
Commentary – Can educational leadership researchers and school leaders both learn from failure? Yes, we can if together!

Preface

In this essay, we want to be clear from the beginning that Israeli Research Professors Benoliel and Berkovich are engaged in a noble struggle: that is, they explicitly want to make *intelligent failure* a viable school leadership strategy. But to do so, *intelligent failure* must also become a viable research objective. Practitioners share professionally with researchers the desires for good theory to be practical, equitable and heuristic. Yet, as Benoliel and Berkovich openly admit, their intervention framework borrows from fields outside education, including design thinking, change management, implementation science and, of course, organizational learning. And, most importantly, measures of success are defined by external judges. Still, we must ask, can using noneducational theories transform schooling and research practices away from fear of retribution and toward *intelligent failure* (i.e. learning individually and institutionally from errors)? This is just the first of many questions we have in our commentary on *intelligent failure* as a reciprocal construct: theory and practice.

Why reciprocal? Our reading of their model is as educational leadership researchers ourselves. As such, it makes sense to follow in the footsteps of Kurt Lewin, Chris Argyris and Karl Weick. But what we should point out is that educational researchers are not held accountable for every sentence or paragraph pertaining to our findings. Peer review is not the same as being held accountable by external bodies for decisions, actions, etc. The world inhabited by our research subjects and participants is not equivalent to our research world. It would be a different story if all our research studies were mandated to be designed as collaborations with practitioners. They are not.

Instead, there is an unacknowledged asymmetry of power. If not of power *per se*, then at least an asymmetric relationship based on positionality in a school system versus a university. Researchers often conclude with findings as recommendations, suggestions or plain out advice (i.e. mostly unsolicited) to talented practitioners. When has the reverse ever been the case? Therefore, a central question for any theoretical framework regarding schools and school leaders is: how will it be beneficial to practitioners? And, our take away from reading the articles in this special issue is that researchers need to be far more critically reflexive in order for *intelligent failure* to become a shared research/practice objective (see [Figure 1](#) below).

This special issue reveals an international collection of articles focused on educational leadership and the concept(s) of failure from many organizational perspectives. For example, using international Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) data, Liu (in this volume) found that teacher leadership and a governing board in educational leadership had direct and indirect positive effects on student achievement. Yet, these findings are less common in low-socioeconomic schools that are more prone to being labeled failures. In the US, Meyers and VanGronigen (in this volume) found that principals lacked robust root-analysis skills that contributed to the misidentification of problems and, therefore, solutions. Böse and Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz (in this volume) had similar findings in Germany, where school failure could be attributed to principals choosing inappropriate goals for identified problems.



In studying principals' perception of failure, Caliskan (in this volume) found that principals in Turkey identified failures differently, whereby some could be a source for learning experiences while others resulted in a complete loss. Importantly, Caliskan points out the limitations of the educational system that prevent principals from adopting a "learning from failure" framework. While principals may be a part of school failures, they themselves serve as gatekeepers for cultivating the relational conditions, where learning from failure can be practiced (Price, in this volume). Coviello and DeMatthews (in this volume) reported similar findings when school leaders tried to meet the needs of students with disabilities (i.e. attitudinal issues of teachers and systemic issues of coordination). They also revealed how principals make courageous decisions to experiment with student placement – some that end in success and others that end in failure.

As a body of research, the findings vary by geography, research questions, conceptions of failure, methods, etc. We had hoped that the empirical studies in this special issue might have used the Benoliel and Berkovich framework to test either parts of their model or their model as a whole. We do hope that future studies will take on that worthwhile task. For now, however, we have to deal with both the realities for school leaders and researchers, and how the sociopolitical rhetoric of public school failure can be addressed by both theories and practices.

The known knowns

Let's begin with the assumption that practitioners already know the following: schools need more money, bureaucracy gets in the way of making flexible and adaptable changes; the poorest schools are often staffed with inexperienced teachers, professional development often fails to be delivered with adequate preparation or practice, university leadership preparation is far removed from everyday on-the-job practices, embedded learning seems to work best and blaming and shaming often trump trust and collaboration. These are all knowns; thus, we see no reason why our research journals should keep publishing these same known findings.

At the same time, educational researchers already know the following: that school failure discourses are ever-present, and result as much, if not more, from political, economic and social systemic failures; that the year-long pandemic has magnified systemic weaknesses and disparities; that dropping out of schools can be traced back to students being absent, to domestic abuse in the home, to homelessness, to drug/alcohol addictions, to incarcerated or otherwise absent parents, to food insecurity, to shared housing-foster care-hotels-motels-shelters, to student disabilities, to necessities to work at part-time jobs, to necessities of caring for family member(s), to inability to make up poor or failing grades, to inability to pass exit examinations, to pregnancy, to not getting along with teachers and to being suspended (or expelled) from school (Miller, 2019). If this list does not lead students to drop out of schools, then it is likely to lead to their receiving certificates of attendance [how ironic], instead of high school diplomas. These, too, are all known knowns.

