Creativity and Pedagogical Innovation: Exploring Teachers’ Experiences of Risk-taking

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this paper is to share the results of research into the experience of teacher risk-taking in the classroom. The development of children as risk-takers is featured prominently in curriculum documents and reports calling for the competencies of 21st century learning. Teachers are expected to become 21st century learners who model risk-taking. The repeated calls for the development of risk-taking students through the modeling of risk-taking teachers makes the experience of risk an important pedagogical question. However, 21st century learning documents do not take up substantively the meaning of teacher risk-taking.

Research Design: Phenomenological research is concerned with the unique and the individual and in that regard each teacher-participant represents particular perceptions of risk-taking experiences and responses to risk in the classroom. The six (6) teacher-participants responded to a call distributed widely to teaching staff in a Canadian school district. The inquiry relied on phenomenological interviews and experiential life world material. In this paper three phenomenological themes are described: risk and readiness; risk and the in-between spaces of pedagogy, and risk as exploration and finding a way. This research allows us to understand teachers' lived experience rather than assume the meaning of the terms risk and risk-taking.

Key Words: educational innovation; discovery processes, reflective teaching, decision making, phenomenology

Word count: 8984

Introduction

In the last two decades, there have been many educational initiatives with an expressed aim to transform teaching for the emerging realities of the 21st century. The common rationale for these initiatives is that traditional educational approaches designed for 19th and 20th century learning are not up to the task of preparing the next generation for life in a new millennium. The educational change being proposed is characterized as transformational and *radical* (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). Numerous documents, whitepapers, coalitions and partnerships between educators, governments, policy makers, not-for-profit foundations, and large corporations have been very successful in shifting curricular visions for K12 schooling on a global scale. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016; www.e21c.co.uk; www.p21.org; www.c21.org)

Generally, these initiatives fall under what has come to be known in current educational discourse as *21st century teaching and learning*. With a primary focus on student learning, advocated for is a complete re-thinking of traditional education models to allow for new educational goals that are aligned with preparing creative, innovative, problem-solving students who learn through cross-disciplinary, collaborative projects. Twenty-first century learning has as its principal focus the development of competencies including: persistence, flexibility, resilience, independence, empathy, and an entrepreneurial mindset (Dede, 2010). Students direct their own learning and are motivated intrinsically by pursuing what they find most interesting. There is a common focus on 'a recognition that failure is an essential part of progress' (Brooks & Holmes, 2014, p. 6) and students learn to 'fail smartly' (p. 47) and 'fail safely' (p. 63). The concepts of *risk* and *risk-taking,* and the development of young people as *risk-takers,* are featured prominently in curriculum documents and whitepapers calling for educational change. For example, in Canada, the Alberta Education (2011) *Framework for Student Learning* curriculum

document states, '… all students are inspired to achieve success and … embrace ambiguity and uncertainty and are willing to take risks… make bold decisions in the face of adversity' (pp. 8-10). Most national and international documents call for risk-taking as a disposition to be developed in young people. If the terms risk or risk-taking are not used explicitly, the idea risk is captured in other dispositions such as: 'the development of an entrepreneurial mindset' (c21canada.org; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2010), 'considering and pursuing novel ideas' (Fullan and Langworthy, 2013 p. 3), and being 'open to failure as an essential part of progress' (Brook and Holmes, 2013, p. 3).

Re-orienting Teaching and Teacher Identity

Just as 21st century education initiatives shift the goals of learning for students, so too do they propose a different vision for the traditional role of the teacher, and what it means to teach. Teaching is increasingly seen as 'an equal two-way partnership between and among students and teachers' (Fullan & Langworthy, 2013, p. 10). To successfully implement the new pedagogical models required for deep learning (Fullan & Langworthy, 2013; 2014), teachers assume new identities and distinctive roles defined differently in various documents and whitepapers. Teachers are described as learning designers, activators, co-learners, learning partners, facilitators, guides, curators of learning, coaches, mentors, artists and innovators (Fullan & Langworthy, 2013; 2014; Brook & Holmes, 2014; IDEO, 2016; Kuchler, 2017; Ananiandou & Claro, 2009).

The expectation of 21st century learning is to disrupt the very idea of what it means to be a teacher. The new vision of teaching evident in the discourse of 21st century learning fundamentally changes 'common perceptions of what teaching entails and of what a teacher is' (Biesta, 2013, p. 45) and proposes to reinvent the role of the teacher (Shrag, 2008). To develop in

students 21st century learning competencies including risk-taking, a teacher becomes a, '… caring, interested mentor and role model' (Brooks & Holmes, 2014, p. 7) and a 'learning partner' (Fullan & Langworthy, 2013, p. 14). Deeply imbedded in the discourse of 21st century teaching is the understanding of teachers as social innovators who develop creative pedagogies. Teachers become 21st century *learners* who, through their learning, model resilience, perseverance, and confidence in ambiguity, failure, and risk-taking. Brooks & Holmes (2014) put it this way,

> Schools empower both students and teachers, encouraging them to experiment with new ideas and fail safely, so that they develop the confidence to take risks… Teachers pursue their own research on instructional techniques, both to advance their own knowledge and to set an example of risk taking and perseverance for students to emulate. (p. 7)

An international summit on the teaching profession held in Banff, Canada determined a key theme for future development will be '… a focus on the profession itself having twenty-first-century skills' (Steward, 2015, p. 6). These proposed changes in teacher identity have real implications for the nature and meaning of education.

