Guest editorial

Failures in school and school failures: lessons for leadership and management

Failure is not just an option, but is a necessary ingredient of success, (McConoughey and Weinzimmer, 2012)

Introduction

Le Feuvre (2010) wisely argues that "All individuals know failure better than we might care to admit – failed romance, failed careers, failed politics, failed society, failed humanity, failed failures." (p. 3). Failure is also common in organizations. Scholars have defined organizational failure as a state with scarcity of resource slack, unstable goal preferences and poverty of strategic options (McMillan and Overall, 2017). Failure is an elusive concept, while some failures can be universally recognized, some failures are considered to be failures because of "a [specific] context and specific time frame" (Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 5); although in other contexts, they might have been labeled as outstanding successes. Organizational failure, when it occurs in high-impact situations that threatens the overall organizational success, usually stems from internal organizational dysfunction and misalignment. A key managerial challenge is to implement an organizational system that can cope with failure (Overall and Wise, 2016). This is especially important in light of the substantial organizational costs of failure, costs that can be avoided or reduced by training managers to properly manage failure scenarios (McKinley *et al.*, 2014). Although the importance of failure analysis is widely recognized, particularly when dealing with the unexpected (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015), managers often do not apply failure analysis (Edmondson, 2011; Habersang *et al.*, 2019).

In the current sociopolitical educational context, failures have come to be conceptualized as "pathological" and have become taboo in educational discourse. This creates a paradoxical reality of schools and principals that are required to maintain an innovative and advantageous position in a complex and accountability-driven environment to ensure the school's survival under uncertain circumstances (Kruse, 2018; Valli *et al.*, 2018). Because of the complexity of school management (Leithwood *et al.*, 2017), *learning from failure* is a necessary resource in most schools. Yet, policymakers, researchers and practitioners ignore the fact that "Failure is endemic in the creative act, leaving the question not if something is a failure, rather how that failure is harnessed" (Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 5). In fact, some failures are inevitable and may lead to innovations and effective preventive actions (Edmondson, 2018).

Just the negative effects arising from organizational and management failures should make the topic important to management scholars and practitioners in education. However, while research has investigated student failure (Villarreal, 2017) and teacher failure (Mosoge *et al.*, 2018), little if any research has investigated the antecedents and learning processes in relation to school failure. Lessons can be gained from failures in schools as they often contribute to school success (Overall and Wise, 2016). While the mechanism of *learning from failure* is complex and demands additional research and better understanding, it is important to identify new behavior patterns derived from the lessons that can be learned from failure, in order to establish new behavior patterns (Edmondson, 2018; Habersang *et al.*, 2019). Such mechanisms may provide a global benefit in terms of providing continuous school improvement.

This special issue is focused on the interplay between failure, learning and improvement in the educational context. This involves framing failure as an important school resource, emphasizing the identification of failure in the school context as a necessary condition for

strategic improvement in planning and leadership practices in schools. The articles in this special issue will address the question of "How and why do school resources, organizational structures, and processes in various social areas engender school failure?" A major pitfall of school organizations is that they may detect and correct failures but do not look into the root causes of these failures or identify the new behaviors needed to prevent their reoccurrence. Although scholars have suggested that failure prevention and management should be integrated to generate enhanced performance outcomes, the specific ways to achieve such integration in school settings remain under-explored.

The objective of this special issue is to map the many facets of failure in schools in a way that can help researchers and practitioners to identify, study and build successful schools that also fail at times. Accordingly, applying various perspectives in defining and framing failure in schools, the contents of this issue will seek to illustrate the multiple facets of failure by acknowledging and investigating the role of failure in schools and the lessons that can be taken from these failures for school managers so as to build organizational capacity in various school contexts.

Each of the articles in this compilation reveals an empirical grounding in the challenges and benefits of the relations between failures and learning in the school context. These empirical studies were conducted internationally, in the European, American and Middle Eastern contexts, and reported on the work of principals in schools across samples from various social areas and across several multiple level of analysis. The studies delve into the causes and characteristics of school failures, with a particular focus on the specific context of schools. The combination of studies from diverse contexts and a broad range of methodologies employed to investigate and explore descriptive, correlational and causal questions have provided a richly grounded special issue with pertinent suggestions for theoretical and practical policy adjustments.

At the outset, *Pascale Benoliel* and *Izhak Berkovich* propose an integrative conceptual framework in which intelligent failure is conceptualized as an organizational learning process resource. Drawing from the social capital theory as an overarching framework, Benoliel and Berkovich propose a conceptual model that incorporates the learning settings and a leadership tolerant of "intelligent failure", to provide better opportunities for school faculty to analyze, manage and learn from intelligent failure in educational settings. The article identifies root causes of failure and the kinds of lessons that can be drawn from failure analysis with the goal of developing the ability of schools to engage in intelligent failure and failure analysis.

