

RISK

Signposting better choices to more adventurous teaching

39 reflections to improve
your decision-making
in the classroom
and beyond



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39 reflections to improve
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and beyond

David Gumbrell



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You backed me to take that RISK and now I have done it!

THEMATIC INDEX

The chapters in RISK! can be read sequentially or the content can be dipped into as needed. The following categories will help you find your way through the book if you have a specific problem or attitude to RISK. Each category is identified by an icon, which also appears in the contents listing and at the start of each chapter to help you identify the chapters you most need and navigate your way through the book.

DO YOU WANT TO:



try and measure risk?

TAKE A RISK WITH CHAPTERS 1. 5. 7. 10. 25. 35 AND 36



be protected from risk?

TAKE A RISK WITH CHAPTERS 2. 8. 9. 14. 18. 21 AND 30



enjoy the benefits that risk can bring?

TAKE A RISK WITH CHAPTERS 3. 12. 15. 22. 27. 31 AND 38



take more risk?

TAKE A RISK WITH CHAPTERS 4. 6. 11. 20. 26. 32 AND 34



avoid being restricted by risk?

TAKE A RISK WITH CHAPTERS 13. 19. 29. 33 AND 37



avoid the dangers of not taking risks?

TAKE A RISK WITH CHAPTERS 16. 17. 23. 24 AND 28



hear what other teachers say about risk?














TAKE A LOOK AT THE INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS A-H



















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MEET THE AUTHOR



David Gumbrell

I am an educational consultant, working in schools to support teachers with their resilience and also with teacher training providers and student teachers. I deliver INSET days and one-to-one coaching sessions, and I also speak at headteacher conferences. Drawing on over 20 years of teaching experience, including seven years as a headteacher, and research conducted at Kingston University, I feel I am well-placed to nurture the development of those new to the profession as well as those who have been teaching for a little longer! I am passionate about teacher well-being and resilience but also understand how precious time is for teachers and I wanted to create a resource that made the best use of this.

DEFINITELY. MAYBE: AN INTRODUCTION TO RISK!

Risk considers the challenges to human intellect and resilience, as we grapple with uncertainty about the world and ourselves.

Baruch Fischhoff

In my first book *LIFT! Going up if teaching gets you down* I offered you 39 reflections (one for each week of the academic year). I wanted them to provoke thought, contemplation and yet at the same time pique your curiosity and be emotionally engaging. Each chapter was deliberately short, allowing it to fit into your busy schedules, yet inform you of the research about resilience and then allow you to assimilate that for yourself.

In writing this second book *RISK! Signposting better choices to more adventurous teaching*, I continue to support you with your own resilience and help you to consider how you deal with the outcomes of the multitude of decisions that you make in your professional and everyday life. How do you deal with the high of the successful decisions that you take, and how do you respond to the lows of the unsuccessful ones that inevitably come your way?

My aim in *RISK!* is to get you to question how you make the decisions that you do. What factors impact those decisions and how conscious are you of the inbuilt biases of your brain? I draw on research that identifies the real drivers in your decision-making and challenge your thinking as to who is in control. Is it you, and if not, then who is it? Are you really the rational, informed, process-driven person that you like to think you are, or is the real picture something different altogether?

Steve Peters, in his book *The Silent Guides*, suggests that we are controlled more than we think in our decision-making processes by an irrational chimp who is emotive, reactive and impulsive. The immediacy of our chimp-response is the 'quick fix' to satiate a basic need such as hunger. Not much thought goes into the decision, yet it is an inbuilt response that we have to try to manage and control. Steve Peters suggests that we need to nurture our chimp to allow the more rational part of our brain to have the time to make a better, more informed, rational decision. Put simply, every decision that we are faced with will initially be responded to by our chimp.

- **Can you recall a scenario in school where you have made a chimp-based decision?**
- **What were the circumstances that led up to your decision?**
- **In hindsight, how would you change your decision-making process?**

Proactively looking after your basic chimp needs can potentially allow you the time for the rational human to step in, placate the chimp and then over-ride any emotionally based or potentially ill-advised decision that it was going to make. This simple understanding can help and support your decision-making processes when you are consciously aware of it. All it needs is food, drink, water, rest and love

for that chimp to feel less volatile. In this way you can train yourself to recognise and then control your seemingly irrational responses in the classroom and beyond.

