

# When Education is at Risk

Filippa Millenberg & Michael Noah Weiss

## 1. Prologue

The first dialogue of this anthology is somewhat special in the sense that it presents and investigates a pedagogical situation that took place at a Swedish folk high school, whereas all other dialogues focus on Norwegian schools. There are certainly differences between the folk high schools in Sweden and Norway, differences that are not further discussed here since the case shared in the present dialogue could also have taken place at a Norwegian school.

After some informal talks in connection with the work on “The Nordic Folk High School Teacher” (Lövgren, Hallqvist, Rahbek & Lysgaard, 2023), the present dialogue was performed in early November 2021. At that time, Filippa Millenberg was writing her PhD thesis on folk high school pedagogy at Linköping University. Already during her studies in teacher education, she felt that the ideas of *Bildung* and popular education (*folkbildning* in Swedish) were somewhat missing. For her – who understood learning in a more holistic way with the focus on personal development and growth – the reason to become a teacher, to put it bluntly, was because she wanted to prepare and equip (in Swedish *rusta*) people for life. Therefore, parallel to her teacher education, she enrolled in a program to become a

folk high school teacher. After three years in the ordinary school system, she started at a folk high school where she taught for 10 years before starting her PhD studies.

In the course of the following dialogue, Filippa shares an experience that for the dialogue partners appears to be a good example of Biesta's idea of "the beautiful risk of education" (Biesta, 2013). Based on this experience, it is examined when a folk high school teacher should take this risk, when it becomes too risky, and what it actually is that is risked when taking this risk.

## **2. Dialogue**

### **2.1. Concrete reflection**

**Michael N. W.:** Filippa, with 10 years working at a folk high school, I assume you have significant experience regarding the question, "What is good folk high school pedagogy?" In order to examine this question, I would like to invite you to share a concrete experience, a concrete pedagogical situation you were involved in that you think represents good folk high school pedagogy.

**Filippa M.:** In this case, I want to pick a story in which I worked with a group of students where some of them had some bad experiences from their former schooling. Others in the group had achieved good results in previous schooling, and the reason for their being in this group was that they lacked qualifications in some subjects, which meant that they could not apply for university. Their goal with the studies was thus merit. The group consisted of many different people at different ages, from different backgrounds and with different approaches to learning and to life in general.

One of the girls, for example, had a very strict and straightforward attitude in terms of “I want to enroll in a higher education program; I don’t have time to waste, and in this one year at folk high school, I do what I am asked to do, and the rest is of no interest to me”. Then again, there was a guy in this class; let us call him Tom. Tom had been bullied at his previous school. He had this self-image that he was not able to accomplish what he was supposed to and what he was asked to. He was very insecure and tried to protect himself in many ways. Tom would come five minutes late every morning, opening the door very silently and walking to his desk with his head kept down. I would always greet him when he came in, saying, “Good morning, Tom. Welcome!” He was not saying much, just nodding.

I recognized that this other girl that I just described, let’s call her Sarah, was a bit annoyed about Tom being late every single morning. I did not do much about that; I didn’t make a comment, nor did I talk to him about it. I felt secure in my way of handling the situation. One morning, however, Sarah rose up from her chair and shouted, “This is not OK any longer! You come late every single morning”, and then to me, “And you even welcome him every day. This is my time for studying, and he is interrupting.” In this aggressive tone of voice, she continued for a while.

There I was, standing in this chaos, thinking, “What am I going to do now?” I knew about Sarah’s perspective, and I knew about Tom’s experience being bullied and having low self-esteem, but I was not really prepared for this to happen on that specific morning or any morning, to be honest. So, I just told Sarah, “Ok, I heard what you said; that is your perspective. I have mine, and I think Tom has his. I suggest that we put this aside for now and go on with what we are supposed to do and then sort it out later. Is that OK with you?” And it was. Thinking back, I do not think they were OK with it, but since they did not protest, I went on.

At the time when this situation occurred, the class was reading and working on some texts about historical movements. Each student was supposed to choose a specific historical person, imagining that he or she would be this person. Then they would meet each other and create a dialogue between these different historical figures about their movements and how they struggled, what they experienced, what their problems and challenges were, and what kind of solutions they would come up with. The students were working in different groups, putting up these dialogues based on the persons they would play. When they went into their groups, I asked Tom, "Would you join me for a while?" He accepted, and we went out of the classroom. I said to him, "You know, about what happened this morning: I think that you are coming late because you have been bullied previously. And when you come in five minutes late, no one can mob you. So being late is something you do in order to feel secure in the classroom." (I said this without really knowing; I thought it was that way, and I tried it out.) And he replied, "Yes, that's the way it is. And you know that?" "Yes, I know it", I said, and "I think we have to make Sarah aware of this too. The way she attacked you is because she doesn't understand. And she needs to understand your situation, even if it might be hard for you to tell, but we can do it together." When saying this, it seems problematic because I am the one who encouraged Tom to share his life story, but I don't think I forced him; I knew him so well, so he could have said "no, I won't", but still, here is a risk. First, Tom was a bit doubtful, but I suggested a specific day so he would have time to prepare and think about it. Then he went into the classroom again, saying, "OK, I'll come back to you tomorrow." Then I asked Sarah to come out with me, and I said, "I do understand you got furious this morning, and I heard what you said. Can you tell me a bit more about what you are thinking and why

you became so angry?” She replied, “This is just not the proper way to behave!” I replied, “But maybe you should know why Tom behaves the way he does?” Sarah thought she knew and replied, “Well, he is just bad-mannered. That is why he does things like this.” So, I asked her, “Are you willing to listen to his story? Would you be willing to take part in a dialogue with the three of us?” Sarah accepted, but more or less half-heartedly.