The discourse of 21st century learning may seem commonsense as it enters the language of education. The curriculum guides, white papers, conference and summit proceedings rely on the language of theory and case studies. However, we are called on to understand, without relying solely on theory, categories and explanations, what the experience is like for teachers to teach in a 21st century classroom as a space for change, creative risk-taking, and innovation driven by student interests and agency. How might we describe this experience and come to know it more deeply? In this way, the task is phenomenological; it requires the study of lived experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science which studies lived experience and begins with the life world. It brings to reflective awareness the nature of events as experienced

and aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of the everyday lifeworld. Van Manen (2016) writes,

> …a phenomenological question wonderingly inquires into the meaning of a possible human experience. Phenomenology asks, "What is the nature, meaning, significance, uniqueness, or singularity of this or that experience as we live through it or as it is given to our experience or consciousness?" (p. 39)

Phenomenology attempts to 'get behind' our taken for granted perspectives of lived experiences to reveal glimpses, both tentative and fleeting, of phenomena as they are lived, not theorized (Vagle, 2014). Being phenomenologically oriented to teachers' experiences of risk-taking requires an attentive focus on the practice of living before it is informed by the conceptual, the cognitive, or the theoretical. A great deal of research has been undertaken on teaching and teachers: training, decision making, thought processes, behaviours, professionalism, work life, and teaching strategies across the disciplines, to name just a few. Far fewer studies have taken up the task of asking deep and rudimentary questions about the experience of teaching as it is lived, with children and young people, in the classroom and beyond.

In this paper, we orient to the concept of educational risk to understand more fully what we mean by risk in the context of teaching. The phenomenon of risk-taking as it relates to pedagogy and what it may contribute to the 'new pedagogies' (Fullan & Langworthy 2013; 2014) of 21st century learning is explored more concretely. This research focuses on teachers' experiences of risk in the classroom, and for the purposes of this paper we share three important themes to emerge from the data, namely: risk and readiness; risk and the in-between spaces of pedagogy, and risk as exploration and finding a way.

Methodology

Phenomenology is concerned with the unique, the individual, and the idiosyncratic and in that regard each teacher-participant represents the contingent, the unpredictable and the particular in their perceptions of risk, their various risk-taking experiences, and responses to risk. The six (6) teacher-participants responded to a call distributed widely to teaching staff through school district email. The data collection took place over a four (4) week period during spring 2017. The teachers had consented to participate in a larger study *Re-conceptualizing Teacher Identity for the Creative Economy*. A key objective of this larger research is to guide teachers to rethink their roles by incorporating an artistic way of being and thinking into instruction.

The inquiry relied on primary sources of data including journal records of participant's direct experience of risk-taking and reflection on the experience of risk in the classroom. Teachers as active and intentional participants in the inquiry are able to reflect on their experience to potentially result in deeper awareness of taken for granted perspectives to interrupt norms and routines (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008).

Research Questions

The primary research question is focused on the classroom teacher's experience and asks what does it mean for teachers to take risks in the classroom. Participants were asked, (1) As a teacher, how do you experience risk-taking in the classroom? Secondary questions helped further focus the inquiry and informed future iterations of the analysis. These included, (2) How does risk-taking manifest itself for you in the day-to day classroom? (3) How might you differentiate between types of classroom risk-taking? (4) What does it mean for you to encourage risk-taking in your students?

Risk-taking was described primarily through the analysis of teachers' lived experience descriptions (LEDs) of concrete situations in which they perceived risk. LEDs in the narrative form of anecdotes were used to define risk-taking situations and to determine within each individual situation the point from which pedagogical reflection can proceed. Also, detailed open-ended conversational interviews (van Manen, 1997; 2016; Vagle, 2014) and opportunities for further refection took place during the research period. In a conversational interview the focus is on the dialogical. The researcher and participant converse to clarify and elaborate on LEDs and the focal phenomenon that is the subject of the anecdote. The task of the researcher in the phenomenological interview is to 'keep the questions (the meaning of the phenomenon) open, to keep himself or herself and interviewee oriented to the substance of the thing being questioned' (van Manen, 1997, p.98).

Data Interpretation

The first step in a phenomenological inquiry is to orient to the lived experience by questioning and carefully focusing on the nature of the phenomenon being investigated. It is essential to get behind assumptions, conceptions, and taken for granted perspectives to uncover essential aspects - the meaning structures of experiences as they are lived through by bringing them to the fore. We begin by inquiring into the notion of risk by setting aside what has been previously given to focus on the meaning of risk-taking as it reveals itself in the experience of the classroom teacher.

Phenomenological interviews, experiential life world material (anecdotes, narratives), detailed notes, and audio of open-ended conversations generated the empirical research data that captured pre-reflective direct experience. The data are descriptive in the sense they reveal in greater detail the authentic, experiential accounts, or narrative accounts written or spoken by

each participant. The participants shared lived experience descriptions and vignettes (Schratz, Schwartz and Westfall-Greiter, 2013) through written journals and conversational interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed. Rich data emerged and were subjected to thematic analysis. Transcripts revealed thematic statements that formed the basis of more in-depth phenomenological descriptions. Holistic and selective approaches were employed to isolate thematic statements of pedagogical significance (van Manen, 1997; 2016).

A hermeneutic phenomenological research approach differs from other qualitative approaches in that it rejects any claim to meaning or research conclusions that are framed as definitive findings, answers or solutions. Also, hermeneutic phenomenology "is particularly open to literary and poetic qualities of language, and encourages aesthetically sensitized writing as both a *process* and *product* of research (emphasis in original, Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012, p. 1). Analyzing thematic meanings is a complex and creative process driven by the epoché and the reduction (Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1997; 2016). The epoché, or bracketing, is part of the phenomenological reduction that orients the researcher's sustained engagement with the phenomenon. The phenomenological reduction demands that the researcher bracket, "Past knowledge about the phenomenon in order to be fully present to it as a concrete situation in which one is encountering it" (Giorgi in Vagle, 2014, p. 67). It means assuming a phenomenological attitude of being patient, sensitive, open, and receptive as we seek the meaning of the phenomenon into which we are inquiring.