Indeed, in his book *Predictably Irrational* Dan Ariely suggests that we can also know in advance what our natural predispositions are – to predict what our emotional brain is going to do or how our *mental illusions* (as Dan describes them) will trick us into thinking that we are being rational, in control and not driven by our emotive animal instincts. We have all come across the delights of optical illusions and enjoyed our eyes being fooled by what they are seeing. Dan invites us to develop the same level of enjoyment in mental illusions, where we are convinced that we are seeing our rational brain in action when our emotive brain is actually in control!

Each chapter of his book describes an experiment that leads the reader to an understanding that a decision made when not hungry is different to one made when hungry (that is why we should never go shopping when we are not full!); a choice made when not tired is different from one made when you are tired (that is why we should always make decisions in the morning, after a good sleep). In short, if our chimp is not getting what it needs then it is fearful, threatened and thus decisions appear to us, deep down, as irrational. Dan convincingly argues that we can predict them.

- **Can you recall a situation where hunger distracted you from your teaching?**
- **How does tiredness affect your ability to teach?**
- **In hindsight, how could you change your decision-making process in light of this new knowledge?**

Now that you know that you are irrational (controlled by your chimp) and that you can predict this (your chimp's reaction is predictable), you need to ask yourself two further questions:

- 1. How can you become more rational when you make a decision?**
- 2. How can you be more rational when you evaluate a decision?**

Certainly, when you do make a decision in chimp-mode, then you believe that the decision that you make, due to it being made under conditions of threat, is 'risky'. However, that decision was predetermined by a feeling of being threatened and thus your chimp feels fearful. Fear makes you uncertain, which in turn leads to a sense of danger and makes you come to the conclusion that the decision taken was risky, when perhaps it was not. Your chimp can sometimes fool you into feeling threatened when you are not. Predictably, you are feeling uncertain and because you are tired or hungry or stressed, you have deemed the threat as risky.

The same is true at the point of evaluating any decision that you make. At the end of a long teaching day you can quickly come to a decision about whether it has been a good day or a bad day. You can easily think that a lesson didn't go well because it was too 'risky'. But what is driving that evaluation of your teaching day? Is it a tired chimp and therefore irrational? Before you make decisions about how

well your day has gone, you need to emotionally regulate yourself in order to know that the conclusion that you are drawing is accurate. Otherwise, inadvertently, you may connect 'failure' with 'risk', teaching yourself to be ever more cautious next time. It can then become a learnt behaviour – the acceptable 'norm' that you measure all else against in the future.

As Fischhoff stated in the opening quote, when we *grapple with uncertainty* it *challenges our resilience*. Risk is that challenge and the uncertainty is caused when we move away from the known to the unknown, when we have to make a decision that changes the status quo. And yet, teaching demands decisions all of the time and, indeed, it is the power to make those decisions that makes the profession so fulfilling. When you are entrusted to make those calls about how and what you teach, you can feel empowered and that boosts your resilience, makes you feel worthwhile and gives you a sense of belonging.

Contrast this to a situation where you are not trusted, are limited in your decision-making responsibilities and therefore you rarely move out of your comfort zone. You no longer take any risk for fear of repercussions, fear of failure, fear of retribution for 'getting it wrong'. Gradually you become homogenised, averaged out, good enough, yet lack flair, creativity and potentially enjoyment in the job and in the classroom.

These two extreme positions are at either ends of a spectrum and on any given day you will slide along this scale from one location to another. However, by proactively managing your resilience (by pre-emptively managing your chimp) I believe that you start further up the scale. Having slept well and had a good breakfast you are feeling good about the day and confident in your decision-making. You are at an eight and feel that it is worth taking a risk. If it goes wrong then you are down to a six, if it goes well then you are boosted to a ten – is that a risk worth taking?

Alternatively, the scenario could look very different. You stayed up late marking books and didn't really wind down before you went to bed. With one too many presses of the snooze button, you didn't have time for breakfast. You are at a five yet feel that it is worth taking a risk. If it goes wrong then you are down to a three, if it goes well then you are boosted to a seven – is that a risk worth taking?

