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Whose Risk? ‘Managing’ Risk in the Principalship

KAREN STARR
Deakin University, Victoria, Australia

Introduction

Twenty years ago considerations of ‘risk’ in schools were very different to those confronting educational leaders today. There were risks of students falling over and grazing knees in playgrounds or breaking arms falling off the monkey-bars. Attention to risk was at an immediate and elementary level, with few risks keeping principals awake at night, and few requiring any paperwork until after the event. ‘Risk’ has risen dramatically in stakes and prominence and is now a very serious business. Intrinsic to its manoeuvring to centre stage is a calculus of caution and quantification as the basis for government purview and surveillance. But what has been the impetus for such a change and what are the consequences for principals?

Before answering these questions and returning to consideration of risk in education, it is worth exploring the preliminary question: What is ‘risk’?

‘Risk’

Risk is a word used by all of us but which we interpret differently (Cleary & Malleret, 2007). Standard dictionary definitions of ‘risk’ speak to: “[e]xposure to the chance of injury or loss; a hazard or dangerous chance” (Macquarie Dictionary); “hazard, chance of bad consequences, exposure to mischance” (Oxford Dictionary); “... a person, thing or factor likely to cause loss or danger” (Chambers Dictionary). Apgar (2006, p. 11) defines risk as “the possibility of a loss or reversal – or gain or advance – different from what we expect from a decision or an activity.” Dean (2006) suggests these common definitions such as these are too limiting as risk considerations are constantly expanding and becoming more complex. He argues that: “[r]isk is a polyvalent and polysemous vocabulary and set of practices” (2006, p. 166). In other words, ‘risk’ has multiple meanings, of differing value and uses, which have changed throughout history, and continue to change. Ewald (1999) reminds us of the moral, political, judicial, social and epistemological elements of risk, with risk being defined and constituted within the constraints of the times and contexts to which it refers. Risk assessment depends on “who you are” and what you do, as Cleary and Malleret (2007) demonstrate through lists of divergently dissimilar ‘top ten’ global risks as determined by three major international companies.

Organisational leaders, boards of directors or councillors, bureaucrats and politicians are held responsible for assessing, monitoring, averting, or ‘managing’ risk, whilst bearing varying levels of liability for its oversight. There are multiple risks to be managed: strategic, market, reputational, operational, financial, asset, technological, security, workforce, regulatory, and governance risk, for example. Organisations calculate their ‘risk profile’ with the assistance of risk assessment tools and, very often, risk consultants. Possible risk scenarios or ‘events’ are identified and weighted in terms of probability. The causes or contributing factors of risk are canvassed, possible impacts are calculated, and mitigating controls are determined and implemented. Risks are ranked as low, medium or high risks, with each being ascribed a residual risk rating, a consequence rating, and a ‘likelihood’ rating. Risk registers and action plans are developed. Risks with extreme consequence ratings and ‘almost certain’ likelihood ratings hit the top of the risk charts, and become subject to intense scrutiny by key stakeholders and insurers. This is not as straight forward as it sounds, since risks can affect one another, with one risk incurring subsequent risks. Apgar (2006, p. 3) refers to ‘risk intelligence’: “an individual’s or an organization’s ability to weigh risks effectively. It involves classifying, characterizing, storing, retrieving, and acting upon relevant information; communicating effectively; and adjusting to new circumstances.” Risk continues to expand and become a multi-faceted, technical, rational, time consuming imperative that pervades all aspects of our lives.

Some risks are natural, such as droughts and floods, while others are manufactured by human developments. Human made risks are increasingly influencing natural risks. Hence new kinds of risk emerge as our social, industrial, technological and moral lives change. Risks such as terrorism, climate change, toxic spills or world-wide financial meltdowns have global ramifications. Some will affect current and future generations, evoking political and economic responses. Some incur irreversible consequences.

Beck (1992) in his seminal text “Risk Society” argues that risk has become an individual concern. Risk is objectified, privatised, and embodied in ‘responsibilization’ and the ‘new prudentialism’ (Dean, 2006). Individuals are expected to monitor and manage every aspect of their lives and those of their family, making provisions for health, employment, education and retirement. Individuals must become increasingly responsible, self-regulating and risk averse, attend to their own needs, and make their own provisions for the future if they can.

In late modernity risk is fundamentally and inextricably linked to the distribution of wealth and poverty (Beck, 1992). Risks such as pollution, toxic waste, radiation, dangerous modes of production, stress and lifestyle diseases are more likely to affect the poor than the rich who are able to armour themselves through choice of residential location, education, employment, financial security and healthcare (see also Pakulski, 2004). Risk reflects life chances, access to material goods, affluence or lack thereof. Within capitalist modes of production and consumption, there are individuals who fall victim to risk and those who can cope and/or profit from it. Dean (2006) notes the rhetoric about groups ‘at risk’, ‘active citizens’ and ‘targeted populations’ in government policy. Active citizens are capable of managing their own risks while other groups cannot, so becoming the targets of intervention and external ‘management’ by government agencies (see also Thomson, 2002). Advanced societies

not only have to satisfy the need for production, consumption and the distribution of wealth and security, but must also respond to the increasing imperative of identifying, managing and delegating responsibility for risk.