In this study, thematic analysis was undertaken utilizing a combination of wholistic, selective, and detailed reading approaches (van Manen, 2016). Thematization resulted by capturing eidetic meaning using these approaches combined with reflective writing and the employment of insight cultivators as further sources of thematic insights. Insight cultivators

"may be gleaned from philosophic and other sources in the arts, humanities, and human sciences" (van Manen, 2016, p. 324). In this study insight is generated from: tracing etymological sources; reflection on lived experience descriptions; experiential descriptions in film and literature, including the poetry of Frost; the philosophical writings of Camus, Sartre, and other existential and phenomenological thinkers.

Orienting to Teacher Risk-taking

A review of the literature on teacher risk-taking shows that risk as it relates tangentially to changing behaviours and beliefs is a theme in research on effective schools (Levine, 1991; Rosenholtz, 1985). Also, inquiry in teacher professional development has considered risk-taking as a research focus (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Research in schools as work environments finds that schools have traditionally been conservative places highly resistant to risk-taking and change (McNeil, 1986). In the 1990s and early 2000s with increased levels of teacher accountability and standardized testing there have been studies undertaken in risk-taking and novice teachers working in environments of increased managerialism (Clayton, 2007). Currently, the educational discourse of 21st century school reform juxtaposes teacher risk-taking with related terms such as; change agent, innovator, entrepreneur, and learning designer (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Brooks & Holmes, 2013). Understanding teacher risk-taking is an increasingly important research focus. Ponticell (2003) points out that in education only three studies have focused directly on teacher risk-taking (Ponticell, 1999; Short, Miller-Wood & Johnson, 1991; Spritzer, 1975). Since 2003, risk-taking has been taken up as a question of teacher identity and change (Reio, 2005), as an important theme in teacher professional development as it relates to emotion, identity, and agency (Lasky, 2005), and as an effective teacher personality trait as revealed in the results of psychological profiles (Rushton, Morgan & Richard, 2006). Despite the stated

importance of teacher risk-taking, especially in recent 21st century learning documents there have been few studies conducted. Risk is a largely understudied construct in the educational literature (Reio, 2005). The research that has been conducted has been predominately through the theoretical lens of the psychology of risk-taking behaviour (Ponticell, 2003; 1999; Rushton, Morgan & Richard, 2006) and the sociocultural interactions between risk, emotion, and identity (Lasky, 2005; Reio, 2005).

Two of the key researchers in the area of teacher risk-taking (Ponticell, 1999; 2003) and Lasky (2004; 2005) provide insights derived from theoretical lenses related to psychological and sociocultural frameworks respectively. Ponticell (2003) in her case study of the elements that promote or discourage risk-taking demonstrates that teacher risk-taking during program change is affected by teachers' perceptions of "three important elements of a psychology of risk-taking behavior (i.e., loss, significance of loss, and uncertainty (Ponticell, 2003, p. 8). She finds positive emotions facilitate the risk-taking need for innovation, while negative emotions inhibit such behavior.

Lasky, whose research was conducted in Ontario, explores how school reform can affect teacher identity, teacher agency, and teachers' willingness to be professionally vulnerable. Using a sociocultural approach to agency, Lasky found teachers with increased accountability pressures struggled to remain openly vulnerable with their students. Teachers will take risks when they feel safe enough to open themselves to the possibility of embarrassment and emotional stress in an effort to build relationships with students that encourage and promote learning (Lasky, 2005).

No studies of teacher risk-taking have been conducted using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. As stated above, phenomenology attempts to understand the experience and the meaning of teacher risk-taking. As van Manen puts it, a hermeneutic

phenomenological approach represents an "attitude of or disposition of sensitivity and openness: it is a matter of openness to everyday, experienced meanings as opposed to theoretical ones." (in Friesen, Henriksson & Saevi, 2012, p. 1) Phenomenology seeks to reveal meaning without relying initially on constructs, lenses, theories, categories, and explanations. Teacher experience as it is lived is described, and this description calls for an attentive focus on the experience of risk-taking as it is lived in practice before it is constructed by the conceptual or the theoretical.

Orienting phenomenologically to risk

To ask what is it like to take a risk, to be a *risk-taking* teacher requires a sense of what it is we mean by risk in the context of a teacher in the classroom. Phenomenological analysis often begins with the words we use to refer to the phenomenon. Words can lose their former power, the meaning with which they were once imbued fades from overuse and familiarity. Paying close attention to the etymological origins of words provides a first step in putting us in closer contact with the lived experiences from which the words originally developed. A starting point then are the words *risk* and risk-*taking*.

The word *take* comes into English from Old English *tacan* meaning to get, especially by force. The word is imbued with physicality, a forward movement of reaching for and holding. To *take a risk* often reflects this moving forward with purpose and confidence. *To take* also connotes acquiring or gaining possession of something, as in a game of chess when I attempt to *take* your piece. Again, the word signals purposeful forethought. The word *take* also has other meanings that point to a more receptive, less assertive, forceful way of being. To *take* means to accept or receive something - to undertake. An event, choice, or situation I interpret as risky may be offered and received, undertaken, and accepted rather than grasped hold of. To be a risk-*taker* to take a *risk* is in many instances used to represent a confident, forthright, seizing of an

opportunity, boldly, decisively make a choice when presented with options. However, the *experience* of taking a risk often differs greatly from this sense, as we will see.

