

Commentary – Let's switch cognitive gears: leading school improvement through learning from failures and successes

Introduction

How do you expect us to fly as you fly? came another voice.

You are special and gifted and divine, above other birds.

Look at Fletcher! Lowell! Charles-Roland! Are they also special and gifted and divine? No more than you are, no more than I am.

The only difference, the very only one, is that they have begun to understand what they really are and have begun to practice it.

His students, save Fletcher, shifted uneasily. They had not realized that this was what they are doing.
– *Seagull*, Bach (1970).

Educators, facing the numerous challenges posed by today's systemic school complexities and diverse millennial students, often remain unaware or underconfident of their own powerful capabilities. How can these educators learn to fly most smoothly into their dynamic classrooms, "beginning to practice" their teaching role with knowledge, balance and courage? Many times, efforts to support young teachers embarking on their challenging profession today focus on learning from past school experiences (retrospective learning) to elicit educators' wisdom of practice. One might think that teachers, like the seagulls, can learn to soar by observing their peers and colleagues who have already taken flight and by learning from their successes. However, somewhat surprisingly, when school forums usually convene to carefully examine past events as group opportunities for school faculty's learning and growth, such collective analysis has traditionally focused on failures and difficulties rather than on successes.

Indeed, the current special issue spans diverse studies conducted internationally in the European, American and Middle Eastern contexts, which mostly call on researchers and school leaders to investigate failures as a vital mechanism for promoting school learning and improvement. This framework involves the conceptualization of failures as a crucial school resource to be identified, analyzed and leveraged to enable planning of effective directions for change. According to this perspective, school failures are a necessary condition for strategic school improvement. Each of the contributions to this special issue adds important perspectives, offering conceptual and empirical updates to school leadership, research and policy.

Yet, I would like to suggest broadening the framework for school learning and improvement, to incorporate not only retrospective learning from failed events and processes but also learning opportunities embedded in past successes and satisfactory incidents. I contend that such a holistic approach, which combines learning from mistakes together with a more positive way to address the complexity of school life, may furnish an integrative



complementary framework for school improvement. In this commentary, I start by briefly explaining the learning from failure perspective, and then I analyze how the articles in this special issue are conceptualized vis-à-vis failure analysis. I next provide the learning from success framework and, most importantly, conceptualize an integrated framework for learning from both successes and failures.

Learning from failures

Learning from success is something that creates euphoria; there is that sense of “We did it!” so we think it will just keep on happening like that. When we teachers succeed, we do not force ourselves to go into all the details and learn from it. Deep and significant learning can come only from problems and failures. The more traumatic the failure, the more it knocks you to the ground, the more you learn, deep down.

– a high school math coordinator

For many years, consensus has held that human beings tend to engage in conscious learning and sense-making when they are frustrated by disruptions, crises and failures. Scholars of organizational behavior and social psychology have underscored that, in order for genuine learning to occur, people must be motivated by past failed events and unpleasant malfunctions (Ellis and Davidi, 2005). Although failures and problems represent different circumstances, they both stimulate a conscious search for meaning and clearly signify that learning is needed. Thus, a commonly held belief is that learning is optimally triggered by unexpected crises, undesirable obstructions and problematic experiences – when people need to identify what happened, look for explanations, consider how to solve the current negative consequences and think about how to avoid similar situations in the future. Such intentional *post-action review* processes on the part of the learner require awareness, attention, reflection and hypothesis testing (Ganon-Shilon and Schechter, 2017; Weick, 2009).

Similarly, at the organizational level, effective reflection is motivated by workers’ identification of failures, and effective change can occur when analyses of past problems – problem finding and problem solving – are integrated into organizational practices (Schechter, 2019). Problems and failures can challenge people not only to question deep-rooted assumptions and status quo norms but also to seek alternative courses of action. Consequently, failures may be perceived as the ultimate teacher (Schechter, 2011b). Framing failure-based learning as an important strategic, proactive and analytical framework that is relevant both at the individual and the organizational levels, scholars have emphasized the need for continued empirical inquiry into the learning from problems/failure domain (e.g. Sroufe and Ramos, 2015).