Whilst being individualised, generally risks are determined through consideration of the entire population, with the probability of risk falling to any individual representing only a fraction of the risk field (Ewald, 1991). From an objective position, such as that assumed by the insurance industry, risk is collective but responses to it are individual, and individuals suffer the consequences if they fail to take steps in anticipation of risk. Individuals make efforts to 'protect' themselves through vehicles such as insurance or superannuation savings. Hence risk has acquired a capital value.

It appears that the individualisation of risk and the prominence placed on risk as capital has spawned an industry in securing recompense as a form of monetary retribution, for the wrongs or dissatisfactions that occur in individual lives. Whereas in the past citizens may have more readily accepted misfortune, mistakes and accidents, such risks are now the subject of 'blame' with ensuing litigation, insurance and compensation claims, media scams or other requisitions for restitution or retribution. Exogenous risk has more effect than ever before (Cleary & Malleret, 2007), so much so that new terminology is coming into effect to avoid risk. For example, whereas communities once experienced 'power failures' they now have 'power outages', with the latter inferring a reduced level of liability.

Risk is something which individuals and leaders/managers of individual organisations have a duty to control as far as they can, even though there is little evidence that organisational effectiveness is improved as a result (Apgar, 2006). Now, more than ever before, leaders have to 'watch their backs', as risk is not only something to be managed, the management of risk gets increasingly riskier.

Risk in Educational Leadership

It is no wonder that in a social realm concerning children and their futures, 'risk' now plays such a major part in education. Increasing litigation claims against educators and education authorities have been an impetus for increasing governmental interest in, emphasis on, oversight and mandatory control of, risk. Strict risk management is the required remedy.

Whilst being cognisant of the discussion above, this paper presents some different perspectives on risk and the principalship. Besides the obvious observations about principals and risk, a less common discussion about how principals themselves may be considered both 'at risk' and 'as risk' is raised, as are what have to date been 'undiscussable' issues which exacerbate risk in education. Hence, this paper problematises the principalship around the notion of 'risk'. It conveys the demotivating and delimiting aspects of risk management, and emphasises the possibilities for unintended risks that arise in the wake of these practices. It also raises the possibilities for risk in policy and practice that appears to evade the purview of risk assessors. The paper exposes inherent problematic and contradictory aspects of so-called 'risk aversion' practices in order to inform research into both 'risk' and school leadership.

The Research

The research is the result of an exercise in grounded theory building, an approach developed by Glaser and Straus (1967). In such an exercise theory emerges from the data gathered. Theory is not derived deductively, but rather is generated through an ongoing inductive process whereby emerging insights are analyzed and continually tested, producing further evidence and/or new theoretical insights (Hayes, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Hence the research is data-driven rather than theory-driven. Grounded theory is responsive to research situations and the people in it, and it supports examination of individual standpoint, complex contexts, considering the inextricability of macro, meso and micro connections, influences and consequences simultaneously (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The research focused on the current professional learning needs of principals, which was conducted across Australia. Data were derived from principals in government, Catholic and Independent schooling sectors and from all levels of schooling. Participants were approached through professional engagements, including leadership capacity building programs and principals' conferences, while others were approached directly at their schools in order to ensure a broad sample of school types and locations. Data collection occurred through intensive, semi-structured, recorded interviews with 100 principals, and through discussions and observations recorded as field notes.

Adopting a socio-cultural approach, the lived experiences of participants have been privileged. The study rests epistemologically on three interconnected assumptions: first, large scale social structures constitute tangible realities; secondly, personal and public aspects of life are constitutively linked (Connell, 1996); and thirdly, micro contexts shape experiences, identities and understandings. Social structures cannot be separated from contextualised practice or from the historicity of the practice (Ball, 1994).

Amidst numerous aspects of the principalship, educational policy and practice, and the subsequent professional learning needs that emerged from the interviews, the issue of 'risk' in various guises was prevalent. The topic of 'risk' arose mostly through dialogue about compliance requirements which are growing in number and complexity, and through commentary about the increasing personal and professional insecurity inherent in the principalship. In the following sections I have delineated three sub-sets on the topic of school principals and risk. The paper then goes on to discuss the 'undiscussables' which have been elided in risk policy and practices.

