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# ACADEMIC GENERATIONS EXPLORING INTELLECTUAL RISK TAKING IN AN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

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We examined intellectual risk and risk-taking behavior in educational leadership preparation programs and investigated the intersection of academic generations within a community of practice, that is, doctoral students and faculty. The literature review examines several perspectives on risk and risktaking which includes cultural milieu and gender and ethnic differences. We offer suggestions for addressing risk and for further research.

## **Introduction**

As educational leaders, we are and will be continually challenged to overcome new obstacles, address issues, take risks, and improve our organizations beyond the point at which we entered them. Educational leadership preparation programs are implored to enable graduate students to become the leaders who will face these difficult challenges. As faculty in those programs, we ask doctoral entrants to play simultaneously and effectively their role as students while preparing them for their professional roles in public schools, colleges, and universities after degree completion (Antony, 2002; Austin, 2003; Golde, 2000; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). In other words, we ask doctoral students both to learn to take future professional risks and to face current personal risks, but we haven't always been effective as faculty at modeling and preparing them to do so. Furthermore, little has been written about the leader as risk-taker (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Kehrer, 1989),

both in terms of academic generations, that is, how doctoral students learn to deal with risk in leadership situations or how faculty prepare them to be risk-takers. The purpose of this paper is to explore how cultural milieu and gender differences affect risk-taking behavior in leadership preparation programs by investigating the intersection of these academic generations, that is, doctoral students and faculty.

## **Cultural Milieu of the Community of Practice**

Education is a culturally conservative profession that rewards conforming rather than bold behaviors. In fact, McCarthy (1999b) characterizes educational leadership programs, in particular, as complacent and unresponsive to needs for reform. After her national study, she concluded that educational administration is fairly self-satisfied, indicating perhaps, less inclination to take risks. Nyquist (2002) calls for innovation in Ph.D. programs; but innovation often involves risk. She calls on

doctoral programs to espouse and support creativity and adventurous research, a move away from what traditional educational leadership may have valued. While teaching growth and change to students, the faculty in the field of education may be slow to change their programs or to purposefully take risks.

Pallas (2001) contends that traditional developmental models that prepare educational leaders have proven ineffective primarily because these models assume naively that adult students are passive learners and their "personal epistemologies" are irrelevant to the research processes they undertake. Instead he subscribes to a different paradigm that "ascribes agency to newcomers, and sees generational encounters between newcomers and old timers as opportunities for community learning and the development of change practices" (Pallas, p. 7). Wenger (cited in Pallas) introduced the community of practice model that advocates preparing students for epistemological diversity (thinking from novel and diverse bases), a goal that includes elements of risk on the part of students, if not their faculty mentors.

A more balanced gender demographic in educational leadership departments might lessen their heavily conforming nature. According to McCarthy (1999a), between the early 1970s and early 1990s, women faculty in educational leadership departments increased tenfold. By the mid 1980s many in the field predicted that the influx of women faculty into educational leadership departments foreshadowed dramatic changes in the professional culture. But, by the end of the 1990s, women

seemed to have adopted the attitudes of the predominantly male departments, and significant changes did not materialize. She speculated about what might have been a low tolerance for taking risk in hiring new (and different) faculty with innovative perspectives. This may have occurred early in search processes or later in tenure decisions by weeding out the adventurous and the risk-takers, but the result remains the same, greater "similarity in attitudes between new and veteran faculty" (McCarthy, p. 207). Such practices do not portend changes in the preparation of educational leaders at the doctoral level or the inculcation of and comfort with risk taking behavior.

Antony (2002) contends that one's professional role may not always be congruent with one's value system, a distressing, risky situation. Antony advises that persons, who are marginal, pose alternative viewpoints, and challenge normative expectations are precisely the intellectual risk-takers who will advance the professional leadership field beyond its current boundaries. He encourages departments to socialize new entrants to be responsive to their own individuality in the context of further development of a field rather than reproducing the status quo.

#### **Gender Differences**

Evidence suggests that risk-taking among adolescents is not unrelated to cultural and gender stereotypes (Gilligan, 1982; Ponton, 1997). Ponton claimed that traditional restrictions on the activities of girls and young women have led to fewer opportunities to engage in risk-taking than those of boys and young men. She says

men have traditionally been encouraged to engage in a wide variety of risk-taking endeavors and have opportunities to do so. Women become more conforming and take less risk than do men; they learn to play by the rules and resist challenging established norms. Moreover, women may, in fact, be warned not to take risks while men are encouraged to do so (Boehm, cited in Kehrer, 1989).