Largely, the current special issue may be seen as a proactive answer to scholars’ call for strategic learning efforts that focus on problems and failures so as to promote school outcomes. However, several characteristics of failure-based learning may pose risks to individuals and organizations. For example, many schools may not have adequate access to full and accurate information that would enable them to conduct systematic analysis of underlying root causes for problems. This may be the case when a school slated for turnaround faces the threat of closure because it is not meeting its annual target growth goals; yet, the school lacks both access to the database and analytic capacity for data mining and interpretation that would permit productive collective learning (Schechter, 2019).

Another common characteristic of failure-based learning is practitioners’ tendency to become entrenched in denial and avoidance during collective learning experiences, corresponding with the sense of threat inherent in acknowledging failures to peers and superiors. Thus, in educational settings, collective learning from failure forums may elicit a

sense of vulnerability about how one's professional colleagues and supervisors will perceive one's competence, expertise and knowledge (Beaulieu *et al.*, 2002). As such, becoming involved in a collective forum for reviewing problems and failures may tend to perpetuate the same defensive dynamics that may have initially contributed to the development of that problem/failure. This sense of threat to one's professional legitimacy may thereby limit the potential for such reviews to yield authentic inquiry or change (Slavich and Zimbardo, 2012). Indeed, collective learning forums frequently involve defensive exchanges, where members refrain from expressing their assumptions and avoid raising issues that may elicit tension or blame (Argyris and Schon, 1996), which unfortunately can maintain the problematic status quo. These "dysfunctional learning habits" (Louis, 2006) function "in a self-maintaining, self-reinforcing pattern that is anti-learning and noncorrective" (Argyris, 1993, p. 243).

Learning from failures in educational administration and leadership

Several contributors to the current special issue have highlighted important challenges regarding learning from failures in educational contexts. Çalışkan calls for particular attention to the question of how principals perceive failure in their profession. He distinguishes between the perspective expressed by principals whereby failure is seen as a learning opportunity as opposed to the perspective whereby failure is seen as a "total loss" event to be avoided. Çalışkan points out Dweck's (2017) rational mindset for explaining these two differing beliefs about experiencing and interpreting failure. From a "fixed mindset" perspective, failure is considered to be the limit of one's abilities, which might lead to the view that such events must be avoided at all costs. In contrast, from a "growth mindset" perspective, failure is regarded as an opportunity to learn. As such, principals' adopted mindset affects how they respond to the failures that they encounter. I would argue, as Çalışkan does, that this logical-rational orientation for principals' adopted perspective toward failure analysis does not sufficiently account for many relevant but tacit psychological, political, cultural and social dynamics.

Benoliel and Berkovich in this special issue insightfully describe how failures have come to be conceptualized as "pathological" for today's accountability-driven sociopolitical educational environment and have therefore become taboo in educational discourse (e.g. Kruse, 2018). To promote schools' ability to nevertheless learn from failures, Benoliel and Berkovich propose a conceptual model, where learning settings and school leaders are tolerant of "intelligent failures." This reframes failure so that it is not perceived as a problematic deviation that should be avoided at all costs (the assembly line metaphor) but rather is seen as an inevitable organizational resource elicited by schools, which function in challenging, dynamic environments. Intelligent failures may have innovative potential when understood as part of a process, where school faculty strive for school improvement by analyzing, managing and learning from these "intelligent" experiences of failure. This proposed model is important in fostering a framework for organizational learning and improvement in light of the deeply rooted mechanistic view characterizing the history of educational systems, namely schools' fragmentation and linear organizational models that restrict mutual dialogue, deliberation and growth.

Another focus of the current special issue is the need to evaluate the extent to which contemporary principals are actually undertaking analysis of problems and failures in everyday school life. Meyers and VanGronigen argue that today's climate of frequent school improvement, reform and turnaround-related initiatives can entice school principals to refrain from expending energy on systematic attempts to discern the actual root causes of school organizational failures. These authors define *root cause analysis* as an approach that school leaders should utilize to identify the "foundational faults" or the "whys" underlying problems. Spotlighting such faults, Meyers and VanGronigen contend that root cause

analysis is of high quality when it “leverages multiple, appropriate data sources to develop **robust, reasonable explanations** about why organizational faults exist” [emphasis added]. Furthermore, root cause analysis is considered exceptional when it “describes **clear, logical connections** between faults and how responding to them sequentially will result in meeting goals” [emphasis added]. Although root cause analysis has been prevalent in local, state and federal toolkits and policies for school improvement planning, not surprisingly, in the field, principals’ analysis of root causes was articulated only in 11th place out of 12 components used for school improvement programs (e.g. vision, action steps; [VanGronigen and Meyers, 2020](#)).