Principals *and* Risk

In schools, risk is now the responsibility of everyone, but particularly of principals and governing councils or boards. Most risk procedures have become mandated, and each year many join the growing compliance list of risks that principals cannot ignore. In addition there is the aggressive parent; harassment; negative media attention; students who break school rules and the law; dealing with the disloyalty of key staff members; embittered councillors; leading change, which "is always accompanied by risk" (Barth, 2007, p. 217), and handling 'critical incidents' that render principals

negligent if they fail to follow procedures to the letter. Failure to meet duty of care obligations, such as alleviating bullying or removing a health or safety hazard; failure to adequately respond to a student's special learning needs, or alleviate exposure to sources of a growing inventory of allergies, or a student being deemed illiterate or innumerate on leaving school can incite claims of 'negligence'. A staff member may claim unfair treatment despite incompetence, misjudgement or misdemeanour.

Although the realm of principals and risk is immeasurable, the increased emphasis on risk has produced some undesirable consequences. For example, some schools have abandoned programs such as work experience and residential school camps because the necessary paperwork and procedures are too stringent, cumbersome and time consuming, the risk too high. Parental assistance in sports coaching or reading programs requires expensive police checks for their suitability. And assured oversight of voluntary workers by registered teachers not only negates the cost-effectiveness of volunteerism but exposes teachers to the risk of bearing responsibility for another adult whom they do not employ. Increased insurance premiums have made some activities prohibitive. Occupational health and safety legislation places primacy on risk factors being ameliorated, often to the detriment of budgetary expenditure for educational purposes. Barth (2007, p. 212) refers to this as a pervasive 'culture of caution' that has gotten out of hand. He cites principals' reluctance, defensiveness and conservatism in trying 'new' ideas for fear of risk exposure, such as unbudgeted costs and possible negative consequences. Risks of all kinds strike fear in the hearts of principals and present unwelcomed managerial work. Principals tread more warily than ever before. This "pathological" culture is being exercised to unreasonable lengths, stifling creativity, teacher enthusiasm and the learning experiences of students (Barth, 2007).

Even well intentioned responses to risk can become risky or riskier, as Thomson (2002) demonstrates by dissecting the notion of 'students at risk'. Students 'at risk' put schools and fellow students at risk through 'causing trouble', creating stress for teachers and reducing aggregate school achievement. These students usually fail in school, have high absenteeism and leave school as soon as they are legally able. Students 'at risk' often come from 'risky' families. Thomson (2002) points out some problematic assertions about 'students at risk', which infers disenfranchisement from 'the norm' as 'Other' – a problem to be fixed - whilst valorising the status quo which is classed, gendered and raced. The monolithic conception of 'students at risk' produces simplistic, overly reductionist, one-size-fits-all policy responses and external interventions. The term also becomes "official identity" through labelling - 'homeless', 'junkie', delinquent, young offender - which misrepresents and marginalises students even further. Such conceptions influence policy that works counter to the interests and intentions of these students, playing against the agency of individuals, families and groups, while setting up dependency through external 'interference'.

Hence the ways in which institutions like schools characterise, identify and respond to risk can create further risks, worsening the situation. When it comes to the duty of care, principals walk a tightrope of requirements. Recently a principal of a remote school asked for assistance in the development of a policy for a student at risk of self-harming. She believed she required 'a risk assessment tool' for medical and psychological assessments, advice about how such information could be

communicated to all who needed to know without breaching confidentiality and privacy laws, the development of questions to ask and processes to activate in the case of the student's absence, ways to re-engage the student into 'normal' student life, and the development of monitoring procedures to keep check on the student. This request said a lot. Making a difference in students' lives is not an easy ambition and it is difficult to take any (seemingly ameliorative) actions without fear of contravention of some unrelated policy, law or un-written expectation. It also demonstrates that principals operate in times of high obligation, high monitoring and low trust. In some circumstances, it is difficult for principals to make any move without extensive consultation and advice, for fear of the concomitant risks they might inadvertently create for others let alone themselves.

The management of risk takes an escalating amount of energy and time. Governments are responding with numerous measures that, paradoxically, intrude heavily on the 'core business' of teaching and learning, thereby creating negative educational effects. For principals whose work is being increasingly intensified through incessant managerial imposts, this is one of the biggest risks of all.

Principals at Risk

While some students may be 'at risk' this term may also be applied to principals who are exposed to professional, personal and psychological risks through their employment.

The principalship has changed irrevocably over the past three decades (Leithwood, 2007b; Starr, 2008a) and continues to evolve. The nature of the work, working hours and conditions, work tools, expectations and accountabilities are different. It is not surprising to find that principals are feeling stressed through increasingly complex, time-consuming and demanding workloads (Hood, 2008). The working hours of Australian principals exceeds that of counterparts in many other countries (Department of Education & Training, 2004). Major risks to health and family life occur through issues which are out of the control of the worker.