The word *risk* comes to English from the Latin verb *riscare* meaning to run into danger (Ayto, 1990). The meaning can be traced to the word *riscus* meaning cliff. There is speculation that the origins of risk are related to the nautical experience of 'sailing too close to the rocks' and also to the Italian *risco* meaning 'to dare' (Ayto, 1990, p. 446). The word risk is imbued with a sense of choice in that it is a challenge one chooses, a dare one elects to take. The concept of risk is complex with overlapping psychological, anthropological, political, economic and philosophical perspectives. Both Giddens (1991) in his description of 'risk culture' and Beck's (1992) 'risk society' characterize people's living in a heightened state of risk awareness and in a culture of fear. Risk is largely understood in these accounts as the possibility of harm. At first glance, it is perhaps not the probability of something bad happening as the result of being exposed to potential hazard that we are trying to get closer to in this study. Yet, is it possible that teachers fear a perceived harm or hazard in taking classroom risks?

Risk can have both negative and positive meanings. To take a risk also includes positive possibility. While we live in a world pre-occupied with potential hazards with whole industries dedicated to mediating potential risk; we are also a culture that celebrates the risk-taker, the bold, courageous adventurer who captures the public imagination in sport, business, politics, professions, arts and entertainment, science and many other fields. In education, the teacher iconoclast as represented by the fictional John Keating in *Dead Poets Society* or Erin Gruwell, the teacher who inspired the film *Freedom Writers* push boundaries, create, experiment with new pedagogies and develop meaningful, life changing relationships with students. No matter the

pursuit it seems, the risk-taker represents in ways that overlap and are deeply interconnected, the features of physical, emotional, intellectual and financial risk-taking (Keyes, 1985; Smith, 1998).

Risk and risk-taking behaviour have been an important area of research for psychologists. The psychology of risk examines how individuals think and feel about risk and how they act, as well as analyzing institutional and societal assessments and reactions to risk (Breakwell, 2014). Theories of personality such as self-efficacy, locus of control and cognitive style have also been overlaid on the psychology of risk (Breakwell, 2014). Thrill seeking and adventurous behaviour is highly recognized. The derring-do of Silicon Valley startup entrepreneurs and those who exhibit an affinity for living on the edge is often celebrated. So too is the brilliant artist who overturns accepted mores and conventions to create something original, who finds hidden patterns and generates solutions. The dispositions of 21st century learning are in many ways reflective of the goal to instill in the young the same courage, resilience, perseverance, and the same embrace of failure and the entrepreneurial mindset displayed by the most successful in society (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016; Fullan and Langworthy, 2014). But is this the kind of risk-taking teachers are generally called upon to demonstrate and encourage in the classroom?

Outside of Hollywood films, teachers' risk-taking is less dramatic than the highly wrought feats of physical or financial audacity. The risks are perhaps more intellectual, relational and emotional in nature (Lasky, 2005; Ponticell, 2005). In a phenomenological study of children's risk-taking on the playground, Smith (1998) cites the work of Keyes (1985) who describes less dramatic risks as *level two* risks and they 'are far less noticeable and far more common… While these risks may not seem like much when compared with high excitement risks, they accentuate a different order of responsibility' (Smith, 1998, p. 12). Although Smith's study focuses primarily on the childhood experience of risk as it relates to physical and

emotional risk in and around playground structures, it has relevance for understanding teachers' experience of risk in the classroom. Smith reminds us that genuine risk-taking implies growth and development and the increasing acceptance of who we are. With this in mind then Smith says, 'the most responsible thing we can do is allow and encourage another person to take risks' (1998, p. 12). Smith looks to risk-taking as a form of pedagogical responsibility and asserts we can deepen our understanding of developing a pedagogy of risk-taking, 'from our most common ways of experiencing risk' (1998, p. 13).

This then would seem to orient us to the teacher's experience of risk. It is only when we have a deeper appreciation of the risk-taking experience of the teacher can we orient with appropriate pedagogical thoughtfulness toward encouraging and supporting the risk-taking of children and young people.

Risk and the Experience of the Classroom Teacher

As discussed above, many 21st century learning documents call for dynamic risk-embracing teachers as those who are comfortable with 'uncertainty and exploring and trying new things' (World Economic Forum, 2016, p. 32). Teachers are expected to embrace 'talking openly about mistakes, learning from mistakes' (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 66); 'model inquisitiveness, demonstrate options on how to learn when one doesn't know, exemplifying appropriate risk-taking in learning' (Kozak & Eliot, 2014, p. 83). Risk-taking by teachers is linked directly to increased creativity, innovation and opportunities for design thinking (Short, Miller-Wood & Johnson 1991).

The type of risk-taking called for from teachers is not normally associated with a perceived harm or hazard. But how risk is experienced depends on the 'various ways it enters our lives and the significance of the risk depends very much upon not only the response that is called

for but also the meaning we make of that response and the conduct of our lives' (Smith, 1998, p. 13). The emotional, intellectual, relational, and creative risks associated with trying new ideas, novel approaches, experimentation and discovery are not often associated with the 'running into danger' connected to physical and financial risks. But this may not always be the case. 'When a teacher tries something new, they are scared that if it doesn't work a parent will call and complain. That teacher needs to know that they will have someone at their back' (Kelli Etheridge, 10th Grade teacher in Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 66). As this teacher conveys, the embrace of risk in the classroom means moving beyond what feels safe and comfortable. Teachers are encouraged to push beyond what they feel they are sure they can do and what scares them. Risk-taking exposes us and makes us vulnerable (Lasky, 2005) as we test personal boundaries and encounter the unknown. It is in this space of vulnerability, in being exposed that we are open to self-understanding and to the possibility of change, growth and discovery. However, this may also point to the limits of the encouragement of risk-taking, the support required to lead teachers in their risk-taking, and the shared responsibility for teachers' fears. How can teacher apprehensiveness in risk-taking make us more mindful and bring us closer to the lived experience of the classroom teacher?