Imagine being different from the dominant cultural group because you are viewed from a cultural lens of gender (Bem, 1993). When one does not "fit in" a dominant cultural subgroup, the expectations of those in charge can subject the "outsider" desiring entrance into a risky position (Tierney, 1997). For example, if women do not "fit" the predominant culture's preconceived notions of what an educational leader might be, this outsider status increases vulnerability and has been linked to non-persistence among Ph.D. students (Golde, 2000). As a result, these groups assigned previously to subordinate roles are less likely to be viewed as viable candidates for roles as leaders. They become less likely to be selected for leadership positions or self-select. They are less likely to be encouraged to take risks whether it is to enter the field in the first place or take risks once in professional practice. Not only are innovative faculty a possible risk to the status quo, as doctoral students, women faculty may not "fit" a predominantly male faculty member's (and perhaps female's) preconceived notion of what an educational leader should be (McCarthy, 1999b).

Success in securing leadership status for women is still fraught with risk because

equally daunting is not "fitting" into the image of leader. Jablonski (1996) calls this dynamic risky in terms of the responsibilities that members of these groups assume. For example, she explains that if women express feminine qualities while being in a managerial position, they risk losing a modicum of authority. In educational leadership programs, women may be welcomed additions as entering students but not treated as viable candidates to represent the next generation of administrators or faculty. For example, although females dominate the classroom teaching ranks, within the ranks of school superintendents or university administrators, women still remain the minority. To illustrate, four Mexican American women who held superintendent positions clearly came to this position from an "outsider" status. After studying these four women, Mendez-Morse (1999) characterized an event in each of their lives that she labeled their "initiation to leadership." Each experienced this transformation "event" at the outset of their careers. One attribute of these events was that they were self-imposed; the women established the task themselves. Another attribute of these events was "risk or sacrifice." According to Mendez-Morse, "although their initiation to leadership involved some risk or sacrifice, the women believed themselves capable of doing the job...they also recognized, in retrospect, that meeting the self-imposed requirement had been a significant event in their administrative careers" (p. 129). Based on this assessment, risk-taking patterns by gender might play a role in the professional socialization of female Ph.D. students who are aspiring leaders. Socialization is also

affected by who the faculty are, what they value, and as gatekeepers to the next generation, to whom they choose to give entrance (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). This inherent power maintains the status quo.

Cultural subgroups, which include gender and ethnicity, reflect beliefs about risks that crystallize what the micro-culture identifies as dangerous (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). Even though most women lack the strong encouragement to be risk-takers that most young men have experienced their entire lives, to be successful still requires risk-taking on their parts. In her qualitative study of the non-persistence among doctoral students, Golde (2000) learned that students often played conflicting roles that placed them at risk to succeed in their programs. Maher, Ford, and Thompson (2004) concurred from their study that female doctoral students expressed initial doubts about successfully completing a doctoral degree. Both studies implied the risks associated with role conflict and status attainment among these students and their ultimate goal of professional practice.

Jackson (1999) studied African American women in the superintendency. Her findings suggest that these successful women do have strong "family, church, and community support to prepare them to take risks" (p. 153) even though the same level of support might not have been provided in the work setting. Twale, Ridenour, and Schaller (2002) examined female doctoral students and their predominantly male faculty and found that each group assesses and deals with risk differently. Unbeknownst to the other, each group risks

everything yet perhaps neither group fully realizes the total extent of the risk calculations to the other. Often working in isolation, faculty view risk as disconcerting to them professionally, while the students studying in a cohort allowed the group to support their risk-taking behaviors, viewing it as a shield against faculty power. The cohort bonded together to meet risky encounters, which signaled challenges to faculty authority (see also Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Tierney, 1997). These studies indicated that tension exists between the academic generations that hinder the growth and development of each group.

#### Implications and Conclusions

*Within* academic generations persons define and experience unique versions of risk and risk-taking. *Across* academic generations, there may well be a substantial gap in risk-taking and risk aversion. Each generation resolves their academic role in ways that maximize perceived success. Within what may likely be a "generation gap," moreover, there may be a mediating gender dynamic.