While function creep and greater centralised controls have heavily affected the nature of principals' work, incumbents feel that their involvement in the educational side of school has suffered as a result, with less time being available for students, classrooms and curriculum (Blackmore, 2004, Starr, 2007a; Starr, 2008a; Starr & White, 2008;). People are not bottomless pits of energy (Hargreaves, 2007). Energy needs to be conserved for the most important things but principals complain they do not have time to do the things they love the most – working with students and teachers (Starr, 2007b; Starr & White, 2008). There is insufficient time to reflect, renew and re-charge. Until governments monitor their policy and accountability demands, and shrug off the technical/rational orientation of school managerial work, this will not change.

Job descriptions, employment contracts and appraisal mechanisms still place responsibility for school improvement on principals, despite recent emphasis on 'shared' or 'distributed' leadership models in Australian education. A failing school is attributed to a failing principal. There is no provision yet for combined appraisal of

the school as a whole and position descriptions are still imbued with traditional trait theories of leadership (Lingard & Christie, 2003; Starr, 2007b). This is unfortunate when leadership acts are interdependent, draw on the capacities of many individuals and are enacted at all levels of the organisation. At the present time, however, principals bear sole responsibility for school results.

Ball (2005) refers to this situation as being a symptom of a 'performative society' which regulates performativity, compliance and accountability. He argues that it is not so much that performativity gets in the way (although the principals in this study found it to do so), so much as it being a means of changing school leaders' work and professional learning. At the heart of performativity lies the commodification of knowledge such that knowledge and knowledge relations are both de-socialised and externalised, creating the dissent which is so obvious in schools. Through externalisation, Ball (2005, p. 154) suggests there has been a "profound shift in the nature of the relationship between workers and their work" which often produces "cynical compliance" derived from mistrust. Furthermore:

The policy technologies of market, management and performativity leave no space for an autonomous or collective ethical self ... [and] ... have potentially profound consequences for the nature of teaching and learning and for the inner life of [educators]. (Ball, 2005, p. 154)

It could be argued that the "inner life" of principals makes for profound differences in actual performance. Bottery (2004, p. 92 - 94) cites what he calls "an excess of performativity", which exists in a culture of "low trust", with leadership work being under constant scrutiny and external judgment with "profound" results including the "perversion of the true objectives of the organization, as attention is focussed on external demands and not on internal needs." Being agents of performativity leads principals to feel guilt, self-betrayal, dissatisfaction and unhappiness (Bottery, 2004).

The ways in which principals are appointed and appraised puts them at risk. Principals are employees on mid-term contracts (usually 3 or 5 years). Being on limited tenure, the principal is often the most vulnerable employee in a school with no guarantee of continuity in the role. Principals have to 'manage' their careers more than they ever did before, and this becomes increasingly difficult as the role changes constantly.

There is a risk in voicing independent thinking and alternative ideas (Starr, 2000). Leaders perceive that they are more likely to fare better if they are compliant, cooperative and do not complain (Starr, 2000). Principals are also aware that they are unlikely to succeed in gaining future leadership positions if they do not toe the line (Starr & White, 2008). There are occasions when principals are placed in insidious circumstances through no personal misconduct or misdemeanour. Stories from principals concern community dis-endorsement through having to make unpopular decisions in the best interests of the school, the changing of the guard on the school council resulting in a loss of support, being assessed as too embattled during the early stages of second order change, amongst many other scenarios (see Blackmore, 1999; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007, Littleford & Associates, 2002; Starr, 2000). Principals perceive that too little duty of care is shown towards them by their employers and education unions, compared to other employee groups. Schools are perceived as becoming 'greedy' institutions (Franzway, 2001), with governments being ungrateful,

never-satisfied and parsimonious in praise, appreciation and recognition. Principals feel de-valued, disempowered, overwhelmed (Hargreaves, 2007) and at risk.

Leadership, if executed with the good of the whole organisation in mind, entails making tough, unpleasant decisions from time to time. Some individuals will inevitably disagree with, or feel aggrieved about leadership acts, and hence leaders can harbour a subconscious fear that someone at sometime will want to afflict retribution or revenge. This is not an unreasonable fear, since many principals face anonymous attacks on their person, property or professionalism at some stage during their career (Starr, 2008b). Taken to extremes, the actions of leaders can be affected by fear of creating conflict or ruffling feathers. This is 'the Talion principle' or fear of someone 'getting even' (Kets De Vries, 1993). Formal complaints, votes of no confidence, vandalism of possessions such as homes or motor vehicles, sabotage of work, hate campaigns, threats of being sued, anonymous letters, uninvited media interference, and being the subject of rumour or innuendo, are examples provided by principals (Starr, 2008b). Leaders also report horrendous stories of revenge or retaliation when they have addressed a school problem, while upsetting the interests of others.

Even when leaders retire they may incur psychological risks (Starr, 2008b). Many principals feel they leave with their hard work not being recognised or appreciated. This is 'the edifice complex' where what they achieve – the edifice they have built and the effort they have contributed - is not acknowledged by successors (Kets De Vries, 1993). It is common for new leaders, especially first time principals, to assert their legitimacy by deriding their predecessor. Hence, retiring leaders must be prepared for successors to be highly critical of them or to fail to acknowledge their time at the school (Starr, 2007b; Starr, 2008b). Principals deserve a better end to their careers, but many look back on negativity rather than on golden times.