After the talk with Sarah, there was a break, and during this break, Tom came to me, saying that he was willing to tell Sarah his story. So, after the break, the three of us went out. I started the dialogue by acknowledging that this situation happened this morning and that we obviously had different perspectives on it. I also stated that by sharing our perspectives on it, this situation offers a brilliant way of learning about life and being human. Then I invited Tom to explain why he came five minutes late every day. And he told his story, and while he was doing that, you could see Sarah changing her body language. She looked down, was silent, and was not as edgy as she would normally be. After Tom told his story, I said, “Sarah, I knew Tom’s story; therefore, I made it a bit easier for him to sneak into the classroom. Also, I didn’t want him to tell his story to the whole class since Tom was not ready for that.” It was a hard situation for all of us, and Sarah started to cry and said, “I am so sorry!” She was straightening up and wanted to leave the room, but I said, “Just stay here for a while.” We continued talking, and finally I said, “Look, Sarah, I don’t want you to feel ashamed. This is just about sharing perspectives and learning about ourselves, and we are going to cooperate in this class for the rest of the year. We are going to be respectful, and since you know about this situation now, we can go on without hard feelings. Is that OK for you?” It was OK for her. Then Sarah asked, “What are we doing when we go back to the room?” I replied, “I

don't know. What do you think?" And she said, "Don't say anything about this. Let's not talk about it any longer." I agreed and asked whether that also was OK for Tom, and he said yes. So, we never said anything to the rest of the class. We never spoke about it again. However, the thing was that after a while, Sarah and Tom were cooperating really well together. In the first three weeks after this incident, they would just talk more often to each other, and after these three weeks, they started cooperating and sitting together, having coffee break[s] together in the dining hall and discussing things. They actually took an interest in each other.

This story, for me, says something about good folk high school pedagogy. To me, it is clear that the ideas about acknowledging what Grundtvig said, "mänskiska först" (in English: "the human being first"), are becoming blood and flesh here. Being human among other humans – its complexity but also its learning possibilities – are at hand in this somewhat hidden curriculum.

**Michael N. W.:** This is a fascinating story for several reasons. However, before going into them, I have some questions. First, you said that after some weeks, Tom and Sarah started to cooperate quite closely. How was it for Tom and the others in the class? Was he engaging more with the others too? How was the whole group dynamic then?

**Filippa M.:** I would say that after Sarah and Tom started to bond, Tom was also more recognized in the class. Sarah had a high status in the class; she was straightforward, and she was also quite certain about things. So, when the two of them came together and started to cooperate, Tom was all of a sudden recognized as somebody important in the classroom in the sense that he made it clear that he actually could do things, that he understood things, that he could put his own perspectives on things, and so on. Even though he

was not talking all the time. I also think he became more a part of the group after they started to get to know each other and cooperate in different kinds of schoolwork.

**Michael N. W.:** If I understand you right, then Tom went through some kind of transformation in terms of his self-esteem. Since he was bullied previously, he probably never had much self-esteem; for example, that he would think of himself as being able to contribute to a community in a constructive way and that he was seen. With what you have said, it appears to be quite obvious that suddenly he was seen; he was recognized, accepted and kind of integrated. He received a different status in the class, so to speak. How was that for Sarah? Did she also change her social and emotional behavior?

**Filippa M.:** I think she actually did, but I also think that it was quite hard work for her to change her way of viewing other people. When she started at the school, she was so certain about things in terms of “This is just the way it is”. The situation with Tom was not necessarily a wake-up call for her, but it nevertheless told her something. For example, that studying is not just about doing what you are asked, and then you are just out of here. Tom, by sharing his story, told her that studying in this context is so much more. I think that through that, she got a new understanding of people like Tom, about whom she previously thought were not serious. Before that incident with Tom, she would think that such people come late into class without caring, that they don’t contribute to anything, whereas she would. At the end of the school year, she would make statements like, “When I entered the folk high school, I had to convince everyone about how things are, while now I know why people sometimes think differently and I am not responsible for them believing in my view.” However, she would never say that from that moment on with Tom,

she would see things differently herself. And if you had asked her what she learned at folk high school, she would never say anything about who she was or what people's stories were. She would always say, "Well, I got my certificate; now I can go to higher education. And that was my goal." Nevertheless, I am still convinced that she also learned something else than the subjects of study, such as social and emotional behavior, but I am not sure whether she herself could see that clearly at the time. I don't think she was able to verbally express that. I don't think she was able to reflect at that time.

