

The Crux of Being a Folk High School Teacher

Kjetil Hareide Hallre & Michael Noah Weiss

1. Prologue

Kjetil Hareide Hallre and Michael Noah Weiss met for the first time at a seminar for newly employed teachers at Ringerike folk high school, where they went on a philosophical walk together. Their paths crossed again at the University of South-Eastern Norway in the teacher program “Folk high school pedagogy.” Since both of them had a certain interest – not to say admiration – for each other’s work, it felt natural to invite Kjetil to the following dialogue, which took place on a snowy December morning in 2021. At that time, Kjetil was in his seventh year as a folk high school teacher. He teaches music and runs two different courses at his school, one for musical theatre and one for music performance, band and songwriting. He worked as a music teacher and musician for many years before he found his home at folk high school.

In the following dialogue, a situation is presented and investigated in which a folk high school teacher definitely does not end up on a daily basis. Nevertheless, similar situations can occur to anyone since they are part of life. During the conversation, the dialogue partners assumed that stepping out from one’s conventional role as a teacher and

just being a human being is an essential dimension of folk high school pedagogy. At first, this might appear like a paradox because just being a human being seems to strip off the teacher's professionalism. And what should a teacher be if not professional? In the further course of the conversation, however, it turns out that this paradox – this *crux of the folk high school teacher*, as it will be called – seems to be necessary in order to support the students in their individual *Bildung*-processes.

2. Dialogue

Michael N. W.: Kjetil, you have several years of experience as a folk high school teacher. And that experience might also be a valuable resource for our dialogue now, in which we investigate the question, “What is good folk high school pedagogy?” In order to go into this investigation, I would like to invite you to share an experience that you think represents a good example of folk high school pedagogy.

2.1. Concrete reflection

Kjetil H. H.: That is a good question and when I ponder it, there is one situation that I would like to share. In order to keep the involved persons anonymous, I will change or not disclose certain details. However, I will do that in a way that does not alter the essence of the story.

Some years back, we had one of these entertainment evenings at our school. I was about to get dressed and go to the school when I got a phone call from a teacher colleague who informed me that one of my students just received a phone call that his father had a life-threatening seizure. So, my colleague asked me whether I could come and sit with

that boy for a while. So, I went to the school and sat down with him, and we talked. At that point, he did not know much about the situation, just that his father, to whom he was very close, had this severe seizure. We sat and talked for a long time, and I remember that I felt quite inadequate as a teacher. Because what should you talk about? What could you say, and how could you help someone in such a situation? How could you give consolation? Where is your authority in terms of your teacher's role when you find yourself in such a moment in which you feel so naked and inadequate?

While we were sitting there, the boy's mom called again and told him that his father did not make it. Being in that situation as the teacher, you first of all realize that you have all these hopes, plans and dreams about what it is to be a teacher and to be skilled and knowledgeable – to be steady and stable in your position and your role. But in the face of such a big life event, you are just stripped of all that and left with just being a good human being – hopefully – or at least “the next person around”. In other words, this experience stripped away my preconceptions of what I would do in a situation like that. Instead, I was trying to just float, say the right thing and just be there.

Maybe it was a flash of inspiration, but I suggested going for a walk, bringing my dog with me. So, we took a walk while it was cold and raining, talking about everything and nothing, about life, about family and dogs, and so on. Now, looking back on that experience, to me, it is an example of folk high school pedagogy because it breaks down the barrier of “I am the teacher, and you are the student” and replaces it with two human beings who try to navigate through this complicated and, at times, cruel and hard world. Just sitting in a room talking or going for a walk with a dog, it was just two people trying to swim through this sea of life, so to speak. Later, I thought that this was

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one of those moments where the hierarchical structures between the teacher and the student were truly disassembled. We were just two people talking about life.

You asked, ‘What is good folk high school pedagogy?’ and that question might give the impression that in order to answer, you need a pedagogue. And the pedagogue does pedagogy, and that is how it all happens. However, much of the pedagogy that happened in the situation I described was not something that was done or added by a pedagogue. Rather, it was the situation as such that brought it forward. It was the situation letting me simply be a human being instead of me panic-fueled trying to get hold of some sort of hierarchical position or teacher’s role. The situation made me just someone there to comfort and to talk to. I also think that this was possible due to the good relationship that the student and I had built up during the semester. Before that situation, the student and I knew each other fairly well, as student and as teacher, and as you do in a folk high school. So, when it came to that moment I was describing, the student could also feel that he could trust me and trust that I wanted the best for him. That I would be a good conversational partner for that situation. Also, going for a walk and bringing a dog enriched the human experience in that situation.