I would like to expand these authors’ discussion of root causes (also implicit in Price’s article in this special issue) because I suggest that the complex, dynamic and often murky systemic phenomena occurring in schools may pose substantial difficulty for school leaders’ attempts to draw **clear, logical connections** between a single “cause” and its “effect,” or to reach a single **robust or reasonable explanation** for specific school problems or failures. Failures (as well as successes) at the school-wide performance level are rarely direct or deliberate. Thus, in line with “loose coupling” theory ([Weick, 1982](#)), when school stakeholders analyze failures, they frequently can only identify some proximal intentional factors that may have led to the undesirable outcome, while struggling to locate the diverse, often tangentially related capacities that may have established the conditions conducive to their organization’s recent difficulties ([Halverson et al., 2005](#); [Schechter, 2011b](#)). Furthermore, when analyzing the root causes of failures in the communal arena, schools may encounter inherently complex dynamics among practitioners, as described above. Thus, teachers and principals may experience the collective public disclosure of root causes underlying failed practices as a threat to their professional legitimacy.

Coviello and DeMatthews argue in this special issue that many of the concepts in the business management literature on failure analysis align with studies of inclusion and special education leadership. Such concepts include building a culture of professional learning and continuous improvement, establishing effective teams and trusting relationships, and creating systems and processes for consistently reviewing organizational performance. Probably the most unique aspect of special education schoolwork, compared to general schoolwork, involves the multidisciplinary nature of each child’s educational-therapeutic team. These teams must cooperate to design a customized IEP (individual education program) for the child and must follow up on progress toward stated goals, thus necessitating reciprocal information sharing between all staff members ([Schechter and Feldman, 2019](#)). Sharing information among staff members increases the possibility of accurately assessing the child’s difficulties – academic, communication, motor, functional, social and emotional – and determining the best interventions. Such collaborative learning from colleagues requires each member of the staff to diagnose the child’s problem, state his/her professional point of view in front of other staff members and participate in decision deliberation processes. Decisions may include selecting the appropriate subject matters to be taught to the child, the frequency and personnel for supervision and the necessary modifications to different didactic instruments and supportive devices. Thus, to establish common activities and lead to better practices and results among special education students, different staff members should meet in a variety of forums to learn, discuss, make decisions and evaluate their students’ progress and well-being ([Brownell et al., 2010](#)). Overall, special education leadership and instructional practices are embedded within the learning accountability perspective, in which staff members assume responsibility to learn from their actions, initiate collaborative meetings based on open sharing of ideas, give constructive feedback to others and implement the lessons learned.

In another attempt in the current special issue to delineate contemporary principals’ actual behaviors, Boese and Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz explore the extent to which school principals

serving disadvantaged communities are able to set appropriate goals and choose suitable measures for improving their schools, according to the specific challenges they face. Principals of schools serving disadvantaged communities must deal with insecurity, tensions and conflicts to a far greater extent than principals of schools located in more privileged communities. These added stressors and challenges facing disadvantaged communities may lead to the perception that their school leaders cannot set aside the time and effort needed to design and implement improvement strategies that will turn their schools into effective educational institutions.

Inasmuch as schools serving underprivileged students continue to fail disproportionately in the United States and globally, Liu's important contribution to this special issue advocates for educational leaders to embrace school failure analyses as a scaffold for turnaround initiatives in an educational accountability system. It should be noted that learning how to systematically and effectively analyze failures is also important, especially when organizations lack skills and experience in conducting such an analysis. Explicit training in collective learning programs could be strategically important specifically for school leaders in such communities.

Perhaps success-based learning endeavors may offer unique advantages to help schools in disadvantaged and marginalized communities to move beyond impasses and failures (Rosenfeld, 1997). Rosenfeld's learning from success orientation recognized that even when people live under impoverished or hopeless circumstances, they sometimes reveal well-adjusted, productive and even inspiring experiences. Focusing on the analysis of such oft-missed successful and satisfactory incidents among populations from disadvantaged communities, even if relatively rare, can provide important opportunities for learning and empowerment (Nilsson, 2015). As presented next, success-based learning can accentuate the process of discovering what works well, what wisdom already exists in the community and how the school can promote a more positive course of human and organizational welfare. Instead of focusing only on learning from failed events and processes, educators who strive to have a positive impact on their students and on the schools' wider community may wish to focus on the learning opportunities embedded in past successes. Can educators deliberate on their successful practices as leverage for nurturing the practical wisdom necessary to work in challenging school contexts? Would such success-based learning support possible trajectories of positive, inclusive and reciprocal learning and growth?