## 2.2. Critical reflection

*Transformation* **Michael N. W.:** I think this is a good point to go over to the next step of the dialogue, called critical reflection. In this step, one of the main questions is, "What is at stake in this story?"

In this respect, it seems obvious that Sarah had a straightforward perspective on learning, on what learning meant and what education meant. She would not – at least not in front of others – recognize that learning can also take place on a social or emotional level. Nevertheless, she obviously did learn something in this regard. It appears to be the same with Tom. What he learned in that case was not so much about a certain subject, it was not about getting in line with the standards of the formal education system. Rather, it was more about realizing that he also can manage to be recognized and to be seen in a community of peers. His social status changed and he contributed to that change. Therefore, I assume *transformation* as one of the central aspects in this story. I don't know what you think about it and there are for sure other aspects or themes too.

*Learning to live together in dissonance* **Filippa M.:** I think you are right. Sarah had a very clear idea of what was supposed to go on in this class in terms



of her view on what learning is about and how it should be done. Like, you have a task to do in a given subject and as a student you should respond to that, learning was in Sarah's world linked to a subject and the outcome of her work is a specific task. However, that would just be one part of life that you as a teacher and as students bring into the classroom. According to Sarah's view, you don't bring in your whole life into the learning process. That was not interesting or relevant for her. In contrast to this view, Tom did bring his hard and difficult experience into the classroom, and I actually did not get the impression that he thought this experience could not be part of the learning process. I think he had a similar view to Sarah. However, I do think that along his studies his own experience about school, being bullied and what learning is all about changed. I think he actually viewed schooling and his own abilities in a different way after this year at folk high school. He appeared like a human being among other human beings and got to see himself with new eyes. In fact, I think he also learned something about the ideas of knowledge and learning which are central to folk high school pedagogy. I don't think Sarah picked up these ideas in the same way, but by the end of the year I think she also learned something, like on emotions, who she was, and so on.

Furthermore, I assume that sometimes when you work with students like Sarah, you have to be quite robust in your own role as folk high school teacher. That is, to acknowledge the views of your students, which are different from yours and still inviting your students to try to work on another way of viewing learning and knowledge. In a way you are saying "I know that you understand learning differently but let me teach you my way, follow me and give it a try." Of course, you would face skepticism and resistance from some students when you choose such an approach. Sarah, for example, had often said "I don't think your right;

I don't think this is the right way to do it". About some exercises, she would even say, "This is like being in a primary school, working with scissors and glue. No, I am not going to do that!" By the end of the school year, she would at least say, "Well, OK, I will do as you suggest." In other words, you could see a change of attitude with her, but still, she was a bit suspicious all the time, thinking that this was not what school should be like. This is not about the teacher using power to take the students where he or she wants them to be or to get them to think and view things the same way as the teacher does. This is about giving humans a chance to be more human and to be able to see themselves in relation to other humans, to learn to live in the dissonance, which is central to living in a democracy. But this is just an invitation; students can say "no, thanks".

*Connecting  
worldviews*

**Michael N. W.:** Maybe Sarah just did what she did because you asked her. Nevertheless, even though she was suspicious about it, she joined you in the private talk with Tom, for example. What happened after that talk, that is, the whole process during the remaining school year, could not have been foreseen by you as the teacher. You could not see it coming that after some weeks, Tom and Sarah would cooperate so closely. In a way, this talk was the turning point.

From what you are saying now, it is the term *worldview* that comes to my mind. Tom and Sarah had two completely different worldviews, and due to the talk that you initiated and facilitated, both of their worldviews could change. Actually, they could change in a way so that these two worldviews could connect, so to speak. And all of a sudden, Tom and Sarah could cooperate. Therefore, I am wondering whether *transformation*, *worldview*, *being social* and, of course, *cooperation* are key themes inherent in this story of yours. Especially cooperation appears to be quite cen-

tral in your shared experience since cooperation between Sarah and Tom was not possible before this particular talk. In order for the two to cooperate on a specific subject, for example, something had to happen on a social and emotional level first. And what happened on that level was that their worldviews got a little bit closer because they made adjustments to their individual worldviews. Sarah realized that she was sometimes too harsh in her opinions on how one should behave at school, on what a good teacher should be like, and so on. However, Tom could also realize that he in fact could make important contributions to the fellowship with the other students. In short, it was a learning process for both in terms of learning on a social and emotional level.

**Filippa M.:** Yes, definitely. Furthermore, I think that their different worldviews could actually come together just because of this initially chaotic situation in the class. It was not that the students sat down together and asked about each other's life stories. It was this chaotic situation that also made other people in this class see different worldviews, not despite but due to this clash. However, in the long run, they also experienced that something positive came out of it.