2.2. Critical reflection

From being a teacher to being human

Michael N. W.: It is a very impressive story that you have chosen. Quite in the beginning, you said that you felt “naked” when you were in that situation. As you said yourself, you were kind of stripped of all these “instruments” one eventually would expect from a pedagogue, also because of all the pedagogical knowledge you had, you felt useless at that moment. You could not use your skills and your knowledge as a resource in that situation. For me,

it is interesting that you chose this example even though it seems that you stepped out of your teacher's role. You were just a human being meeting another human being at a very challenging moment. But still, you say this is part of folk high school pedagogy.

I think I have a quite clear picture of this situation. When we now move further on in the dialogue to the next step, where the question is, "What is at stake in this experience of yours?", then what do you think is at stake? Instead of "being at stake", you could also ask what was essential in that situation, and if you took that out, then it would not be the same experience.

Kjetil H. H.: If I understand the question right, I think for me as the teacher, it was about dealing with the loss of the student. The student losing his father is obviously at the core of the situation. First, the fear and the worry, and then that loss that he was facing, what life threw at him. That is so horrible and so rough. And then also, trying to navigate that in the best way possible while knowing this is not something you can fix. This is not something that you can solve. Therefore, the question rather is, what can I offer in terms of comfort, what can I offer in terms of empathy, love and sort of meaning in that moment?

Navigating loss

Michael N. W.: I think I understand what you mean. This is also the reason why I did not ask you how you felt afterwards and so on. It is obvious how that student felt. For a human being, it is probably one of the worst situations to receive the message that one of your close ones is struggling, fighting for his or her life – and then the next message you get is that he or she did not make it. In fact, this is one of the worst scenarios that can happen. Giving comfort, being there as a human being and stepping out of your formal teacher's role, and instead just being human in the actual sense of the word – would you say those are essential

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attributes of the folk high school teacher? I also ask this because these are not necessarily essential attributes that you would expect from a teacher in a conventional school. A teacher in a conventional school has a contingency plan for such situations that he or she must follow, while you were stepping out of the teacher's role and just being human instead of following certain steps of an emergency plan. Still, you were dealing with one of the most existential issues a human being can be confronted with.

*Learning-for-life
pedagogy*

Kjetil H. H.: Yes, I think that is true. As a folk high school teacher, you are put in different situations where you should and have to step down from your pedestal as a teacher and just be there with your students. This idea goes back to Grundtvig, and it relates to an ideal of pedagogy in terms of *Bildung* (see e. g. Ohrem, 2011). The overall intention of this pedagogy is learning for life. For in the grand scheme, it does not really matter whether my students know all the different scales or can perform on stage as long as they can develop some sort of life wisdom. I think that is the true value of a folk high school, something that you would not get at a conventional school in the same way.

*Being, not
doing*

Michael N. W.: I think here you mention something very important because with respect to the situation you described previously, there is not a solution; there are no techniques with which you can fix such a situation. You cannot say "OK, the student is really sad because of what happened to his father, and now I have to do this and that, and then the problem is solved." It is obvious that this does not work. Instead, what you did in that situation was that you were with the student and that means *being there, being present* – and not *doing* so much in the sense of a clear plan and in terms of "This is the goal! And now we have to do this and then this and then the student will be OK again". This makes me wonder about what you just said about life

wisdom. The whole *Bildung*-idea of the folk high school is obviously to support the students to develop towards a certain practical wisdom, life wisdom, life experience. However, is it that there is in fact no real curriculum or teaching plan in order to achieve that? Instead, is it *being present, being there authentically* which is the actual key to this situation? There is something there in that experience you shared, which is not techniques nor a teaching plan – is it just *being there*? Is that enough?

Kjetil H. H.: That is a very good question. I think being there authentically, as you mentioned, is a very important aspect here – being there as a whole human being and not just as someone with a teacher hat, and that is the only hat you get to see, so to speak. Sometimes in class, I put my teacher hat on, but then in the break, I take it off when I go together with my students and grab a cup of coffee and talk about the Christmas holidays or something. In these moments, you are there authentically, almost like a whole human being, apart, of course, from what you keep in your private sphere. I hope all the folk high school teachers have a working definition for themselves of what the idea of *Bildung* means to them and what we are striving towards. As a folk high school teacher, I have a clear idea of what I want: I want the best for my students in their lives and not just in music. I want them to have a thriving life and take the next step in the right direction. And I need to have an idea about the direction in which they are walking. I am aware that these are vague definitions and not square-shaped boxes in which they have to fit in. Choosing such an approach is not always easy because each student stands and starts at a different point. Nevertheless, the definition that I have is foggy enough so that the learning and development process can become a very individualized path for each student. And exactly this is the challenge and the

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high school
teacher*

crux of being a folk high school teacher: that you must figure out where the students stand individually and then try to see how you can guide them towards that vague but still defined goal of *Bildung* (see e. g. Hattie & Larsen, 2020: 176).