Learning from successes

When you ask "Where do you see success?" you deconstruct it so that it becomes a conscious process. When describing a success, we cannot just show what happened – a mere description of the successful event does not do any good. We need to really reflect on what we learned and how it contributed to our knowledge. Conceptualizing our successful experiences is very demanding, although this is a critical stage for the faculty in becoming a learning group. We need to be sure that we do not just put successes away into our "mental safes." It is a wake-up call for us.

– an elementary school principal

Learning from successes explores effectively functioning individuals or organizations in line with a positive psychology perspective (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As proposed by Çalışkan (in this issue) regarding a "growth mindset" for interpreting negative aspects of school practices (per Dweck, 2017), framing positive aspects of school practices as important learning opportunities also has philosophical grounding in the literature on appreciative inquiry (Whitney and Fredrickson, 2015) and on positive organizational scholarship (Nilsson, 2015).

Collective learning from success can shift the school faculty's selective focus of learning – from primarily concentrating on problems and failures to deliberately concentrating also on previously unexplored successful practices. Within the school's continuous improvement process, social learning arrangements may be pinpointed as important for enabling teachers' conscious reflection on their own and their peers' successful practices. The main goal of such a learning group is to work collaboratively to uncover the school stakeholders' own tacit wisdom that made these successes possible. Teachers' experience, actionable knowledge and good judgment can be discovered to create an inventory of *professional wisdom* about what actually works in practice in one's own school (Argyris, 1993; Argyris and Schon, 1996). During collective learning from success, school staff members can decide to delve deeper into analyzing those events that they consider meaningful and successful, aiming to uncover peers' knowledge and to capture past actions and specific practices that led to desired changes. Specifically, such forums can nurture the gradual emergence of the group's action-oriented professional knowledge, helping teachers learn to extract information on when to implement strategies, what steps to take and how to achieve desired goals (Schechter *et al.*, 2008). Thus, overall, each forum for learning from success seeks to establish a learning community that decides which beneficial school actions to investigate together and then works to identify team members' professional wisdom and share action-oriented knowledge.

Although learning from success has been perceived as having some pitfalls, a focus on school successes has also been attributed with many positive impacts (see more on collective learning from successes in Schechter, 2019). In educational systems, collaborative learning from success relies on several main assumptions (Schechter *et al.*, 2008). First, teachers' expertise is considered to be a rich but barely tapped resource. Second, for the most part, successes have rarely been the object of explicit learning because of systemic bias toward learning from difficulties or problems in schools. Third, teachers' expertise can best be shared via collective learning processes, where individuals' knowledge is transformed into organizational knowledge and where tacit knowledge is transformed into explicit, actionable knowledge.

Importantly, to help school practitioners deliberately uncover their wisdom of practice, retrospective learning from successful practices must enable the implicit knowledge that contributed to past successes to become expressed in *actionable language* for future use. These past successful activities should thereby be framed as *action principles* that may contribute to success in the future. In other words, in collective success-based learning, school staff members identify their professional successes and coordinate structured group inquiries into the actions that contributed to these successes, formulating them in actionable terms as a basis for their dissemination (Schechter *et al.*, 2008).

Switching cognitive gears to integrate learning from successes with learning from failures

Inasmuch as both learning from successes and learning from failures furnish advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses, their holistic integration may substantially benefit schools. Learning from failures has been pinpointed for its advantages in stimulating school stakeholders' willingness to deliberate about alternatives, to critique traditional work patterns and to unfreeze their entrenched perceptions and accept that change is needed in the organization. The advantages attributed to learning from successes include its potential for enhancing school staff's reflection on effective practices, creating positive organizational memory, promoting a sense of commitment and fostering diverse school community members' willingness to invest in learning (See Ellis *et al.*, 2006 and Schechter and Michalsky, 2014 for more details on integrating learning from successes together with learning from failures.).