*The beautiful  
risk of  
education*

In fact, I was very close to asking Tom and Sarah at the end of the school year to share their story about what happened when they had this particular talk and what happened afterwards. Sharing that could have been a good experience for us all in that class. However, since Sarah and Tom had said back then in December that we shouldn't talk about this anymore, I felt that I had to respect that. For me, this was about finding the right balance. On the one hand, I thought that this could be a beneficial learning situation for us all, and as a group, we could respond to them at the end of the school year, saying, "Thank you; we are actu-

ally learning something from your story.” For me personally, this story was such a wake-up call concerning being in uncertainty as a teacher and being in that beautiful risk of education, as Biesta called it (see Biesta, 2013). This is also about teaching being authentic; it is about bringing ourselves into a real learning situation and standing in what is an authentic and difficult situation. For me, at the end of the school year, it would have been nice to tell them that this was a really important learning process for me as a teacher too. On the other hand, I wanted to be respectful towards Tom and Sarah. Nevertheless, I think I still regret that I did not ask them to say something about this story before we went on holiday. Though I think that the worldviews of the other people in the class came a bit closer, nonetheless. Though it was not shared, the incident in December and what followed from it did something to us all in this group. I think afterwards it was about bridge-building.

*The need for  
chaos*

**Michael N. W.:** When you say bridge-building, then I am wondering about two things. First, the chaotic situation. From a pedagogical point of view, I am wondering whether chaos is needed in order to change a situation that is kind of stuck. In your case, the situation was stuck because of two people with very different worldviews who were also very convinced of their worldviews. The way out of this situation, which also made these two people transform their worldview, was chaos. In other and more general words, the question is whether people like Sarah and Tom need to face chaos first before they are able to transform their worldviews in order to come closer. Furthermore, are such chaotic situations also necessary for a teacher because it is in such situations that something happens? Or, to formulate it differently, if we assume that personal transformation is one of the key aspects at stake in this story, then is putting it

at stake – that is, arranging for a chance to make it happen – first possible when there is chaos?

**Filippa M.:** I think so. And if someone would ask me what I want to learn in a teacher program, then I would say that I want to learn to handle conflicts in teaching situations. How to handle such conflicts, which approaches are available, and so on. By trying to push these conflicts aside in order to proceed in the way that is easiest to go has little to do with working with human beings in a learning situation. Rather, we need to be aware that chaotic situations can be the starting point for something to grow and for something good to come out of it. However, such a situation also demands something from the teacher, and that is *to dare to be vulnerable*, to dare to be at this risk (of education), and to say to yourself, “I don’t know the way to do this, but let us do it together. Let us try it out.” So, yes, I think we need a bit of chaos. Also, because there is something authentic that is revealed in the chaos. Like Sarah, who was really upset; that is, she expressed an authentic emotion. Tom, too, was authentic. In fact, he could not do anything else; he was just stuck in his familiar pattern of behavior. There is something about being authentic in the classroom and welcoming your students to be authentic with their different stories and backgrounds. Authenticity in the classroom – even if it sometimes creates chaos – fosters democratic awareness among the students. Now, what do I mean by democracy in this respect? Democracy is about living together while knowing that we will not agree on everything. In fact, what I think democracy is about at its core is being able to live in dissonance, to live in a shared space without agreeing on everything but respecting each other by knowing our different worldviews and conditions. However, even if we have different worldviews, we still live together. We are aware of our different opinions, and we

*To dare to be vulnerable*

## *When Education is at Risk*

can cope with them. I think this is an unspoken aim for many folk high school teachers derived from the ideas that formed this form of education (like in 1800, the big struggles about democracy, justice, and social change), which also might include a view of the aim of education also being about becoming human among other humans, to understand the self in relation to the world and others.

**Michael N. W.:** You bring up an important point here when you say democracy means that we try to live together, even though we know that we do not agree on everything. In fact, this is what happened in that class. They did everything but agree. There was conflict in that situation, which you were trying to solve. And you brought up an important idea in this respect: the vulnerability of the teacher. One can see that both Sarah and Tom were vulnerable, especially Tom. Now, making Sarah see his vulnerability also meant making her see her own. She started to cry and realized that she was not perfect and that she too could be wrong. This made her realize her own vulnerability in terms of fallibility. However, you also said that it is you, as the teacher, who has to be vulnerable. In this regard, I remember you mentioning that you still regret that at the end of the school year, you did not invite these two students to share their story with the class because you found it risky. Now, the whole story began with a risky situation where you invited both for a talk, and finally, it also turned out to be risky to invite them to share their story of what happened after that initial talk. Do you think that this also had to do with your own vulnerability that you did not ask them to share? Of course, you had respect for these two students since they both made it clear right after the initial talk that they did not want to talk about it anymore. And you respected that, which from an ethical point of view, seems to be absolutely right. However, was it also because you did

not want to risk such a public disclosure, so to speak, since it could play out the wrong way and then you would have felt hurt?

**Filippa M.:** Yes, I think you are right. However, what would have happened if I had asked Tom and Sarah to share their story, and it would not have turned out well? Then I would have created something bad for the whole class – and on our last school day, where we were supposed to thank each other for this year. That would not have been good for anyone. *Risking, or rather not?*

On the other hand, I could have asked Tom and Sarah, and they would have felt absolutely comfortable saying, “No, we won’t do this.” So, why did I not ask? Maybe it was because of me. This last school day was kind of a success for me, and I was afraid of getting in the way of that. If we had had another ending, it would have made me feel like I had done something as a teacher that was pedagogically wrong. In other words, I think you are right with what you said. What strikes me now when reflecting on what I just said is that the fact that I didn’t dare risk ‘again’ also means that I excluded authenticity. Do you agree? And here I mean this balance between protecting oneself and daring to risk the possibility for authenticity and growth as humans.