Principals as Risk

There are two obvious abstractions within the topic of leaders as risk. The first concerns an implicit conception inherent in standardised routines and requirements which suggests that leaders cannot be trusted: they are apt to make mistakes or they may fail to complete certain tasks unless they are mandated to follow strict instructions, guidelines and timelines. The second meaning that can be derived from the topic 'leaders as risk' concerns leaders who are a risk because of their poor leadership or personal behaviours. In other words, leadership work can be poisonous, but leaders themselves can be "poisonous" (Kellerman, 2004). There is, however, a third, less obvious meaning, which I discuss at the end of this section.

Leaders are not to be trusted

The well-known twentieth century composer, Egor Stravinsky was so concerned about ill-interpreted performances of his works that he attempted to write music that was 'conductor-proof'. In order to achieve this, Stravinsky's musical scores contain rigid and explicit expression marks or performance directions, leaving conductors with little leeway for interpretation. It appears that education bureaucracies take a similar stance when it comes to delivering policy and procedural mandates to schools.

Routinised procedures and compliance checklists leave little doubt as to what is required and no room for creativity.

To be protected from leader-risk, education departments have devised myriad rules, regulations, deadlines, obligatory audits and surveys, standardised tests and other technical instruments to instil compliance, to avoid error, to achieve consistency and easily quantifiable results, to ensure servility and enable each site to be centrally monitored and accounted for.

All leaders have their blind spots and will make mistakes on occasions but usually these are not catastrophic. As a risk management strategy, however, education systems have adopted the lowest common denominator approach, standardising the work of all principals in order to address the one or two who may be tardy, incompetent or insubordinate.

“Poisonous” Leaders

The topic of “poisonous leaders” is a less spoken about risk, and has been elided in some of the best-selling texts on leadership over the past thirty years, with the word ‘leadership’ becoming commensurate with the very best of human qualities (Kellerman, 2005). This is a counterintuitive risk, concerning situations when leaders themselves are a risk - when the “dark side” of leadership prevails.

Organisations are at risk if they have “bad” leaders (Kellerman, 2004), and schools are no exception. A range of factors constitute “bad” leadership. Some leaders take high stakes decisions or have risky personalities, putting schools and their councils at risk. People who are too aggressive, too quick to temper, who have a ‘sting in the tail’ such that diplomacy and fairness fly out the window; who have maladroit interpersonal skills; who make enormous misjudgements but fail to see their mistakes; who are profligate spenders of budgets, who behave in ways in their personal life that, if known, would render them unsuitable in the eyes of many others; who are self-promoting or too ruthlessly ambitious; who don’t listen or who cannot accept constructive criticism or advice; who are corrupt or incompetent or intemperate all make “bad” leaders (Dlott, 2006). There are leaders who are emotionally illiterate, who are fools, impostors, fakes or frauds (Kets De Vries, 1993). O’Keefe (2006) argues that bad leaders are more common than we care to admit. Leadership characteristics such as these make for miserable follower-ship, and schools stand the risk of losing good people (students and staff) in the wake of “bad” leaders (Dlott, 2006). “Leaders are like the rest of us: trustworthy and deceitful, cowardly and brave, greedy and generous” (Kellerman, 2005, p. 2). So “[i]t almost seems that by definition bad people cannot be good leaders” (Kellerman, 2005, p. 3). The difficulty comes when leaders themselves don’t recognise that they have a darker side and when other people choose to turn a blind eye to it (Kellerman, 2004).

Gronn (2003) suggests that leadership faults are often created through work intensification and “instrumental scapegoating” (p. 139) whereby leaders can be blamed and incriminated through no fault of their own. Hence ‘bad’ leadership can be incited by a lack of ability to negotiate work practices on one’s own terms.

Choosing a school leader is a risky business. Selection panels do their best to choose carefully, but mistakes can and do occur. Bad leaders can be very talented at selling

themselves at interview, manage to secure ‘credible’ referees in their favour, but who cannot deliver the goods once appointed (Dlott, 2006). And with so few people putting their hand up to be principals, with too small a number of candidates to choose from, and with fewer principals applying for further principalships (Starr, 2007a), there is a greater likelihood or ‘risk’ of some not so good appointments being made.

During the selection process for principals, information of a personal nature is often reliant on referee statements, which may elide negative commentary; hence selection panels must exercise much more due diligence when making candidate determinations. Not surprisingly, using search companies and psychometric testing in education appointments is on the rise (McKinnon, 2008) as a risk management strategy to avoid risky appointments. The sad thing is that little is being done in a timely way to weed out inappropriate leaders once they are in place and wielding their negative influence.