Graduate students have already assumed risk by giving up tangibles like a job, time, and social life to face the typical risks of being in the program so theirs becomes a double-edged sword. While gender socialization may be an explanation for lower expectations of risk-taking behavior among women, for instance, their presence in doctoral programs indicates some are willing to assume risk. In a conservative doctoral program (which characterizes many if not most graduate programs in education), women may expe-

rience, first-hand, behavior modeled that unfortunately remains incongruent with their specific needs, i.e., to become adept at calculating academic and professional risks. Such an academic mismatch in a graduate preparation program is, *in itself*, risky! And, as a result, such uninvited risk is troublingly ironic. It is risky, because women are inhibited from learning skilled risk behaviors, which are essential to their future success, and ironic, considering that traditional socialization processes do not anticipate that women will engage in risky ventures as much as men will.

On the other hand, because women bring new perspectives to doctoral programs and subsequent professional practice their very presence implies an element of risk being injected into the conservative educational culture. As yet, however, women have not been encouraged to form their own models of risk assumption and resolution but instead conform to the conservative behavior patterns already characteristic of their doctoral departments (Antony, 2002; Tierney, 1997; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Further research is necessary to develop revised models.

In Wenger's (cited in Pallas, 2001) community of practice model, practice is the mortar that holds the widely varying members of the community together. The member's collaborative work is a joint practice, a "shared repertoire of routines, words, tools, stories, genres, actions, and concepts with which they pursue their joint enterprise" (Reihl, Larson, Short, & Reitzug, 2000, p. 408). In this study Ph.D. students and faculty came together, bringing with them different backgrounds of practice (based on gender and profession-

al role). Further study is needed to determine if risk-taking in a legitimate community of practice might be minimized, that is, if the sense of community is sufficiently strong or maximized if it is not.

The previous literature also suggests that women perceive risk differently and may require a different type of support system (Anthony, 2002). Students may recognize a need to stay together so the stronger can nurture the weaker members, thus, there is survival through unity. This is often provided by cohort groupings (Barnett, et al., 2000). Faculty, on the other hand, practice in more isolated environments but may try to facilitate environments that build and sustain this community (Twale & Kochan, 2000). Structurally, departments may be ill suited to facilitate community (Bergquist, 1990). Students may expect faculty to ensure their success in the program as a trade off perhaps, to all they have relinquished to be doctoral students (see Cockrell, Caplow, & Donaldson, 2000; Twale, Ridenour, & Schaller, 2002). As gatekeepers, faculty should feel obligated to introduce students to risk, challenge them to deal with it, offer support and assistance, and judge them on the successful outcomes that justify their entering the profession (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).

Palmer (1987) might resolve the situation as simply not inviting risk because the natural creative conflict between faculty and students is not fully fostered nor compassionately encouraged or supported. The definite closeness and relative group homogeneity that fosters a community of practice appears possible but the lack of

integration and the student disconnect with faculty at times hinders a stronger faculty/student collaboration (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Strange & Banning, 2001). Perhaps if faculty continually strives to maintain a professional façade, they forget to model risk-taking to their students, especially women for whom risk-taking is not inherent in their past socialization. Inadvertently, faculty invites challenge to their work and scholarship, knowing that is the basis for student learning, yet a professional risk to their careers. Clearer use of assigned risk-taking opportunities for students progressing through the doctoral program seems simple for faculty to do but often faculty members' own fears prevent them. Faculty isolation might indeed fuel this. Faculty cohorts that engage in risk-taking and likewise include their students may be a viable tool against isolation.

Student perceptions of faculty power are especially compelling and warrant closer attention. Is power misinterpreted as paternalism, close mentoring, or guided direction through the professionalization process? Students and faculty each take risks but not without discomfort, that is, they each want "control" over the situation but fear the consequences they cannot always calculate beforehand. Again, does this phenomenon differ by gender in that male faculty members are less willing to encourage risk-taking behavior of women students (Boehm cited in Kehrer, 1989)?

Finally, we still struggle with the original conundrum, minimizing risk between academic generations within the community of practice itself while at the same time preparing future educational leaders to be risk-takers. To say that faculty needs

to try out innovative strategies poses its own risks, not to mention the risks to students. We suggest allowing students to shadow and/or to participate with faculty on action research projects, curricular reform, accreditation self studies, consulting projects, scholarly writing, advisory boards, conference presentations, and workshops. These and other practices need to be attempted and evaluated for their own value as well as filtered through the cultural lenses of gender and ethnicity.

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