**Michael N. W.:** Yes, but I also think that with regards to vulnerability, there is a difference between the situation at the end of the school year and that talk in December. To put it bluntly: In that talk in December, you had nothing to lose compared to the situation at the end of the school year, where you could have lost everything you achieved during that school year. And maybe you did not want to risk that? The question, though, is: Would there have been even more learning if you had dared to ask?

*Vulnerability  
presupposes  
trust*

**Filippa M.:** Definitely, because if we had told the story, I would have shared my point of view, and Sarah and Tom would have presented theirs. And then maybe other people in the class would have shared their own stories, and maybe we all would have suddenly realized that there were stories with other people in the class that had been initiated by Tom and Sarah's story, but we were not aware of them yet. So, we, as the whole class, could have made it 'our' story and not only Tom and Sarah's.

Here, I would like to add something about the "lost learning opportunity": If we all had told our stories, we would have recognized that being in a group in education, studying together, and living among others is not always easy. By saying that aloud, it also became explicit and something to bear in mind during the coming time. And maybe it had also become easier to pick up other 'risk situations' along the way. I also think that vulnerability presupposes trust, so what is at risk here might be the trust between Tom and Sarah, but at the same time, I do not think so. I do think that the trust was greater, so it would have stood the "test".

### **2.3. Theoretical reflection**

**Michael N. W.:** What I am wondering about now is the phrase coined by Biesta that you mentioned: "the beautiful risk of education" (Biesta, 2013). And maybe in the next step of our dialogue – the *theoretical reflection* – we could use Biesta's "beautiful risk of education" as our main theoretical angle. On the blurb of his same-titled book, we can read that this publication is about:

What many teachers know but are increasingly being prevented from talking about: that real education always involves a risk. The risk is there because, as W. B. Yeats has put it, education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire. It is there because students are not to be seen as



objects to be moulded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility. (ibid.: blurb)

To me, the story you told is a good example of this beautiful risk that you face as a teacher. In this story, it is not hard to see why the learning process of Tom and Sarah was rather about lighting a fire than filling a bucket. However, lighting a fire – in literal and obviously also metaphorical terms – requires more caution compared to filling a bucket. You brought in an important aspect of this risk of education, and that is the vulnerability of the teacher. Now, when we ask ourselves again, What is at stake in this story of yours? Then it seems that there was not so much at stake in that initial talk in December for you as the teacher compared to what was at stake for you at the end of the school year. At the end of the school year, it was the pedagogical success of that year – that is, the social learning of Tom and Sarah. They started to cooperate and were able to see the world differently. And exactly this you did not want to risk in order to “open up” the eyes of all the other students too, so that they could also come out with their stories and their worldviews. If that had happened, it would have added to the success you already had, of course. However, there was also the danger that by giving it a try, you would light a fire that would backfire, so to speak. In short, your attempt would fail. But in what way would it have failed? In the way that Sarah and Tom would have stopped cooperating or that it would have separated them? Therefore, with regards to Biesta’s beautiful risk of education, I am wondering, when does education become too risky? When are we not willing anymore to risk our own vulnerability as teachers?

**Filippa M.:** If the trust between us is at risk of being erased. And if my own vulnerability would risk being too costly for the participants or for me without, for example, *When it's not worth the risk*

seeing a potential of a ‘learning outcome’ by being vulnerable. Do you see what I mean? If I, for example, were to tell a participant that his or her behavior or way of acting in the classroom hurt other people and even me, and I suspected that the participant could neither handle it nor understand and learn from it, but only seeing it as criticism, then it would not be worth risking my own vulnerability. It would be too costly, both for the participant and me.

**Michael N. W.:** When asking when we are not willing anymore to risk our own vulnerability as a teacher, I was doing so because you finally decided that it was too risky to ask Tom and Sarah to share their story.

*Risk and care*

**Filippa M.:** In this specific case, at the end of the semester, I guess I was not too sure about the trust between us after all. They both finished their studies, and they were not coming back after the holidays, but if they would have done that, I would have had time to work on the trust if we had lost some of it. So, to sum up, the question of when I do not dare to risk my own vulnerability as a teacher is not only a question about myself but also about the participants’ learning and experiences. Risking my vulnerability stands in relation to what they risk losing. Do you understand what I mean? Talking with Biesta, it also has to do with the teacher’s view of humans (and their worldviews) (see e. g. Biesta, 2013: 4f). Seeing them as “subjects of action and responsibility” (ibid: 18), vulnerability is linked to what the teacher judges or assesses as reasonable actions and responsibilities based on the individual’s ability. And here, the risk of the teacher is about a balance between challenging and protecting.

In other words, the term risk means, for me, that you can put another person into a situation where he or she could get hurt and where you are not in control to follow that up, on the one hand. For example, as I just mentioned, you are

not able to talk to that person about what happened to him or her after the school year ends. On the other hand, risk in this case also relates to my own view and my own story as a teacher. Am I ready to reflect and review my stance and my story, or do I try to avoid that risk because I am not ready to do that kind of self-reflection yet?