Michael N. W.: Let us have a closer look at that goal in terms of lifelong learning. *Lifelong learning* is a term coined by Grundtvig and sometimes even related to the German term *Bildung* (see e. g. Hansen, 2007: 329f). Now, I don't want us to elaborate on a straightforward definition of *Bildung*. As you said, it is a rather fuzzy term. Nevertheless, lifelong learning in other contexts is almost used synonymously with the term *continuing education* in the sense of the acquisition of skills and knowledge over a lifespan, which also gives an idea of how learning is understood in these contexts (see e. g. Hansen, 2007: 332; Davies & Longworth, 2013: 21): There is something that you can acquire; there is something that you can get in terms of knowledge, so you become more informed, more skilled, and so on. What you were saying now stood in contrast to that specific idea of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning, according to what you said, rather resembles a *learning for life*. And that, as far as I understand it, is not necessarily about acquiring anything; rather, it is much more about developing an attitude towards life. What do you think about that?

*Nuggets of
wisdom*

Kjetil H. H.: I think you are right, though I don't think that it is only about attitudes. Metaphorically speaking, it is about finding the nuggets everyone has on his or her way, the different nuggets of wisdom or learning to do. I don't think that you can sneak around those nuggets. And finding these nuggets, that's part of the goal, whether they are skills or doing your laundry at home or learning to deal with a conflict with a friend. Those little nuggets – in terms

of wisdom and also skills – you have to pick up, and that makes life easier. However, I think what you said about learning for life is maybe the most important aspect of picking up these nuggets, so to speak. In a sense, this is about *process vs. product – the process of life vs. the things that you have learned*.

In that respect, I think folk high school teachers differ on what they focus on. For myself, I think this learning for life is what has always driven me as a teacher. At our school, we have this definition of *Bildung*:

To become more conscious

- 1) about yourself, that is learning more about yourself;
- 2) about other people, in terms of your relationship to others;
- 3) about the world.

These three levels are, of course, intertwined, and we use this definition often in conversations between us teachers and the students. The students might not see themselves clearly in light of the community with the others. Some of them also have a narrow view of the world, as if it does not exist and only they themselves and what they are doing is important. In this case, we would try to help to open up a window to the world, so to speak, or help them navigate the relationships in the community at school. In short, we want them to become more cognizant of these three levels.

2.3. Theoretical reflection

Michael N. W.: If we now take a look at what we just investigated concerning *Bildung* and lifelong learning and see it from a more theoretical perspective, then it is Martin Buber with his I-Thou relation who comes to mind (see Buber, 2010). An I-Thou relation is the opposite of an I-It relation. In very short terms, in an I-Thou relation you try to *I-Thou, not I-It*

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see the other as a unique being, whereas in an I-It relation, you see the other just as an object. To me, Buber's concept of the I-Thou encounter seems particularly relevant for the situation you were in with this boy who just lost his father. There you stepped out of your teacher's role in order to simply be a human being – and exactly this stepping-out from your teacher's role is part of being a folk high school teacher. This appears to be a kind of paradox because it means that being a good folk high school teacher sometimes requires you to step out of this teacher's role and just be a human being. Therefore, I would like to ask you, what do you think in general of Martin Buber's I-Thou relation and its eventual relevance for folk high school pedagogy?

*Meeting
students
differently*

Kjetil H. H.: I think this concept is highly relevant. For example, when I refer to this concept as the three levels of *Bildung* that we use at our school, then I might meet one student where I know that I have to give him or her positive confirmation because I know from experience that he or she needs that. In other words, giving positive confirmation is something that helps this particular student on his or her path, while it would be something completely different that helps other students on their path. In this sense, you have to meet students very differently. However, in all these differences, there is also something common, and that is the need to be together with the students as human beings. And to just be with the students is something that we do when we have our evening shifts, for example, when the teaching time is over and the students just hang out, watching videos, playing darts or having a cup of coffee in the cafeteria. In those situations, our job is to walk around and talk to the students. In other words, there, it is about being another human being among and with them, a human being that is talking about Harry Potter or about a pet that a student just lost. In this respect, I think it is important not

to dominate such situations and talk over, like, “Here is the teacher coming in, and he will set the standards for the way we communicate with each other.” Rather, as a teacher in such situations, you join such situations and conversations as an equal part, to some degree.