There is something to be said for a new kind of ‘trait theory’ in the field of leadership. Not the traditional kind of trait theory that presumes leaders possess similar grandiose qualities, but one that recognises that principals do need to possess certain values and dispositions to be successful in the role. The community may expect more of principals than leaders of other organisations. Certainly principals are ranked highly in terms of honesty amongst other occupational groups, as is indicated by their appearing in the list of statutory signatories for the certification of legal documents. Principals are expected to be convivial, polite and diplomatic, honest, reliable, ethical, tolerant, confidential, friendly, open, trustworthy, compassionate and empathetic – to name a few (Starr, 2000). But there are some other antecedent leadership behaviours that make an enormous difference in school achievements. Leithwood (2006) found that a handful of personal leadership traits were responsible for a high proportion of variation in leader effectiveness, they are: open-mindedness, flexibility, persistent optimism, positive and motivating attitudes and dispositions, self-confidence, self-motivation, commitment, and, significantly in terms of this paper, an understanding that their actions affect the daily lives of others.

The Risk of Leadership Disengagement

Lastly, leaders are a risk when there are not enough of them, as is currently the case. The reasons for poor attraction and retention rates in the principalship are many and complex (Millikan, 2002; cf. d’Arbon et al, 2001; Myers, 2006). However, this is a certain risk that deserves much more attention.

Risky Central Leadership Practices: An ‘Undiscussable’ Topic

Argyris (1998) refers to ‘undiscussable’ issues in organisations: the topics that are not discussed, referred to or acknowledged in public; the private, secret, taboo conversations. ‘Undiscussables’ are barriers - ‘the elephant in the room’ - a part of reality unable to be rendered problematic even though it is known to be there and to get in the way. Barth (2007) refers to the same phenomenon as the ‘nondiscussable’. Leaders learn what talk is acceptable, what it is safe to talk about and what is not. Some conversations will diminish reputations or future job prospects. “We are fearful that open discussion of ... incendiary issues in polite society – will cause a meltdown” (Barth, 2007, p. 161). And as a result a great deal of emotional energy goes into

frustration, constraint, and resentment about the truth being denied, and the sorrow of injustice never resolved. Greene (1988) describes these “silent spaces” thus:

There is a general withdrawal from what ought to be public concerns. Messages and announcements fill the air; but there is ... a widespread speechlessness, a silence where there might be – where there ought to be – an impassioned and significant dialogue. (Greene, 1988, p. 2)

Such a state of affairs is created through “deficient” or “constraining” realities, which are perceived as such by the human actors that endure them (Greene, 1988). ‘Undiscussables’ reduce effectiveness and are de-humanising but are easily accommodated, with too few willing to stick their necks out to discuss them (Greene, 1988).

The types of ‘undiscussables’ raised extend current notions about both ‘risk’ and school ‘leadership’. In the case of ‘risk’, the comments below demonstrate how risk management elides critical ‘risky’ areas and topics, in addition to the findings above which indicate that risk management can incur further risks. The comments also expose the problematics of ‘leadership’, when principals are constrained by policy, practices and the hierarchical decisions of departmental bureaucrats who themselves are trying to avert risk while concomitantly creating risks for fellow employees in schools. The ‘undiscussables’ raised below appear in no particular order or importance or impact. They are not the only ‘undiscussables’ that exist but those cited were commonly raised by the principals interviewed in this research.

So what subject matters are ‘undiscussable’ and why are they so risky?

Principals speaking openly about feeling muzzled from raising certain topics and from speaking publicly, of being controlled, and of having to be compliant and obedient in keeping certain topics under wraps (Starr, 2007a, 2007b; Starr & White, 2008). This feeling of being silenced emanates from the protocols and disciplinary practices of education departments, through personal notions of ‘professionalism’, and through being so consumed by the job that there is “no time or energy to bellyache” (School principal, Victoria).

There are risks and frustrations encountered through central policy directives that do not work. While many instances were raised, a common frustration occurs when government departments merge, with education departments being variously combined with ‘training’, ‘employment’, ‘children’s services’, ‘early childhood development’, for example. It appears common that newly merged government departments have policies, systems and personnel positions that don’t meld easily, or at all:

... you can’t get a straight forward answer [from the regional or central office]. They’re all applying for their own jobs or someone else’s because they’ve restructured again and everyone’s [in an] acting [position]. ... it’s all about feather-bedding their own nests, not about service. ... No one’s sure which policy is being followed. You get shunted from person to person on the phone. Some don’t return your call. ... then you get really thrown when you do something because you have to and you find out later that something different

has to happen ... They've left you another fiasco to deal with on the shop floor!
(School principal, South Australia)

Schools have rules and regulations galore ... but Departmental stuff-ups happen all the time and there's no accountability in there. ... The latest thing is the computer software in one section doesn't speak to the other ... really badly planned! Everyone's too busy to get to the nub of baseline problems ... you wonder how they keep their jobs – who they're accountable to ... (School principal, Victoria)

Within these statements principals reveal their own heightened sense of accountability, but see it operating as a one-way street.