The well-meaning call for teachers to lead children by modeling risk-taking and by embracing uncertainty and failure requires careful thoughtful attention and responsiveness. Smith (1998) reminds us, 'No matter what particular view of risk and risk taking we adopt, from an educational perspective we must be mindful of the fact that for the most part ours is an adult view of risk and one the child has yet to learn' (p. 15). Even before we can assume the role of responsibility for the risk-taking of children we must question how we can assume to understand the child's experience due to our adult interpretation of risk. As adults, we draw on our own

experiences and culturally determined beliefs about risk and these inform our actions. It is important to acknowledge that when we say children should be risk-takers or demonstrate a disposition of risk-taking we may be making assumptions about what constitutes a risk for a child. Perhaps the child does not see an action, or a decision as a risk at all. The young person may need to learn about difficulties, experimentation and failure before it can be determined if a risk is being taken. Likewise, we may not see risk attached to an event, whereas a child may do so. What we can presume to know about risk, the child's experience of risk is contingent on our interpretive vantage point as adults. To help children take creative risks is a practical task that requires critical awareness and pedagogical sensitivity to teacher experiences of risk-taking so we can nurture the young mindfully and tactfully.

Pedagogy and Risk-taking

In advocating for a new teacher identity, the fundamental relationship between teacher and student is called into question. In the whitepaper *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning,* Fullan & Langworthy (2013) state, 'The consensus among stakeholders in this project is that new learning goals require changes in how relationships between teachers and students are structured, in how teaching and learning is practiced' (p. 2). The document advocates freeing teaching and learning from the constraints of prescribed curriculum content. The relationship envisioned is not one based solely on how teachers relate to children in order to help them achieve a pre-determined learning outcome or standard. It is not about 'knowing' a child as a means of detecting or diagnosing a problem so the need may be corrected with the necessary educational or psychological intervention. Fullan & Langworthy (2014) write, 'In the new pedagogies *human relationships* take a new and more central place in the learning experience… the entire learning experience is deeply embedded in these *relationships*' (emphasis added, p. 14).

This language points to another way of understanding the teacher-student relationship. Teaching and learning are understood as 'responsible, risky, non-reciprocal acts, the relationship between adult and child is seen as a personal existential relationship without an epistemological purpose as its first premise' (Saevi, 2015, p. 343). When the focus is on the teacher-student relationship, the meaning of the term *pedagogy* shifts from its use in most 21st century learning documents. In the North American educational context, pedagogy is usually defined as the method, practice, and theory of teaching, especially as a discipline or academic subject. However, pedagogy in the Continental view has as its central concern a 'moral-laden interest in the life of the child and young person, rather than a theoretical study of the object of education' (Biesta, in Saevi, 2015, p. 344). Pedagogy in this sense interprets education as experiential and profoundly relational. Pedagogy connects us with the practice of being with young people in a way that is oriented to a leading out of the child in the originary sense of *educere*, toward maturity and growth.

> Pedagogy means taking up the relational as the primary concern of education so, … we know how to stand in a relationship of thoughtfulness and openness to children and young people rather than being governed by traditional beliefs, discarded values, old rules and fixed impositions. The pedagogy of living with children is an ongoing project of renewal in a world that is constantly changing around us and that is continually being changed by us. (van Manen, 1991, p. 3)

It is this understanding of pedagogy that 21st century learning initiatives might do well to take up in the effort to shift teacher-student relationships to the center of an educational enterprise reformed for new learning goals. This perhaps may be the most important 'new *pedagogy*' that requires a change in traditional teacher roles to develop a more thoughtful, tactful, sensitivity to,

and attunement for, the life of children and young people. Pedagogy comes with all the inherent risks and emergent sensitivity to the needs of young people that defy the certitude of teaching methods and educational theories, and is an inherently risky way of being in the world.

Risk and Readiness: The Conditions of Change

'The question is, are we willing to take the risk to change, do I have the courage?'

Phenomenological themes can be thought of as the experiential make-up, the underlying structures of the lived experience being described. Arriving at the meaning or pedagogical significance of an experience requires reflection on the concrete situation. What is the essence, or *eidos* of the experience of risk being revealed when we ask, 'What does teacher risk-taking look like in the classroom?' On the surface, the lived experience description below describes a fairly innocuous example of a teacher trying something for the first time, a new teaching strategy that works well despite the teacher's trepidation. But what does the lived experience description tell us about the experience of risk-taking in the classroom?

> I can still remember my IB Ancient History course. It was very traditional; ancient history can be quite stagnant for Grade 10 students. To be honest, I was just going through the motions. They didn't want to work with the material, spend the time, and engage.
>
> I decided to take a risk and experiment with peer learning. I remember anguishing over it and I had visions of classroom chaos, of losing control. We used a think-pair-share model to discuss the story of Antigone. I didn't know how it would go – students discussed Antigone's choices, and were challenged to predict the end of the play. The students took bold moves, discovered ideas and possibilities together. I encouraged them to dig deeper, keep going. It was a risk – but it worked.

> If we model risk-taking as learning opportunities and then talk about that explicitly, about my feelings, as a teacher, what I would do differently next time, what worked, what didn't, we can begin to change the culture. The question is, are we willing to take the risk to change, do I have the courage?