Addressing challenges and barriers

For those of you familiar with the action research/action learning studies by Kurt Lewin, Edgar Schein, Peter Senge and most recently, Otto Sharrow – all from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology – their views on "organizational learning" is the holy grail of organizations. In simple terms, this body of research seeks to move from individual learning to collective learning. This poses a challenge in schools where learning from "intelligent" failure as a leadership learning strategy would have to become a matter of professional judgment – as advocated by John Dewey a century ago – on the part of both school leaders and teachers. A separate, but also relevant literature contrasts "instructional leadership" with

“leadership for learning”. Yet, the former reigns supreme in meta-analyses, while the latter is marginalized in many mainstream journals.

Benoiel and Berkovich enter these above on-going discussions, especially on organizational learning, a decade after Amy Edmondson and her colleagues worked on developing measures to assess the three building blocks of learning: (1) a supportive learning environment, (2) concrete learning processes and practices and (3) leadership that reinforces learning (Garvin *et al.*, 2008). These researchers believed that the theoretical models presented by Senge and others were not practical (aka incomprehensible for implementation purposes). The articles in this special issue beg the questions (i.e. challenges and barriers) of organizational learning and leadership for learning. Yet, we applaud how Benoiel and Berkovich enter into this complicated conversation on the theoretical and practical benefits of “intelligent failure”. The authors do so fully aware of the barriers to learning from failure. They are mindful of hierarchical structures and bureaucracy and those functions related to the politics of accountability. Thus, it is with prior knowledge of barriers and challenges that their model makes a strong case for “sense breaking” and learning from failures.

From the rhetoric of failure to research findings of failure

How have societies around the world positioned systems of public education within social, political and economic drivers of everyday life? As suggested by Caliskan in this issue, knowing how a culture responds to failure, even intelligent failure, is an important contextual variable that educational leadership researchers are being asked here to consider. That said, are there any cultures anywhere in the world, past or present, where intelligent failure has become/will be a hallmark of school leadership research or practice? That is what Benoiel and Berkovich advocate but – as stated above – with respect to practitioners not educational leadership researchers.

Does the framework of sociopolitical and economic dynamics influence the abilities of school leaders to learn from failure? Every country earmarks government funds for its public educational systems. In the US, public schools have been supported by tax dollars allocated from national, state and from local government authorities – either as budget items or through the power to levy taxes on the population. This federated system varies around the globe, primarily in terms of the tax rates needed to adequately and equitably support public schools. In socialist economies, the tax rates are much higher than in capitalist economies. The result is that school leaders may find themselves in public school systems with [close to] sufficient funds to operate effectively under one set of circumstances; whereas, others leading schools with too few resources require greater efforts and burdens on educators, parents, communities and students. The disparities, however, do not end with tax dollars.

Using the US again as an example, wealthy citizens and even members of the white middle class have been leaving public schools for decades. They can afford to pay for private school tuition while still paying their fair share of taxes. According to the Pew Research Center, a US-based research group, over 63% of the 46.1 million US public school students were White in 1997. In 2019, White students comprised just 49.7% of the 50 million students enrolled. As more White families leave public schools, others continue to follow. Some call this “white flight;” others call this racism. Regardless, “intelligent failure” has to be reanalyzed racially, ethnically and culturally. We cannot just leave a theoretical construct or model devoid of a context (Mintzberg, 1979). And today, the context must include post-pandemic dynamics as students and teachers return to schools and educational leadership researchers search for new questions with unknown answers.

Leaving today: public schools from their inception

From their inception, public schools have played a pivotal role in advancing lifelong opportunities. Let us remember how Horace Mann – a pioneering US educator and proponent of public education as a system – claimed public education as a “great equalizer” of the American social system. Mann was one of the few educators of his time and one of only a handful of US senators to oppose slavery. But lifelong opportunities in school systems were designed for “whites only”. Accepting this historical reality, when we look across the various White ethnic groups who came in waves as immigrants, the results show vast disparities among them, but none of these differences compare to how Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples had been treated by public schools.

Nearly a century later, that same claim of advancing lifelong opportunities was made by another secretary of education, Mr. Arne Duncan. Only this time, it included a new notion referred to as school choice. For some citizens, they had and still have the benefit of voluntary choices as to which public schools they want their children to attend. Other citizens have little to no choice as to the number of years and/or the quality of schooling for their children. In fact, real estate agents promulgate the grading/labeling of schools in order to sell their properties. In the US, we have experienced illegal practices of “redlining” of whole neighborhoods. Educational success directly correlates with success in marriage and homeownership. Thus, in capitalist societies, especially these disparaging labels and disparate choices have always favored the wealthy and White populations over the poor and Black/Brown/Indigenous populations. In other words, failure – along with the meaning of “success” – as outcomes are already “baked into” the public’s perception of schools which are then applied to the thoughts and actions of school leaders. Does the Benoliel and Berkovich model account for how school leaders can address public opinions? If not, further research will need to test Benoliel and Berkovich’s model in the reality of this sociopolitical context.

