Its effectiveness, however, depends on the researcher's ability to balance openness with intuition in the setting and conducting of interviews and most importantly in aligning oneself philosophically prior to conducting the study. If all else becomes murky throughout

the research process, the stance of the researcher must remain clear.

Acknowledgements

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