The teacher's narrative points to the taking of a risk as trying something new. It also speaks to the readiness of the teacher to take a risk. He seems prepared, is willing and disposed to a conscious choice to make a change. Something makes the teacher able to say, 'I decided to take a risk.' Does risk-taking require the right conditions? How might these conditions influence the experience of risk in the classroom? The teacher's motivation for wanting to change, to take a risk and try a new strategy seems to betray an implicit concern about being *authentic*. The teacher describes his course as traditional, the material 'quite stagnant for Grade 10 students' and we can imagine he, too, may have lost some of his enthusiasm for the content. He admits to merely 'going through the motions.'

We use the phrase 'going through the motions' as a way of describing when we pretend to do something by acting as if we are really interested when we are not. The idiom captures a sense of the mechanical and the rote – a lack of thought and intention. The risk seems to manifest itself in doing something different, as it represents a break and a fracture in what may have been a long period of doing things a certain way. 'It was very traditional; ancient history can be quite stagnant for Grade 10 students.' In these few words, the teacher captures a sense of the type of teaching he adhered to, teaching with which perhaps we are all familiar. The teacher prefaces his 'going through the motions' observation with the words, 'To be honest…' This is an interesting turn of phrase as it points to a concern with transparency. In what way may the teacher have been experiencing dishonesty? We all cling to self-deceptions of sorts, to the familiar, the routine, and

the way we have always done things to avoid what change may mean for us. The teacher points to his fears: fear of losing control, fear of failure, fear of looking foolish, a fear perhaps of where free ranging student discussion may lead, and finally, fear of losing identity.

'Going through the motions' may be a way of self-protecting. The material is stagnant; the students are disengaged. Yet we can deceive ourselves and soldier on blaming the material or the students, while teaching the same way as we always have. Sartre (1956) may describe 'going through the motions' as being in 'bad faith (mauvaise foi)' (p. 48). Sartre believes that an individual who is in bad faith is being false to themselves and that at some level they realize this. He gives the well-known example of the waiter in a café who acts as if he is a waiter; it is a play act, a rehearsed, somewhat affected performance that belies the fact that he is conscious of his own deception. Sartre writes, 'He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch for long before we can explain it; he is playing at being a waiter in a café' (p. 59). In the case of the waiter, Sartre says the play act, the going through the motions is 'a "representation" for others and for myself, which means I can be… only in representation' (p. 60). As a teacher, I know my role; I am *my* role in so far as it characterizes me; is it is my role, not anyone else's. If I live out my role as a *traditional* teacher I can keep my consciousness focused singularly on the performance of that role while engaged in it. Sartre's example of the waiter illustrates the attempt to realize a role, attempting to be a waiter and nothing but a waiter. The bad faith arises when I avert my gaze from the way the role becomes distant from me when I focus on it directly. And this I must *not* do; I am a traditional teacher and I teach this way and I am taken up with interpreting everything in my classroom in this way. I may even deny my transcendence of my role, 'I am old-school, a traditional teacher; I can't help it; I can't teach any other way.' The teacher knows his teaching is not engaging for his students; they do not want 'to

spend time' or 'work on the material.' The risk that comes with changing his teaching, of facing the possibility I am *not* that role, is an existential one. Sartre helps us understand this experience of risk through his ideas that explore choice, the self, and freedom.

Sartre posited that being human means we are compelled to create and re-create ourselves through our interchange with the world. The compulsion is the result of a freedom we cannot escape – a freedom to make choices that guide our lives. However, this freedom to choose results in anxiety and it is this anxiety that in turn reveals our freedom. The teacher writes, 'I decided to take a risk and experiment with peer learning. I remember anguishing over it…' Bad faith, according to Sartre, is a way we can escape the *anguish* of freedom. For the teacher, the meaning of the risk that comes with changing his practice reflects the disruption in his objectifying himself as a 'traditional' teacher. The students' lack of interest in his course allows the self-deception to be revealed. The risk comes with the anguish of the freedom to choose another way of *being* in the classroom.

Sartre's bad faith may seem to be a rather severe way to describe the nature of this teacher's experience of risk. For example, self-deception can be protective and not such a bad thing. It can soften the harsh realities of life and shield us from things we are not ready to face. Facing tough choices with confidence and clear-eyed realism while tackling life head-on may be laudable, but we may not always have the inner fortitude required to do so. On the other hand, being hyper aware of the contingency of life, the freedom to choose, and fundamentally altering the course of our lives at any time, may be paralyzing and create an anxiety that precludes us from making taking a risk at all. In this sense, bad faith and self-deception are part of what it means to be a human, of moving forward, of embarking on new projects and different experiences.

The teacher seems to become more aware of the choices and possibilities available to him. By facing his 'anguish,' and the inherent risk that accompanies the freedom to change one's practice, a deeper understanding is gained of the consequences. The teacher indicates just such a shift in understanding in his comment,

> It was a risk – but it worked. If we model risk-taking as learning opportunities then talk about that explicitly, my feelings, as a teacher, what I would do differently next time, what worked, what didn't, we can begin to change the culture.

Embracing the risk inherent in examining our self-deceptions can be a positive way to challenge the inevitable anxiety and fear that comes. But by doing so, we become more aware of the choices and the possibilities open to us. When speaking about the unease and trepidation that often accompanies setting out through new learning landscapes with students, Palmer (1998) reminds us of Albert Camus' words, 'What gives value to travel is fear.' Although referring to fear, the same may apply to risk-taking that often precedes the fear 'we feel when we encounter something foreign and are challenged to enlarge our thinking, our identity, our lives… that lets us know we are on the brink of real learning' (Palmer, 1998, p. 39). The teacher concludes his lived experience description with the question '… are we willing to take the risk to change, do I have the courage?' Understanding our self-deceptions and the fears that hold us back can open spaces for the renewal of teaching and learning and a more sensitive, nuanced appreciation for our authentic selves.