The first empirical article, by *Omer Çalışkan*, uses interviews with school principals to explore what these principals identify as educational failures in school settings in Turkey, and how they implement a learning from failure approach in their management practices. Çalışkan calls for particular attention to the question of how principals perceive failure in their professions and the perspectives they have regarding failure as a learning opportunity as opposed to failure as a total loss event to be avoided. Using the mindset framework of Dweck to examine school principals' perception of failure and their reactions toward failure in their management practices, Çalışkan presents a practical scheme for scholars to understand how learning from failure approach can be examined in an educational context. The article highlights the premise that educational leaders can promote either a promotion-focused (risk-taking) approach or a prevention-focused (avoidance of risks) approach among their teaching staff, depending on the leaders' mindset and leadership practices. This can determine whether the culture of a specific school is one that encourages or avoids learning from failure.

In the next article, an exploratory qualitative study, *Coby Meyers* and *Bryan VanGronigen* analyze school improvement plans and demonstrate the relevance of root cause analysis by principals to identify their own failures and their school's failures and as a way to strategically navigate the organization. Meyers and VanGronigen highlight the importance

of diagnosing and detailing root causes – the why – of organizational failure, in order to improve principals' ability to devise situationally and contextually responsive solutions in their improvement plans. The authors provide a key applicative step in critically thinking about how improvement is to be achieved when failure occurs. By doing so, they are addressing an important, yet under-researched area of education and school leadership.

Susanne Böse and *Stefan Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz* explore the extent to which school principals participating in the bonus program, serving disadvantaged communities in Germany, are able to set appropriate goals and choose suitable measures for improving their schools according to the specific challenges they face. The bonus program was introduced in 2014 in the state of Berlin with the aim of increasing educational opportunities for students at schools serving disadvantaged communities and expanding the number of school-leaving certificates. The results of cross-sectional exploratory and descriptive analyses of longitudinal data from a sample of 164 school principals indicates that failure of school improvement plans might be the result of choosing inappropriate goals and measures for addressing challenges. The most important lesson, as pointed out by the authors, is that failure of school improvement plans in challenging schooling contexts can be a result of design, and further professional attention and development should be given to principals' ability to choose appropriate goals and measures.

In the next article, employing a failure analysis, *Yan Liu* focuses on school leadership failure in disadvantaged schools and demonstrates the relevance of a strategic configuration of human capital in a distributed leadership model. Liu investigated whether schools serving underprivileged students would have different leadership practices that would explain school failure in terms of low student achievement in the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) assessments. Her results from secondary data analysis using the 2015 PISA American data indicate that schools serving underprivileged students tend to fail not only due to a scarcity of highly qualified teachers but also because of systematic leadership failure resulting from a lack of strategic planning by leaders and teachers.

Next, *Heather Price* proposes to investigate a causal claim: a principal's relational practices can operate to repair damaged relationships or maintain positive relationships with teachers in efforts to maintain the staff's commitment to the organization. Using longitudinal, within-year school network and climate data for teachers and principals in 15 American charter schools, Price sought to identify fluctuating levels of commitment among teachers in order to understand the conditions and leadership practices that either succeed or fail in achieving or sustaining high levels of teacher commitment. Her results show how teacher-principal relationships that are grounded in trust can provide the right conditions to promote organizational commitment. The learning and lesson gain from such an analysis can inform theory and practice for educational management and school effectiveness improvement.

Focusing on principal perceptions and practices, *James Coviello* and *David DeMatthews* examine and describe how three elementary school principals worked with teachers and families to identify failures in the area of special education and use these as opportunities for improvement. Coviello and DeMatthews discuss the ways in which, in response to these failures, principals endeavored to promote a culture of professionalism and trust by establishing opportunities for relationship-building that would encourage teachers and staff to join in the school's inclusive mission. The findings of their study confirm that accepting failure is an inevitable, yet valuable aspect of school leadership, and that context and policy-related challenges restricted the capacity of both principals and faculty to safely admit and learn from failure.

Finally, *Chen Schechter* concludes with a reflective and in-depth commentary based on the different theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions presented in this special issue and proposes an integrated complementary perspective for learning from both successes and failures. *Eleanor Jin Su-Keene* and *Ira Bogotch* open the discussion further to

the broader public discourse on school failure by proposing a thoughtful and critical commentary on the sociopolitical aspects of the school failure discourse.

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