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POLITICAL RISK-TAKING: A REQUIREMENT OF TODAY'S INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Rose M. Ylimaki

1. INTRODUCTION

Educators in the United States are currently in an era of high-stakes accountability whereby federal and state policies impose severe consequences on schools that fail to make adequate progress on standardized achievement tests (Allington, 2002; Shannon, 2001). This high-stakes accountability environment places enormous pressures on educators to teach to the test, adopt “canned” approaches or programs, and in other ways, submit to deskilling (Shannon, 2001). At considerable risk, some individuals, schools, and districts do not submit to these political accountability pressures but engage in instructional practices they determine are most effective in their particular settings. This paper session will report findings from a multi-case study that was designed to examine what happens in school districts that make educators willing to take risks by resisting political accountability pressures.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In past educational leadership literature, risk-taking was frequently defined as “taking a chance and trying new beliefs and practices when the outcome of a change process is not certain” (Neihart, 1999). I drew on Kliebard’s (2002) and Shannon’s (2001) perspectives along with educational leadership literature (e.g. Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Neihart, 1999) to construct a broader lens with which to examine risk-taking in the current political context. The conceptual framework included the following aspects:

- 1) Leadership Support
- 2) Ethic of Critique
- 3) Legitimacy of Experience and
- 4) Reflexive Agency.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

I followed guidelines for an open-ended, multi-case study design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Six districts were purposely selected for the study, four that engaged in risk-taking and two that did not, in order to determine what facilitated the risk-taking behaviors. Curriculum directors were

selected as primary participants since their voices had not been represented in risk-taking studies and since they were primarily responsible for district implementation of current accountability policies.

In the first case, at the risk of losing employment, the curriculum director led a district effort to resist pressures to adopt a canned traditional phonics program and retain a curriculum that included phonemics awareness as part of balanced literacy. The second case featured efforts to resist political pressures to adopt books with contrived language and decodable texts rather than the use of authentic materials in authentic contexts. In the third case, the curriculum director led a community effort to retain and fund their Reading Recovery intervention program rather than adopt a state funded program that emphasized more decontextualized reading skills. A fourth case involved a curriculum director's efforts to resist internal pressures from some teachers and administrators with a more traditional philosophy of literacy acquisition to retain a literacy program in spite of mounting evidence of the program's inadequacies. Descriptions of discrepant cases in which curriculum directors and other educators did not engage in political risk-taking are also provided.

Data collection primarily involved three or four open-ended interviews with each curriculum director and at least six others familiar with each director's practices. Interview responses were further verified through examinations of relevant site documents and participant observations. Data analysis was concurrent with data collection and followed the four overlapping stages of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

4. THE NATURE OF POLITICAL RISK-TAKING: SIX CASES

First, the findings reaffirmed the importance of risk-taking to education. Second, leaders must be ready to mitigate teachers' fears over the political consequences for inadequate student outcomes in order for risk-taking and innovative education to occur in classrooms. Third, the district leaders in the first four cases inspired an ethic of critique among educators and community members, whereby district members routinely interrogated the underlying values and ideology associated with current policies. The discrepant case directors did not conduct such interrogations. Fourth, the directors in the first four cases consistently legitimized relationships and experiences as foundational for curriculum decisions. By contrast, the discrepant case directors demonstrated reactive powerlessness in the face of policy pressures. Finally, the findings indicated a strong interrelationship among the four conditions of political risk-taking

5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on my findings, I suggest that risk-taking now means taking a chance on teachers and their understandings of the best research evidence available when the outcome is not certain but the political consequences for failure are high. Today's instructional leadership is not safe leadership of safe schools. Understanding "political risk-taking" may help current and aspiring instructional leaders who wish to support risk-taking and innovation as well as student achievement in the current accountability era.

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