In a folk high school context, risk can also be related to the term *care*. And care is also at stake in this particular story I told because in folk high school, we want to *care about people*. Metaphorically speaking, we do not want them to fall too hard; we want to lift them up and “rebuild” them, so to speak. We want them to unleash their full human potential. That is, at least, the ideal.

Already with these few aspects that I just mentioned, you can see the complexity of risk and its different pedagogical implications that you are dealing with as a teacher. It is like finding the right balance between these different implications of risk. Finally – and this is a question that I am also posing to myself – isn’t it worth it to take this beautiful risk of education anyway? What could be the worst thing to happen?

**Michael N. W.:** The worst thing that could happen would probably be chaos. That is, with reference to Biesta’s idea of education as lighting a fire (see Biesta, 2013: blurb), you set all the pedagogical work that you have done as the teacher on fire. All that just goes up in smoke.

**Filippa M.:** Yes, but on the other hand, if I had not been put into that chaos, I would not have experienced that there is a way through this. My actual insight from that experience, hence, is that there might be a fruitful way in other cases as well. In other words, it is worth taking the risk.

Since we try to see this story from more theoretical perspectives now, there is also something else that comes to my mind, which has to do with teacher education in gen-

*Phronesis and  
responsibility*

eral. In teacher education, the student teachers are often told to find the right methods and the right theory-based strategies. Just take a look at behavioral or cognitivist learning theory and their central role in teaching books for teacher education in Scandinavia (see e. g. Imsen, 2020; Stray & Wittek, 2014). With that, however, the possibility of taking that risk becomes narrower, I think, because then the teachers are already equipped and “armed” with specific strategies and methods whose purpose is nothing but to shut out chaos and risk. In contrast to that, *phronesis* in terms of practical wisdom can be mentioned. Its relevance in teacher education has been pointed out by several (see e. g. Helskog, 2019: 40f; Hansen, 2011: 250). By the term *phronesis*, I mean to be able to be present in a situation and to act prudently in it by reflecting existentially on it (which, in a way, also involves embodied and experience-based knowledge) (see e. g. Biesta, 2015: 12f). Responding to a situation in this way might lead to something that you could not see in advance.

So, when we talk about applying methods and strategies, we do not really make room for either risk or *phronesis*, I think. On the contrary, by applying methods, we want to get rid of everything that appears to be risky and chaotic.

*The  
potentiality  
and reality of  
the learning  
situation*

**Michael N. W.:** That is a good point. It reminds me of the paradox of education as outlined by the Norwegian pedagogue and philosopher Hans Skjervheim. He said that when a teacher realizes that his or her methods won’t work with a certain student, the teacher tends to switch completely and let this student develop freely (see Skjervheim, 2002: 117). However, this does not make the situation any better because what the teacher insinuates with this reaction is that this student is a hopeless case, and therefore, lets him do what he wants. Put in the words of the philosopher Anders Lindseth, Skjervheim assumed that “From this

paradox, there is only one way out: understanding the educational activity as a dialogue between educator and the one to be educated, a dialogue in which both are shaping and shaped at the same time.” (Lindseth, 2015: 64) And actually, this is what you did with Tom and Sarah – you went into dialogue with them.

However, when I say that, I also remember what you mentioned at the beginning of our dialogue when you told the story about these two students. There, you said that at the end of the school year, you saw the opportunity to invite Tom and Sarah to share their story with the class. Finally, however, you decided against it, and you stated, “I still regret that I didn’t do that.” For some reason, it is this statement that gives me the impression that this story still has a certain impact on you. I imagine this impact like a certain ‘itching’ every time you come into a similar situation, telling you, “Now is the time to try it out!” Or, to put it in other words, my impression is that this story about the end of the school year had a cliffhanger ending for you, so to speak. You could also say that this situation created a certain imbalance in you. You already mentioned that finding the right balance – e. g. between protecting oneself and daring to risk the possibility of growth, between challenging and protecting – was quite central for you in this episode. And here I am wondering whether the risk of education we are talking about also relates to a certain felt and experienced imbalance with the teacher – with the emphasis put on *felt and experienced* because the imbalance is rather intuitively felt than disclosed by a rational analysis of the respective situation. Almost like an itching spot, this felt and experienced imbalance invites being rebalanced by the teacher. And if you cannot scratch this spot, it keeps on itching, to put it metaphorically.

For example, in the situation with Tom and Sarah, there was no balance in the beginning. You mentioned that it

was also a challenging situation for you as the teacher who then kind of balanced it out. So, in more general terms, we could assume that when there is imbalance in the classroom, be it of a social or emotional nature, then it does something to the teacher. It makes itself felt, so to speak. What the situation in December did to you was that you did something with that situation too. You acted upon this 'itching' imbalance by inviting the two students for a talk, and after a while, it worked really well between the two of them. Suddenly, they could cooperate. The imbalance was rebalanced; it was not itching anymore, so to speak.