The continuing inequalities in educational outcomes in Australian schools which are blamed on poor performing schools or incapable teachers, rather than social inequalities, is a big issue for principals. Equal opportunities, social justice and equity policies in education are viewed as being so diminished as to be practically defunct. Principals say that these previously publicly-espoused policy goals have been silently passed over and have slipped off the policy agenda over the past decades without debate or announcement – much to the shame of governments:

Governments and the media make a hoo-ha about standardised test results and point the finger at schools when results slip ever so slightly but don't mention the shocking discrepancies between schools ... it points to a failure in government policy to redress inequalities ... there's no sense of concern about this from governments. (School principal, Western Australia)

Principals commonly make other critical references to central leadership practices, many of which are interlinked. These include a lack of central leadership in public relations exercises – such as the conspicuous lack of response and redress by education department leaders to scathing and incorrect public portrayals of schools, teachers and students by politicians and media commentators:

Where's the top brass when we get a blasting in the press? They are too cowardly and worried about upsetting Ministers or about getting their next job. We have to defend our schools and our actions ... but beyond schools it's open slather and no one stands up for us or what we're doing ... (School principal, Western Australia)

Principals privately resent alienating policy and paralysing procedure that become strait-jackets of control and repression for those in schools, and a rejection of concerns that these are increasing and becoming progressively more oppressive:

... I think principals feel unsupported. Workloads have increased exponentially and nothing ever drops off - expectations and demands increase ... People feel it all rests on them and there's little care about that from the system. (School principal, Queensland)

Artificially supported centre/periphery power relations that de-value and diminish the status and autonomy of school-based leaders are strongly felt, as expressed in the following comment:

You're accessible 24/7. You're the sandwich between upwards and downwards demands. It can get on top of you and a lot of people are asking themselves why they're doing it. ... Your day gets caught up in other people's agendas and system's compliance stuff. ... You don't feel like a 'leader'. You're a 'doer' and a responder. You react. There's not much time for what I would call 'educational' leadership anymore. (School principal, Western Australia)

There are concerns about central or regional control being in the hands of people who have never been principals and who simply 'don't understand':

As for disadvantages - probably the lack of understanding from the hierarchy and that would be from my Deputy Regional director upwards. She has brought to her position no understanding of being a principal let alone a small school principal and that's a criticism ... she just doesn't have the background. She doesn't 'get' lots of stuff. You've got a problem when they've never done what you do. (School principal, Victoria)

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, competition rather than collegiality is perceived to be more prevalent in some education systems, with the sense of schools being rivals and personnel being antagonistic rather than supportive of each other. The geneses and outcomes of this culture were described thus:

It's an unsupportive culture – very unhealthy. Principals in this state have started up their own fighting fund to protect themselves because you can't rely on support and protection from the department. (School principal, South Australia)

Other frustrating and broadly recognised 'undiscussables' include: the failure of schooling systems to dismiss incompetent teachers who should not be teaching, who are shifted from school to school or who have industrial support to remain in a school, and a corollary problem in teachers and principals belonging to the same union, which renders principals unsupported when teacher claims are brought against them. For example, one principal said:

The AEU [Australian Education Union] tends to have [their] Executive in the form of teachers who take on principals. You do your job and try to solve the problem of an incompetent teacher and the union sides with the teacher, but you are actually doing your job and belong to the same union. You get no support. (School principal, South Australia)

There is also widespread concern that principals cannot admit to being stressed for fear of negative ramifications and that in some cases principals' health is being negatively affected by the job but they do not have the time to make necessary lifestyle changes.

Like lots of jobs there are bits of it you love and bits you hate and if that gets out of balance that's when it all becomes too much – there's a point where you can't do it anymore. (School principal, Queensland)

One principal spoke of research conducted by a principals' association:

... we asked 'How do you think you are performing?' and 'How do you think you are coping?' And we defined those: – 'performing' ... is how you are managing the job, and 'coping' is how you are feeling inside. And there was a lot of difference between the two. It was really interesting to see – people feel like they are on top of the job – but others didn't – but in everyone self-doubt was there. ... I don't think that principals get any positive feedback. You feel you're on your own and good people – really good people – are feeling like they're not that good. They'll [the education department] lose good people or burn them out. (School principal, South Australia)

No doubt, there are thousands of other examples of undiscussables within a hierarchical, performative and competitive corporate culture.

Implicit in the 'undiscussables' is the view that central leaders must be aware of the activity under the surface – the whole picture is never visible. Whilst protected somewhat by the machinery of government or bureaucracy, they must be mindful of the mistakes, misjudgements or bad policy that will incur system-wide problems. They must appreciate the power that 'undiscussables' wield over the careers and daily working lives of others. There is a pervasive view that certain 'undiscussable' issues are deliberately swept under the carpet (Argyris, 1998; Barth, 2007). While they remain 'undiscussable' they can never be solved.