Schools can no longer rely solely on one or the other – either only learning from success or only learning from failure – if they want to maximize their positive change and growth. Instead, schools may benefit from analyzing both successful and failed events, integrating both of these productive resources for collective learning (Schechter, 2010, 2019). They may complement one another in various ways, for example “success fosters reliability, whereas failure fosters resilience” (Sitkin, 1996, p. 551). Yet, to optimize such dual-pronged holistic integration of learning from both successful and failed aspects of professional practices, it is important to explore the usefulness of different implementation methods (Madsen and Desai, 2010).

Practitioners may capitalize best by first initiating success-based learning processes as a safe springboard for developing the ability to learn effectively from failures and problems. In today’s culture of predominantly failure-based learning, this recommended sequence may seem paradoxical. Yet, when collective retrospective learning forums start by examining practitioners’ acute problems and failures, the defensive dynamics may impair the positive, nonjudgmental climate that could promote effective dialogue and learning. In other words, school forums that are invited to engage in learning from failures without having previously experienced learning from successes may resemble asking a first grader to write the entire alphabet after only one week of school (Schechter, 2001).

It may be helpful to conceptualize the two types of learning as forming a continuum, where learning from success is located at one end and learning from failure is at the other. In this case, it may be advocated that collective learning forums should begin with successes, which should be followed by learning from small minor problems, and only later should large-scale or acute problems or failures be tackled. Such incremental exposure to the collective learning arena, starting with areas of strength first, may gradually build teachers’ confidence through respectful collegial questioning and action-oriented discourse about successful past professional practices. The initial focus on successes precludes an atmosphere of anxiety, guilt or scapegoating, and these early experiences can instill habits and norms for respectful peer dialogue that should serve the group well during future learning processes that examine organizational problems/failures (Schechter, 2019). As such, the gradually evolving ability to learn from past successful experiences provides the resources and experience necessary for future productive learning from failed events (Schechter, 2011). Thus, if we are to be able to engage safely in learning from failure, learning from success can provide “maturity” and readiness to organizational members to begin with the learning process of failure that is more challenging.

We sometimes tend to forget that “failure was born of success” (Nonaka, 1985, p. 13) and that without the frame of reference for how a successful outcome looks and can be achieved, failures cannot be contrasted. Therefore, conscious reflection on successful events may be viewed as an essential prerequisite to establish productive learning in school communities. Similarly, Virany *et al.* (1996) asserted that high-performing organizations are “distinct in that they initiate second-order learning not in response to performance decline, but either in anticipation of environmental change or as a response to elevated performance” (p. 325). This suggests that high-level performing schools are proactive, whereas moderately performing schools tend to learn in response to real crises or performance failures. Accordingly, high-performance schools can also learn from successful events as a resource for developing school improvement and school turnaround initiatives rather than being limited to only learning from failures.

Conclusion

Across the globe, improvement programs are continuously being implemented in today’s schools. Most of these improvement efforts are applied as a quick-fix response to a perceived

problem or crisis, and many do not significantly impact school life in a more general way. Beyond the existing literature that continually develops deeper understanding of school leaders' and teachers' ability to critically scrutinize school difficulties and malfunctions, as at focus in the current special issue, I have emphasized a complementary success-based perspective that can be integrated systematically in combination with such failure-based improvement efforts. Considering the predominant focus in schools to date on ways to correct what went wrong within continuous improvement cycles, the learning from success framework is a paradigm shift that will require a "re-tooling" of activities, thinking and actions.

This retooling holds strong potential. When improvement efforts evolve not only from failures but also from practitioners' analysis of their own successes, staff members may feel safe and encouraged to collaboratively construct a collective body of school successes that may be tapped as needed for improving targeted school outcomes. Indeed, frank but respectful dialogue with colleagues about satisfying teaching experiences can build teachers' trust in their community. Framing such dialogue around successes enables practice of mutually supportive behavior while learning actionable skills, which in itself becomes a school resource or springboard that enhances practitioners' capacity to learn effectively later, under highly threatening circumstances when divulging mishaps and oversights. This holistic, integrative paradigm calls for further research and practical frameworks to assist leaders and staff members in negotiating their professional practices within school improvement and turnaround initiatives.

Learning from success requires work. Reflecting on successes and deciding that we want to learn from them entail struggles and efforts. This is its major disadvantage – it requires work. We tend to jump as if bitten by a snake when encountering failures, but if something is all right, we just say "It was nice." This is a habit that requires mental work. This requires a change in cultural perception.
– a high school principal

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