Risk as Struggle and Doubt: The In-between Spaces of Pedagogy

It's like a risk for me to help them take risks.

Teachers in the study were especially interested in the types of learning opportunities that create an environment in which students can become risk-takers. They asked, 'How do I help students to manage frustration? To not give up, but work through doubt and persist? Teachers shared narratives that captured how they believed they fostered risk in the classroom revealing these experiences as being richly textured, nuanced and complex. Emerging from the analysis were experiential structures that manifested as an intersection of teachers' lived experiences of risk-taking *as* the teachers engaged in developing a pedagogy of risk-taking in students. Teacher lived experience of risk in the classroom played out in simultaneity as they endeavored to foster student risk-taking in the classroom. This may be characterized as a *dual pedagogy* of sorts as both teacher and student together, yet separately, are bound to the experience of risk-taking in the pedagogical moment. The learning situation for both teacher and student is sometimes fraught with confusion, struggle, and a sense of not knowing how to proceed, of being lost, stuck and full of doubt.

> It's like a risk for me to help them take risks. Students . . . expect themes and concepts to be explained to them. They expect me to tell them anything they don't immediately get. They expect certain marks . . . They are surprised when I give them [challenging texts] … and tell them to work together to analyze themes, ideologies, and symbolism. They struggle . . . Their marks often drop on the first few assessments . . . sometimes resulting in e-mails from parents.

As van Manen attests in *The Tact of Teaching* (1991), a certain amount of anxiety and stress experienced in a safe environment promotes growth (p. 194). 'Being wrong,' Alan Block (2014) affirms, 'is the impetus to move forward' (p. 34). English (2013), in her study of Dewey and Herbart, refers to struggle and doubt as the 'in-between realm of learning' (p. 55) and

emphasizes that ‘it is essential for learners to reside in the in-between for the sake of their own learning process: it is in this space that learners can find possibilities for experimenting with the new and, on that basis, develop new learning experiences’ (p. 56).

If this ‘in-between realm of learning’ is a place of discomfort, frustration, and potential negativity, how then can the teacher create a space in which students can learn to manage the frustration without students feeling they have been abandoned? The teacher notes creating a safe place that allows students to dwell in the discomfort of the in-between realm of learning involves being present, but exercising patience.

> I don’t leave my students stranded. I help them work through the challenging bits, but I don’t rescue them right away. They need to learn patience and perseverance. They need to learn to be . . . okay with the discomfort of not understanding everything right away.

This holding back requires pedagogical tact, which preserves a student’s space, but is available when needed (van Manen, 1991, p. 161). It involves knowing when holding back is appropriate. As the teacher confirms,

> I had one group this year call me over to explain to them part of one of the stories they were working on. I said no. I told them to work through it together and I would be back to check on them in ten minutes to see if they still needed help. Ten minutes later they had figured it out and moved on.

When the teacher provides space for students to work through difficulties together, the students come to understand the discomfort as a shared experience of ‘the ruptures and breaks within human experiences’ (English, 2013, p. 65) and within this space students begin ‘to learn how to learn’ (p. 78).

However, knowing when to let students struggle with doubt and confusion itself is fraught with uncertainty and risk for the teacher. One teacher explains the challenge this way,

> Sometimes it's just easier to point them in the right direction, to give them that big hint – essentially tell them what I'm looking for. It's difficult for them I know, learning this way is a change; will they give up, get frustrated, think of me as a bad teacher… a mean teacher who is not helpful?

Teachers may be confused about a myriad of questions, decisions and judgments that occur in the pedagogical moment. When should I answer their questions? How much help should I provide? What do I do when students struggle? How long should I let them struggle with the material? Can I risk they will become too frustrated and give up? What should I do for the best? How do I know which way to go?

> Sure, I let students try to work it out on their own or together. I know they have to learn persistence, to be confident to take risks and try things on their own, but how do I know I've chosen the right path? That's risky too, right? I'm walking around, watching kids carefully, listening for cues, how long should I let it go? Who's struggling? And who's about to give up? What works for one kid, or for one class may not work with another. You just try different things. There's no way to know what to do for sure. But you often know right away you've made the right decision. You can tell by the student, or the energy in the class. So often there is no 'teaching method.' You just have to find your way through.

Choosing a way forward without knowing where that path may lead implies risk. Burbules (2000) reminds us the Greek concept of *aporia* is useful in helping to understand the experience of finding your way through, of being lost, or stuck, and doubtful of a way forward. Aporia is

from the Greek, *a-poros* meaning lacking a *poros* or a path and a way forward. It is interesting to be reminded that the word *risk* is also imbued with the sense of a difficult or dangerous *passage* from the nautical *riscus* meaning sailing too close to the rocks. Aporia signifies the experience of being stuck, of not knowing what to do, or what to choose. For the teacher, the choices may be many; decisions made in the past may fail us now. The teacher asks, 'But how do I know I have chosen the right path?'

Literature, especially poetry, is able to turn to life as lived and express aspects of human experience that escape us as we try to capture its phenomenological meaning. The American poet Robert Frost (1992) takes up the experience of risk in the moment of choice in his well-known poem *The Road Not Taken*. The narrator chooses a path, 'a road less traveled by,' but not before a time of being stuck, of being caught in-between - suspended in doubt without clear passage. The speaker says, 'long I stood/and looked down one as far as I could/To where it bent in the undergrowth/then took the other…' The familiar poem is often read as an affirmation of confident, intentional decision-making, triumph in the moment of choice, and the embracing of risk. Yet, we are intrigued to wonder what to make of the words 'long I stood.' In the previous line the narrator admits he would rather not have to choose at all, wishing he could 'travel both/and be one traveler.' Despite its reputation as a celebration of individuality, the poem can also be read as a meditation on the experience of doubt and confusion in the moment of risk.