In this way, you can begin to see that resilience and risk are intertwined and in researching this book I have come to the realisation that they are extremely closely linked. Along the way, I have interviewed practising teachers to understand their decision-making processes.

- **When do they make the choices that they do?**
- **How do they move out of their comfort zones?**
- **What do they do to manage uncertainty?**
- **Is there a difference between primary and secondary school colleagues?**
- **Does decision-making change over time, and therefore do more experienced colleagues react differently from NQTs?**

The responses to my set questions are included at the back of the book and make for an interesting accompaniment to the reflections in previous chapters.

In a desire to gain a wider understanding of risk and decision-making beyond teaching, I have also interviewed a city banker, a paramedic, an air-traffic controller and an airline pilot. All these highly trained practitioners are responsible in different ways and have to make decisions that will affect large amounts of money, a person's life or a potential plane crash. How do they manage those risks? Is there anything that can be learnt from these professions to help in teaching?

It turns out that each is heavily driven by procedure. There are techniques to follow, practices to adhere to and processes to respect. These are continually updated with training to ensure that there is relevance and consistency in what they do. There also appears to be an '*if ... then*' strategy that is pre-planned. *If* something happens, *then* this will be the response. At this point in the process, through vigilant monitoring, you will react in this way.

- **How procedures-driven is your current teaching role?**
- **To what degree do you feel that your training is effectively updated?**
- **Does your planning include effective 'if ... then' considerations within it?**

There is also a collaborative approach, either with clearly defined roles in the paramedic team (one dealing with the patient, another the injuries) or in the flying team (one pilot flying the plane, the other monitoring the flying instruments). This not only shares the responsibility but brings an alternative opinion, view or set of information to the decision-making process – checks and double checks.

- **How effective is your teaching team in planning lessons?**
- **To what degree is the responsibility shared for the planning within your team?**
- **Do your planning meetings include effective checks and double checks?**

Following a flight or after dealing with a patient there is an evaluation – how closely did they follow procedures? Could anything have been done differently? Can anything be improved? This questioning appeared to be less about blame than I had expected it to be and was very much driven by routine and following the preconceived guidance – assured that this guidance was written by experts.

- **How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your practice?**
- **How do you best monitor how closely you follow joint planning?**
- **To what extent are your evaluations of lessons driven by blame?**

In the airline industry it appears that there is a recognition that attention spans and concentration can waiver and that rests are needed. Air traffic controllers work in 45-minute shifts, then rest. Pilots on long haul flights (more than 8 hours) generates a third pilots and longer flights (more than 12 hours) generates a fourth. In the medical profession, it seems that breaks are sometimes waived; shifts are long and sometimes extended due to the nature of the context and the needs of the patients.

- **How effective are breaktimes and lunchtimes for you to rest?**
- **In what ways could you improve the effectiveness of your breaks to improve the quality of your teaching?**
- **When your breaktimes are waived or compromised, to what degree does this affect your teaching?**

However, what appeared to be missing from all professions that I spoke to representatives from was that there was little, if any, training, discussion or work around the benefits and need for proactive emotional regulation. You would expect in these pressurised environments that bankers, medical staff and flight staff would need to be trained in this as much as all the other procedures, processes and practices, yet it appears that they are not. They are expected to 'just deal' with the pressures of the job and the emotional turmoil that it may bring. There is still a stigma attached to talking about mental health despite its known negative impact on productivity in the workplace.

- **How effective is your workplace at proactively managing your well-being?**
- **Was the last training that you had on emotional self-regulation effective?**
- **To what degree are you able to emotionally regulate yourself before a lesson?**

In teaching, just like in these other professions, there is always going to be uncertainty and a need to make decisions. You cannot predict all outcomes and, importantly, you shouldn't expect yourself to do so. That is the joy of life in schools, but sometimes it is the frustration too; something that you have to grapple with on a daily basis. With 30 pupils the best that you can do is to forecast for some eventualities based on your experiences in the classroom. With experience will come greater confidence that any decision you make is going to be a good one and that you can predict, with some authority, what should happen in most situations.