Success? Failure!

The one deep experience that distinguishes the social rich from the merely rich and those below is their *schooling*, and with it, all the associations, the sense and sensibility, to which this educational routine leads throughout their lives (Mills, 1957, p. 63, emphasis added).

C. Wright Mills described the powerful elite and positioned schooling, that is, private day school and boarding prep schools, as the determinant of lifelong “success”.

... The proper school transcends the family pedigree in social importance. In fact it is the private school, says Mills is the “unifying influence” and as “the most important agency for transmitting the traditions of the upper social classes, and regulating the admission of new wealth and talent. (pp. 64, 65)

In addition, a parallel hierarchy exists inside public schools through the passing of knowledge and information along social and economic settings among parents and prospective parents (i.e. public opinion and real estate values). Michael B. Katz, a sociologist, critically wrote of the systemic racism embedded within public school since its inception. The establishment of public education in the 19th century was fundamentally a function of assimilation and inculcation of dominant social and industrial attitudes and values during a time of major expansion and diversification.

The result has been school systems that treat children as units to be processed into particular shapes and dropped into slots roughly congruent with the status of their parents. . . certain characteristics of American education today were also characteristic nearly a century ago: it is, and was, universal, tax-supported, free, compulsory, bureaucratic, racist, and class-biased. (Katz, 1971, pp. xvi, xviii)

Economic, political and social dynamics – not the actions of school leaders – become the drivers of public school labels.

Which brings us to perhaps the most powerful diatribe on public school failure ever penned by a noneducator. In 1880, a noted American literary critic who did not have a background in education, named Richard Grant White, made the case that the institution of public education had failed miserably. His arguments began with the fact that public education was supposed to be for poor children only, but with governance and finance changes, public schools had expanded to include all children and all grade levels. Thus, he asked a variation of the above rhetorical question: *why wasn't public education a panacea for economic, social and political ills of society?*

... [H]owever great may be the intrinsic value of education as a formative social agency, the effect of that which is afforded by our public-school system has proved in every way unsatisfactory and worse than unsatisfactory. (p. 538)

Drawing on student achievement data, White further asserted that:

... the mass of the pupils of these public schools are unable to read intelligently, to spell correctly, to write, legibly, to describe understandingly the geography of their own country, or to do anything that reasonable well-educated children should do with ease. (p. 541)

White followed up his attacks with claims of teacher deficiencies calling teachers' limited knowledge "an embarrassment". He concluded by stating that "mere knowledge does not raise the quality of men's moral natures" (p. 544). He declared that public schools were not helpful for the public good and were a waste of taxpayer dollars. "The road to the best government of the people does not lie only through the door of the public schoolhouse" (p. 544).

Do these critiques of public schools sound familiar in 2021? We believe that the history of public schools is filled with both failures and successes like all long-lived organizations. However, we demonstrate that public schools live, have always lived, in a rhetoric of failure making the ability for school leaders to embrace "intelligent failure" a dilemma. Therefore, we must excavate ourselves as researchers, practitioners and as citizens on how we contribute or resist the perpetuation of the failing schools' narrative.

Leveling the playing field: vignettes, language games and scorned lovers

In closing, we argue that professors as researchers need to be critically reflexive of their own practices. While we fundamentally believe that professors and practitioners should be on a level playing field, the truth is that professors and researchers hold themselves higher than practitioners (Figure 1). What would it look like if researchers and professors were held accountable?

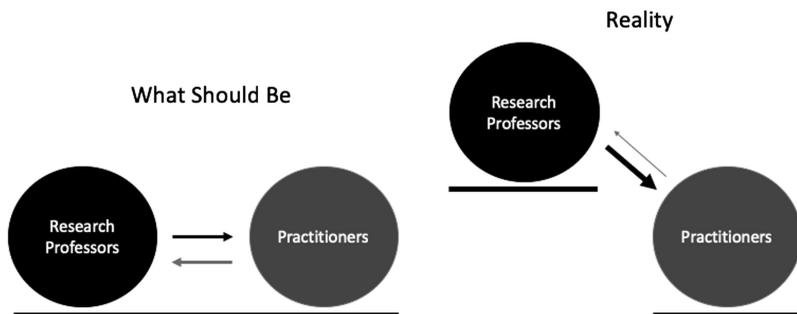


Figure 1.
Relationship between
research professors
and practitioners

Note(s): Ideally, the relationship and learning between the two are equal, but the reality is that research professors are held above practitioners. The expectation is that practitioners have more to learn from researchers than the other way around

Vignette 1:

At a busy four-way intersection, you and your friend are engaged in an intense conversation. Inexplicably, your friend steps off the curb just as a passenger bus comes close to where the two of you are standing. You instinctively grab your friend's arm and pull her back onto the sidewalk—just in time.