The roads diverge in the yellow wood, and one appears 'less travelled,' slightly grassier. But as soon as the speaker makes this observation he undoes it by claiming, 'Though as for that the passing there/had worn them really about the same.' There is a palpable uncertainty, a waffling doubtfulness in the moment. As well, the confident tone in the declaration, 'I saved the first for another day!' is taken back in the very next line with, ''Yet knowing how way leads on

to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.' The firebrand teacher John Keating from the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) takes his students to the courtyard to stroll about to find their own way to walk. Keating coaches the boys by yelling enthusiastically, 'Robert Frost said, "Two roads diverged in a wood and I/I took the one less travelled by/and that has made all the difference (Weir, 1989)."' However, a closer reading of the poem reveals, not a celebration of clear-eyed choice and confident risk-taking, but an acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of doubt, bewilderment, and confusion. The moment of choice in the taking of risk is a pre-reflective, in-between space of possibility. The poet captures the moment as a suspension of time and space, and an embodied standing at a crossroads. In the yellow wood, the choice is an either/or; however, in the life of the classroom there are myriad possibilities. In that moment, we face an aporia of choice. It is as the teacher writes, 'There's no way to know what to do for sure…you just have to find your way through.'

Risk as Finding a Path: Exploration, Discovery and Finding a Way

'So often there is no teaching method. You just have to find your way through.'

Finding your way through implies a path, a way forward. In the sense the teacher seems to be using the idea of 'a way though,' the path may not necessarily lead to a clear destination. It implies exploration. It is a path of discovery, uncertainty and therefore, risk. Kofman (1988) compares the Greek word *odos* (a path or road connecting two destinations) and *poros* (passage across an unknown, possible dangerous landscape, a sea route, or bushwhacking a trail where one does not exists). The two different paths point to contrasting ways out of doubt. In one we make our way toward a known destination – a certain answer. In the other we move toward the *unknown* and forward without certitude but in the spirit of exploration and discovery. We may

look for what can be recognized, what 'feels right,' to create something familiar out of the unfamiliar. The teacher admits to there being no way to know what to do, 'but you often know right away you've made the right decision...' This *knowing* the teacher alludes to is not one of certitude, but a tacit recognition that the choice made in the moment of risk-taking was a path open and true, as it 'feels right.'

The moment of choice seems to imply a conscious decision to act, to say, to respond in some way. However, as classroom teachers, we act, respond, and speak in the moment without time to reflect, to choose, to think about the best path, passage and way forward. We simply say or do. The risk is presented and *taken* in the moment. Not grasped and held, as much as received and accepted. And in that moment, I may not know what to do or say next – it may seem like a suspension, of being frozen, numbed as there is no path in clear sight. It is hidden, or as Frost says, it disappears, 'bent in the undergrowth.' There may be too many choices or paths before me, or perhaps the path is evident but I do not want to follow it because the destination is uncertain, or the destination may not be desirable or pleasant. Each proposes a different risk, a *taking*, a choice made for a variety of reasons. The teacher acknowledges, 'There is no teaching method.' Every path opens a way forward toward possibilities while at the same time excluding others. Burbules (2000) writes, 'a poros is always both a way *and* a barrier, an opening and a closing.'

There is possibility in the 'in-between space' that is the moment of the *taking* of a risk. The potential is realized in recognizing doubt as making new understanding possible, if we are open and sensitive to it, in the moment. When honest contact is made, life forwarding steps and paths we can follow may emerge. But not always. Pedagogical sensitivity opens up spaces of recognition that manifest as feelings and not as facts that are easily articulated. The teacher's

phrases, ‘you often know;’ ‘you can tell;’ ‘the energy in the class,’ point to an ineffable sense of rightness and insight that may arise as new meaning and possibility come into being with the unfolding of the experience of choosing a path, becoming unstuck, and opening a new passage forward.

Conclusion

The goal of 21st century learning is to develop in children the ability to welcome change and negotiate risk in the pursuit of creative, innovative thinking and doing that requires resilience, perseverance and experimentation. Teachers are responsible for helping children develop a disposition for strategic risk-taking by being risk-takers themselves, embracing change and risk and modeling it for students. Acceptance of the in-between moments of struggle, doubt, and fear, may allow teachers to welcome the moment of risk, of feeling lost without a clear path forward. Taking these moments as spaces of risk, as positive possibility means receiving them as opportunities to dwell in them in the spirit of exploration, experimentation and discovery. The contingent, deeply relational pedagogical spaces of teaching are full of educational promise. Embracing the risk inherent in examining our self-deceptions can be a positive way to challenge the inevitable anxiety and fear that comes with risk-taking. But by doing so, we become more aware of the choices, the possibilities open to us, and the freedom to change how we are in the classroom.

That is why, as an educational question, understanding the teachers’ experience of risk as it is lived may be a good starting point. As conceptualized in curriculum documents and whitepapers the notion of risk-taking by the classroom teacher is abstract. Phenomenological research provides concrete insights into the experience of teacher risk-taking. This research allows us to understand, rather than assume to know what we mean when we use terms like risk-

taking to describe what happens in classrooms between students and teachers~~. A great deal of research has been undertaken on teaching and teachers: training, decision making, thought processes, behaviours, professionalism, work life, and teaching strategies across the disciplines, to name just a few. Far fewer studies have taken up the task of asking deep and rudimentary questions about the experience of teaching as it is lived, with children and young people, in the classroom and beyond.~~

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