You need to make a series of decisions that select the path, plot the route and forecast the desired destination point. With this plan ready, you can then make the call and set off in the nominated direction of travel. Your choice as a teacher is either to pave this path (not allowing pupils to risk stepping off this linear route) or to signpost it (allowing for more freedom, flexibility and drift).

The paved path means that you are giving less autonomy to the children and that can inadvertently affect their motivation and engagement in a lesson. You therefore deliver the lesson quite adequately, there is 'work in books' but is there learning? How do you measure the quality of that learning?

Alternatively, the signposted path is where you as the teacher set checkpoints along the way, allowing for a certain amount of 'wiggle room' as to how they get from A to B within a certain time limit. Again, this comes down to confidence, experience and some might say risk-taking. Can you measure the quality of this learning?

During the course of this book, I want you to come on a journey with me. I have signposted 39 ways to a better understanding of your own decision-making processes so that you can be more in control of them. I intend to raise their profile so that you see the potential benefits of taking risks and in turn

be able to be more creative in your teaching. In order to prepare for the journey, you'll need to build your resilience to allow you to make better decisions, while still managing the risk, uncertainty and dilemmas that teaching brings. Hopefully you will finish reading *RISK!* feeling empowered to take control of your own resilience, your own decision-making and your own determination to feel the risk and, thanks to you nurturing your chimp, be able to predict your irrationality and still make that brave call!

INTERVIEW WITH TEACHER A

Teacher profile

Teacher A is an early career teacher who, at the time of the interview, was about to take up a post in a primary school. She had an optimism about her new career and was looking forward to taking on the responsibilities of a class teacher.

1. What is your definition of RISK, within the context of education and teaching?

A risk is something that goes against the grain or what everyone else around you is doing. It is not necessarily risky for you because you know that it is going to be OK, but they might not. I like the idea of risk and doing something different. For me, risk is when you have gone against what is expected. It can be what everyone else worries about rather than me. I am certain in my decision-making and I am sure about it at the time; I therefore don't think that risk is a bad thing.

Once I have made a decision, I stick with it. In the past, things have usually turned out OK, so that gives me confidence that it will be OK this time too. Along the way, I reflect on it but that wouldn't stop me from making the decision in the first place or taking the risk again.

2. What strategies do you use to try to measure RISK in any decision that you make related to your teaching?

You are the one that is going to teach it, so it is ultimately your decision. How you get to that point, that learning outcome, is your choice. You are not always going to get what you want. In taking those risks, you learn about yourself. You need to push yourself or you will get stuck in a rut. I factor that into my decision-making. It is a given that you are going to do something safe. Safe is necessary on occasions when you need a particular outcome but sometimes you need to take risk.

3. How do you minimise RISK in your teaching?

It needs careful planning; you need to give it a try. It is being certain that you are going to be able to get the outcome that you want. It is confidence and you do prepare and think about what could go wrong and by knowing the classroom, the children, where you are working and what you are capable of. If

I am going to do something risky then I prepare well for it. I share the idea with the rest of the team and ask if they think that it is going to work.

It is always a good lesson when you take a risk as you are not going to allow it to go wrong. I am up on my toes, I am bouncing around the classroom, I am excited by the risk. The children are excited about what is coming next and I am too. The adrenaline is pumping, and we are going to love it together. It's like an explosion.

4. In what three ways are you restricted from taking RISKS within teaching?

a) A Key Stage lead, a head of year or maybe a more experienced colleague but maybe someone you wouldn't choose to work with. To go against that experience may not be deemed OK. It is a seniority thing; they have a responsibility that I currently don't. When I am that leader, I will be OK when others take risks – I don't want to be a limiter.

b) It is the other people in the year group; they may have a different idea and it is scary when they get a better outcome than you. They didn't take the risk and got a better outcome in their books. My books may look worse, but I got a better dialogue from the children than them. However, the pupils' books are what are judged in terms of your performance.

c) Something within yourself – doubts that you can pull it off. Is it a risk worth taking? Do I have the energy levels? Not every day, every lesson can be risky – there is a limit to my resilience.