At the end of the school year, however, it was you experiencing a kind of imbalance again. Not that there was a difficult situation with the students again; rather, you saw a learning potential in that situation that could be unleashed. So, the imbalance was created within you by you realizing a difference between potentiality and reality – between what could be and what in fact was. However, this time you finally decided not to act upon this feeling of imbalance and did not go into a further transformation and learning process. Instead, you chose to take this imbalance with you. And it is here that I assume this kind of "itching" springs from this felt imbalance. In other words, this imbalance created a certain force or drive in you that you still carry with you, which makes the chances higher that the next time you come into a similar situation, you act upon it – you "scratch the spot," so to speak. This is what I meant when I said that this story had a cliffhanger ending for you.

*Being present  
wholeheartedly*

**Filippa M.:** I think you are definitely right, and when you say it like that, I also think there is a further important aspect revealed here. In Swedish it is called "*nærvær*", and though in English it is translated with *being present*, it does not really fit the Swedish term. In German, it would probably be Heidegger's "*Dasein*" (see 1962: 27 or 68). Maybe

it is best translated as *being in a situation wholeheartedly* (on wholeheartedness and vulnerability, see e. g. Brown, 2021).

I think you have to be present wholeheartedly in such a chaotic situation in order to be aware of and be able to handle the imbalance. With that, the general question is, How can we as teachers be present wholeheartedly in terms of listening carefully, feeling and sensing the respective situation, being open towards different ways of handling it, and at the same time, trying to understand the students' worldviews in order to open up for a way for us all to go together? To me, this is not only about vulnerability but also about being present wholeheartedly in a given situation.

Now, being present wholeheartedly in terms of being open, listening and so on, is something that you can train as a teacher, I think. However, it is not the same as learning to apply methods. For when we talk about didactical methods and strategies, we often think that people are all the same and situations are the same. Therefore, you can treat them with the same methods. This, however, is not what I mean when I say that you can train such a wholehearted attitude. Rather, what I mean is the teacher taking a stance, a worldview that allows for people to be unique and for situations to be different. The attitude I am talking about does not only imply meeting others as different subjects, but rather being intersubjective. In more metaphorical terms, this means that we meet *in-between*. And when we meet *in-between*, we can take our different worldviews into this *in-between space*, so to speak. There, in this space, we can focus on what is important and valuable for us all in that situation. However, in order to be able to do that, we have to put ourselves "all-in", so to speak. That is, we have to put our different worldviews and feelings into this *in-between space*. We have to be authentic and live our own position and attitude. Hence, vulnerability in this re-

spect means to *dare* to go into this in-between space. Does this make sense to you?

*Taking a step  
back*

**Michael N. W.:** Oh yes, it does. To me, this intersubjectivity, this *in-between space*, as you called it, seems to be quite similar to what David Bohm talks about in his theory on dialogue (see e. g. Bohm, 1996). He assumes that in a dialogue, you create a common space, a space in-between people where you meet as a whole human being, where you are authentic (see e. g. *ibid.*; Bohm, Factor & Garrett, 1991; Banathy & Jenlik, 2005: ix). And if you want to be authentic, you have to be vulnerable. Therefore, this concept of inter-subjectivity, that you brought up, seems quite relevant here because it opens up for authenticity, and that also includes vulnerability.

This also appears to tell us something about the risk of education or, to be more precise, about the wholehearted teacher and when he or she is not willing to risk anymore. How do I mean that? To put it bluntly: You, at the end of the semester, did not want your heart – your whole heart – to get hurt. You said to yourself, “Now it is enough for me.” With that, you reveal an important aspect with regards to being a teacher in general. For example, when it comes to this wholeheartedness, then I think of my student teachers: When they do their teaching practice in their first semester, they have little experience, but they mean well with their pupils. They do this practice wholeheartedly. However, as a matter of course, they soon come into situations that overchallenge them and feel too risky for them. What they do then, in metaphorical terms, is take a step back. By taking a step back, however, they are not in the situation anymore with their full presence because otherwise they would be afraid to get hurt. Not physically, but in their role as a teacher. What you described in your case says something essential about this risk of education from Biesta, I think.



It seems to explain why teachers, at a certain point, take a step back and why they do not dare anymore to stand in that situation wholeheartedly. For it is their ‘whole heart’ that is at stake then, and they do not want to risk that.

**Filippa M.:** When you put it like that, then it reminds me of this image of being a teacher, where you deliberately do not bring in yourself as a person and where you understand being a teacher as nothing more than a professional work. To me, it is like ignoring something about yourself, like you go into this professional role and after teaching, you go back to who you are. I think such a view of being a teacher is quite problematic because it does not recognize this wholeheartedness and the risk that comes with it as something positive.

*Choosing away  
methods*

In contrast to that, the role of the teacher, as we have discussed it here so far, is completely different from that image. Going into the teaching situation with your whole person, as who you are as a human being, was a central aspect of the teacher’s role as we outlined it. That does not mean that you are unprofessional, but sometimes such a stance resembles not being a professional teacher in terms of not sticking to methods and strategies and not keeping your students at a distance. Therefore, I think we need ways to talk about such questions, like what it means to be professional and ethical. This is not a matter of didactics but of philosophy, I assume. We need philosophy in order to be able to talk about different teaching approaches.