Sartre (1963) argued for the rejection of such deficient and insufferable states of affairs through imagining and giving voice to a better, more open reality. He talked about the frustration felt by individuals who know they are complicit in maintaining the very structures they find unbearable. A 'wide-awakeness' and an openness to courage is called for (Greene, 1998, p. 23). Making the undiscussable discussable would become a risk aversion strategy. In an Australian context, twenty years after Greene's book was published, we may ask why there are still so few 'challengers'. The answer is simple – the challenge is perceived as too risky.

Besides opening up the 'undiscussables' to public airing, principals understand the need to develop what Beck (1992) refers to as a 'sub-politics' – that is, groups of like minded people who operate outside formal government instrumentalities to devise and develop improvements in the form of support, dialogue and action. There is evidence of this through principals developing fighting funds to support their members.¹ The work of activist groups is to influence and effect change within orthodox political arenas. They can sound precautionary messages before major policy change is effected. They can alert policy makers to the negative effects of policy mandates. They can form a block of opinion and publicity that can influence public attitudes, keeping individuals safe from the fear of negative individualised consequences.

While discussing the 'undiscussable' is difficult, there should be nothing that is hidden from open problem solving in effective learning organisations, or educational

leadership and education will suffer. There is insufficient debate about the issues raised above yet there is risk associated with them which renders them risk omissions.

Living Dangerously: Leadership in Risky Times

As Grace (1995, p. 192) argues “conceptions of educational leadership are dynamic, contested, historically and culturally situated and at the centre of socio-political and ideological struggles about the future of schooling”. It appears from this study that Australian principals are involved in such a struggle over both the enactment of principalship in restructured education systems and about schools in the future, yet feel waylaid, stymied and professionally isolated in efforts to assert their views through excessive workloads at the micro level, and diminished positioning in terms of policy development at meso and macro levels.

Principals cope with ‘risk’ in a variety of ways. They cocoon themselves in their schools with the staff they trust and the contexts they know to carry on an agenda focused on learning and teaching; they simply ignore some tasks; they substitute accurate reporting with “what people want to hear” (school principal); they delegate risk management tasks to a committee or consultants; and, probably in every case, they “pray that the worst won’t happen” (school principal). One principal summed up the importance of trust in these arrangements:

It’s about having a proper perspective on things. Most of the time, everything is okay and even if things go wrong – which they always do – most of the time you get through. ... You have to rely on yourself and your staff to do the right thing at the right time. Really, this is all you can do without labouring through the ‘risk’ agenda and getting everyone irate and off-side. (School principal, Queensland)

And as Donald Rumsfeld reminds us, danger lies in our “unknown unknowns – the [things] we don’t know we don’t know” (see Bammer & Smithson, 2008). But there is considerable danger in our known risks. The above discussion illustrates the known risks principals endure in the usual course of their jobs and how leaders themselves are put at risk through their employment. Raised has been the topic of leaders who are a risk to others, and who should in fact not be leaders, along with other areas of risk that are rarely discussed but which make educational leadership even riskier. Current discussion and practice in the field appears somewhat deficient, in that it subdues and elides the vastness and significance of the current risk field in education. Ellipses concern the socio-cultural and political aspects of principalship, especially the ways in which leaders and their work are systematically controlled, regulated and held to account.

There are risks that principals can afford to take, risks principals cannot afford to take, and risks they cannot afford not to take. One risk that leaders dare not take is the risk of ignoring risk as it pertains to them personally, to their schools and to the profession collectively. Another risk that leaders cannot afford not to take is collectively raising education’s undiscussables to professional and public debate. Principals would face less personal risk if they were to make the time for greater collective engagement to

exert more influence and control over policy, procedure and direction in education, for the benefit of themselves, students, teachers and the community in general.

In order to better cope with elided risks, there is a pressing need for greater central understanding and support for the principalship, and for an openness to discuss what have until now been undiscussable topics.

Debates and research around risk in education are in need of a different kind of attention. Current discourses focus on the hegemonic approaches and understandings that were raised at the start of this paper. However, the reality of principals exposes the fact that risk is everywhere, it cannot be avoided or ignored, yet its influences and consequences may be far riskier than previously imagined. Principals need to be savvy about assessing their personal risk. They are playing with loaded dice, working in high risk contexts, with high risk likelihood, and often extreme risk consequences. Are the risks too high? A pressing question is: Why is it that principals are not subject to more professional and personal care and support by governments or employers who may be assumed to have a keen interest in supporting their welfare? To not do so and relegate this topic to the 'undiscussable' appears to be a risky strategy.

Notes

1. For example, The Legal Fund of State School Leaders, South Australia which provides legal advocacy and the Australian Principals' Federation in Victoria which operates to advance industrial pay and conditions, as well as provide support and advocacy services.

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