5. Are there dangers to taking no RISKS and just playing it safe?

The danger is that you are going to be the same as everyone else and get lost within a team – you are going to lose that sense of risk very early on. It will change you as a teacher – I want to do my own thing, to do it my way, something that is mine and I will take the responsibility for that. If I play it safe now, then I will be stuck with being a non-risk-taker for the remainder of my career. So, what would be the point? If I do that now, then I am setting myself up for the future; it could even become a habit. It is fizz and fuzz and not doing the same and the children not knowing exactly what is coming.

6. Is there such a thing as too many choices when making a decision?

Yes, I think. If there are too many choices, then the risk becomes more as there are too many ways it can go wrong. I quickly get it to two and then choose. If the choices are varied, then you can panic. I go with just one and then run with it. Once you have decided, you then don't waste time and just get started. If there are two choices, then I need to get on and take one. It is a confidence thing to make

decisions like that, but I know that it is not set in stone, you can backtrack. You can always do it again, there is always a Plan B. Not everything can work out and when it doesn't – so what? You reflect and think through what could go wrong.

7. What are the conditions that would allow you to make your best decisions?

Support from workplace and family at home. I like someone to say: Give that a go. They can see in me that it is going to be worth it in the end. I am a risk-taker, so I need someone to say, do this. Sometimes, this is a mentor who can read you and knows you. I will have planned it carefully, researched it fully, and I know the reaction I want from the children. I want the children to enjoy it as much as me. I plan for a positive reaction from the children. I want them to be engaged and enthusiastic. This will have an impact on their learning, and I will reach that outcome (or it won't have been worth taking the risk in the first place). I want to be the one that initiated that reaction.

8. What steps do you take to proactively stop yourself from jumping to conclusions?

I have to know something in detail and have a good feeling about it; instinct. I have a gut feeling that this is what I want to do, I trust it. It was OK, it was adequate, it was fine, but I feel that I have let myself down. I have my own limit and I check myself against it. You can think back and tell yourself that you should have gone with the other choice, but I am not too hard on myself, even if things go wrong.

However, if they do, then I can try again and do something else. I wouldn't get myself down. I am on my own learning journey and I know that I am going to make mistakes, but I don't beat myself up over it. There is wriggle room that you can turn in – it is never a complete failure. I know what was good and bad and I quite like feedback.

9. In what ways are you encouraged to take RISKS within your setting?

I am not. It is not seen as something that should be done. No one else is taking those risks; it is not worth it. They are going to stay on their set path. It may not be like that everywhere, but I want more responsibility to take more risk. If their name is on it then they might not trust you to take that risk. There needs to be more trust, but you can't just challenge that leader.

10. If you are the person who is holding the parcel when the music stops, is that a RISK or a reward?

People don't want the responsibility or to have their name on the tin. I do want the responsibility, but I know that others don't. I think people don't want it to be them when things go wrong. They also don't

want to have to blame me. It can become the norm, but you can have trust within the team. If I join with someone else then you somehow share that responsibility, you are part of it. They can then help if it does go wrong.

11. Give an example of a RISK you took that worked well. Why do you think it succeeded?

In my teacher training placement, I went for an NQT post at my first placement school. It felt like the expected thing to do at the time and the obvious next step. I was offered the job and verbally accepted. However, four months later I had to complete a half-term placement at a second school. Unexpectedly, I loved this school too – its culture, environment, friendly feeling and support. In the very last week of my placement, I was approached by this school who interviewed me and subsequently offered me this job too. I had two job offers, but which to take, as there was a real risk of upsetting the school I turned down. However, the risk paid off – I took the risk and I made sure it paid off through effort and adapting to my new role. I trusted myself in spotting what I wanted from a school and I have been proved right.

12. Give an example of a RISK that didn't pay off. What would you do differently if you tried it again?

I was due to be observed in a fractions lesson – Year 3. I thought I pulled out all the stops to ensure I put on a 'show' for my observer with dramatic lesson activities, children out of seats moving around and subsequently no outcome for the lesson. The risk did not pay off and the lesson went horribly wrong even though I had spent hours planning all these activities for a jam-packed lesson (that was actually just a show for my observer). However, it was a definitive learning experience as I now understand my strengths as a teacher and feel more confident to do what I know I'm comfortable with. Risks are always worth taking, the outcome will always shape you!