**Michael N. W.:** What comes to my mind when you say that is the approach from Ran Lahav. Lahav is a renowned philosophical practitioner, and he understands philosophical practice as *worldview interpretation* (see Lahav, 1995). In simple terms, the basic assumption of his approach is that we all have our own philosophy of life. Not in terms of a coherent theory, however, but expressed in our feelings,

*Folk high  
school  
pedagogy as  
worldview  
interpretation*

values, beliefs and attitudes (see *ibid.*: 4f). Sometimes we do not realize the philosophy behind these feelings, values and so on; that is, we are not always fully aware of our worldview. By means of philosophical practice, as Lahav suggests, our worldviews can be challenged and by that, we can become aware of it. Once aware of our worldview, we can make changes to it.

In fact, what you did with Sarah and Tom could be understood as worldview interpretation. You challenged them in their worldview interpretation, that is, how they interpreted the world. Consequentially, they realized what it was in their worldviews that did not work any longer in that particular situation, and, after a while, they made changes accordingly.

When you now suggest creating philosophical spaces or arenas in order to talk about questions of professionalism, then that too seems to relate to worldview interpretation. Since what you are suggesting here is actually an arena where teachers can be challenged in their personal and professional worldviews, for example, by asking, How can we dare to stand in a situation wholeheartedly?

**Filippa M.:** In this respect, my impression of teachers in primary school is that they become easily afraid in their own arena since there are so many different people who have questions for them, who have a say on what they are doing, who criticize the teachers' professional work. Be it parents, politicians and so on. Folk high school, on the other hand, is a place where you are not questioned and doubted as much as a teacher. I talked to so many teachers from the regular school system who worry "Is everyone happy with my decisions, or will somebody call me later on?", and so on. In contrast to that, teaching at a folk high school has kind of its own framing.

**Michael N. W.:** Do you think it is easier in folk high school to open up a space for exploring the teacher's worries in terms of vulnerability and the risks that can be taken?

**Filippa M.:** Yes, I think so, due to the folk high school's tradition of *Bildung* (see e.g. Ohrem & Haddal, 2011). That is, examining who you are is already a recognized part of education there. For the folk high school teachers I have met, it was very important to let their students investigate who they are. These teachers would integrate questions like "Who are you? Can you tell me something about your life story?" into their teaching. And I agree with them that it is more important for the students to get to know who they are rather than learn something standardized from a syllabus. Learning to know who you are is essential in order to get to know something or someone in general. In that sense, these teachers risk something with their students. And that "something" that is risked is about *being recognized as a human being*. In this sense, it would – probably – be easier at a folk high school to create such an arena where you can further investigate your worldview and the kind of risk we were talking about.

**Michael N. W.:** What you were describing now dealt with the importance for the students to gain self-knowledge. However, what you also pointed out now – even though maybe more implicitly – was the relevance of the Socratic "Know thyself" for the teacher as well (see e.g. Gallagher, 1992: 198). The teacher, who has to engage in self-reflection and self-investigation in order to know who he or she actually is – not only as a teacher, but also as a person, as a human being. Only when you get going with that does it become easier to be a teacher in the sense that you dare to stand in a situation wholeheartedly.

**Filippa M.:** Very straight to the point. And maybe also a good point to finish up our dialogue?

**Michael N. W.:** I agree. Let us stop here. Thank you very much for the inspiring conversation!

### **3. Epilogue**

In this final section of the present chapter, central aspects, perspectives and insights that came forward in the previous dialogue are summarized. The intention here is not to analyze what has been said but rather to give a condensed overview of essential elements that were developed during the conversation.

With this in mind, we can say that in the previous dialogue, Biesta's expression "the beautiful risk of education" (Biesta, 2013) was reflected and approached from different angles as well as illustrated by means of a conflict situation between two students. As this situation unfolded, however, the two students not only *learned to live together in dissonance*, so to speak, but they also *connected their worldviews* and became learning partners and friends. In order to make this happen, Filippa, as the teacher of this class, had to *take certain educational risks* without knowing in advance whether her interventions would play out well and resolve the conflict.

Hence, in the previous dialogue, *consciously taking risks* in pedagogical settings – or consciously refraining from taking them – was assumed to be an integral part of a folk high school teacher's responsibility and, consequentially, of good folk high school pedagogy. In the further course of the conversation, being able to take such risks or not, that is, responding to them in a responsible way, also appeared to depend on whether a teacher can *be present in the respective situations wholeheartedly*. This wholeheartedness is not a question of methods or pedagogical tools. On the contrary, it means *that one dares to be vulnerable*

as a teacher and takes the chances that the situation offers. When examining this aspect of wholeheartedness, the dialogue partners concluded that it presupposes two further aspects. On the one hand, that the vulnerability of the teacher in terms of taking risks requires *having trust into the respective situation* – which is not the same as having control. On the other hand, this vulnerability and wholeheartedness requires first and foremost that one *recognize those involved as human beings*. That is, to have a genuine interest in the Other – your students – where you encounter them with questions like “*Who are you? Can you tell me something about your life story?*” In this way, the humanness and uniqueness of students can come forward, which makes it easier to work with *Bildung*-related issues.

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