Minutes before, you were two friends engaged in conversation. Now, at this next moment, you are not only two friends but one of you has just saved the other's life. True, this is an extreme example of an everyday relationship, but it illustrates –we hope – three points: (1) how fleeting relationships can be, quite literally; (2) every relationship happens within a social context and under moment by moment changing circumstances and (3) had you not pulled your friend back onto the sidewalk, either (a) the friend is injured, perhaps seriously, or (b) your friend no longer chooses to stay your friend. Do not say the last option is unfair. People make decisions about relationships that are not always rational. Bottom-line: if the two of you want a relationship to thrive over time, do not you both have an obligation to protect and defend one another?

The Benoiel and Berkovich model presents us with failures in everyday life as opportunities for reciprocal learning. Yet, this would be most true if we could apply “failing fast”, “failing forward” or “sense breaking.” This is the stuff of consultants primarily and researchers secondarily. But how are consultants or researchers to be held accountable for their professional development or theoretical constructs? What might reciprocal accountability look like? How would our journal editors respond? Would they write to authors a variation of the following:

Your study promised *x*, *y*, and *z* results. Our records show, however, that your previous studies averaged fewer than 10 citations in Google Scholar over the past 5 years. We are sorry to report that we cannot publish your manuscript at this time. Please consider our journal when you have achieved greater success as a researcher.

Allow us another example:

Let us now reimagine a simple game of “Ring Around The Rosie”. And let us pretend that this game is an analogy of educational failure. If the external sociopolitical actors created the game, then it is they who say to the public, to educators, and to researchers “all fall down.” Each has their hands linked to one another and at the same count, they pull one another to the floor. Over time, those who created the game recede into the background (as part of the culture), but the game continues to be played *as if* it were the players (i.e. the public, the educators and the researchers) who were responsible for “failing/falling” to the floor.

At some point, the players in the game have to stop pointing fingers at one another as the reason for being pulled to the floor. We are not the “root cause” of failures. At some point, the players need to ask themselves how they arrived at this position in the game. And, at some point, they need to have a conversation internally on whether or not this game – as is – is even worth playing.

We end our essay/critical commentary with one of our favorite authors, Roland Barth, an American principal and Harvard scholar, who named the relationship between practitioners and scholars a tale of scorned lovers.

Both school and university people come to new conversations harboring antibodies that each has built up to protect against the other. It seems to many in the university that school people want to improve things without changing them very much; from the point of view of school people, university folks offer to change things but without improving them very much. These are hardly promising conditions for a marriage (1990, p. 104).

So it is with the marriage of intelligence and failure.

The best and the brightest are already in each profession: practitioner school leaders and research professors. Each aspires to having successful careers and most do. The problem is that these two successful intelligent groups are not only scorned lovers but also friends who have not reached out to save one another from danger or “stupidities/injustices”. Relationships are built on trust and openness. Restoring relationships falls on those who hold the power to do so. Therefore, it becomes incumbent upon researchers to be the scorned lover who reaches out and begins the processes of repair. We suggest applying the Benoiel and Berkovich’s model to ourselves *before* asking practitioners to take on the responsibility. The first step is not to apply the model to leadership practice but rather to the practices (i.e. research designs and methods) of educational research.

Eleanor Jin Su-Keene and Ira Bogotch

*Department of Educational Leadership and Research Methodology,
Florida Atlantic University, Florida, USA*

References

- Barth, R.S. (1990), *Improving Schools from within: Teachers, Parents, and Principals Can Make the Difference*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Garvin, D.A., Edmondson, A.C. and Gino, F. (2008), “Is yours a learning organization?”, *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 86 No. 3, p. 109.
- Katz, M.B. (1971), *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America*, Praeger Publishers, West Port, CT.
- Miller, C. (2019), “US high school dropout rate [2021]: statistics and trends”, available at: <https://educationdata.org/high-school-dropout-rate> (accessed 26 May 2021).
- Mills, C.W. (1957), *The Power Elite*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Mintzberg, H. (1979), “An emerging strategy of ‘direct’ research”, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 582-589.
- White, R.G. (1880), “The public-school failure”, *The North American Review*, Vol. 131 No. 289, pp. 537-551.

Further reading

- Krogstad, J.M. and Fry, R. (2014), “Dept. of Ed. projects public schools will be ‘majority-minority’ this fall”, available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/18/u-s-public-schools-expected-to-be-majority-minority-starting-this-fall/> (accessed 26 May 2021).