Michael N. W.: Have you heard about Lave and Wenger’s concepts of Communities of Practice and what is called *Situated Learning* (see Lave & Wenger, 1991), which also are of relevance for folk high school pedagogy in terms of what Johan Lövgren called a “learning together” (Lövgren, 2020)? When you say that sometimes you just are together with the students in the evening, playing games and so on, then it appears that you are on the same level with the students, as you just said. However, is it really that the other students see you at that moment just as another student or still as a teacher? And if they still see you as a teacher – which I assume they do – then is there still some kind of hidden pedagogical task when you, as the teacher, go into such situations and pretend to be a student? I am aware that I formulated this question quite critically, but what do you think about it?

Kjetil H. H.: I think it is a good question. And indeed, when I walk around and talk to the students, I want to spread positivity and be helpful, for example. This is not exactly the same at home, where I can allow myself to be more negative sometimes. At school, you are still at work, and that also means trying to be a good person and a good role model. I think as a teacher, you never get completely away from your position. Also, there are things that the students would not share with me but only with their fellow students. Whether these are things that have to do with breaking the school’s rules or whether they have to do with other personal and private matters, there are certain issues they will not share with me. However, having said that, I

*Eye-level
relationships*

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know that there are other teachers at the school who have in-depth conversations with their students about their love lives. In other words, there are different spheres of the students' private lives. Some of these spheres they will share with the teachers and others they won't. Based on several conversations that I have had on this issue with some students, I can say that they see you more like an uncle or an aunt or a family friend. So, you have the classroom situation where you are the teacher, but, in the evening, you are more like an older brother or a family friend, at least to a certain degree. We as teachers are grown-ups, and the students come to you with certain issues – issues they would not discuss in that way with their peers. But still, the relationship between a folk high school teacher and his or her students is more at eye level than the conventional teacher-student relation in a normal school or university.

Existential pedagogy

Michael N. W.: When you compare the folk high school teacher with an uncle or an aunt who is guiding the students, then we can ask, what is it in the relationship between an uncle and his nephew that is different than the relationship between this nephew and the nephew's cousin? For me, the difference is responsibility. And here, we can bring in what is called existential pedagogy. Responsibility is a key theme in the works of some representatives of existential pedagogy, like Viktor Frankl (see e. g. 2000: 29) or Tone Sævi (see 2015), who described it more in terms of response-ability. And with response-ability, generally speaking, they mean to respond to a given situation in the best way you can. Do you think that responsibility, understood in this way, can explain a bit more the difference between you as the teacher in that room playing dart with your students compared to the students playing dart only among themselves?

Kjetil H. H.: I think that is a very good point. And when you say responsibility, then I do not only think of the responsibility towards the students that I have. I also think of the responsibility that I have towards the school in terms of loyalty. For example, I have to make sure that the students are not doing things that would ruin the reputation of the school or that they burn down the house, to put it bluntly. There are certain responsibilities that rest on my shoulders in the same way as they do in my household, where I also have specific responsibilities. I have specific responsibilities towards my one-month-old son and other responsibilities towards my dog. To sum it up, I think responsibility is an important part of the puzzle.

*Being
responsible in
different ways*

Michael N. W.: I think this is a good closing word to our dialogue. Though we did not use so much time, we came pretty far nonetheless. Thank you very much for sharing and contributing, Kjetil.

3. Epilogue

In the beginning of the previous dialogue, Kjetil shared an experience about a situation that was beyond the normal duties of his profession, but still he felt responsible for the student that was concerned. Not knowing how to “navigate” the loss the student faced, he had the impression that he had been stripped of his professionalism. He felt that there was nothing left but to step out from his role as teacher and be in that situation just as a human being, together with another human being who had a hard time.

In the dialogue, the idea came up that sometimes you can only be a good teacher if you transcend your role as a teacher, which at the same time also was perceived as a paradox. In order to better understand this paradox, the difference between *being* and *doing* was examined closer:

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While *doing* was associated with certain pedagogical techniques, exercises and methods – something that was out of place in that situation – *being*, on the other hand, was meant in the sense of engaging in the situation just as you are and with no clues or plans or quick fixes because the situation cannot be *fixed* anyway. In other words, responsibility in such a situation only can come to the fore by responding to the situation authentically, as a human being. Taking on a role, like the role of a teacher, would appear to be unauthentic. Hence, stepping out from your teacher role does not mean to put aside the responsibility that you have as a teacher.

In the further course of the dialogue, it was also explicated how the responsibility of the teacher relates to *Bildung* as the overall goal of a folk high school. In this respect, it was pointed out that good folk high school pedagogy deals with making the students more conscious of a) themselves in terms of self-knowledge, b) other people in terms of one's relationships to others, and c) the world in general.

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