Learning from failure or failing to learn: perspectives of school principals

Omer Caliskan

Department of Educational Sciences, Yozgat Bozok University, Yozgat, Turkey

Abstract

Purpose – Educational organizations confront a number of failures along with successful practices. Although a potential learning source for organizations, failures encountered are not normally welcomed and utilized to improve future practices. However, the existing literature emphasizes that individuals and organizations can learn a lot from their failure by adopting a pragmatic understanding toward the concept of failure and implementing a learning-from-failure (LFF) approach in their practices. Drawing on these assumptions, the purpose of this study is to explore how school principals identify educational failures and implement an LFF approach in their managerial practices.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopted a qualitative research paradigm. The research was conducted in a middle-sized city in Turkey. The data for the study came from individual semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 school principals. The interview data were coded and analyzed using a conceptual coding framework.

Findings – Findings indicated that school principals’ definitions of failure are classified as learning related and nonlearning related. Failures were generally considered to be a learning opportunity rather than a complete loss, although principals’ identification of important examples of failure varied across school levels. In operating an LFF approach at schools, certain limitations existed such as a lack of institutional policy and professional skills, heavy workload and limited autonomy.

Originality/value – This study attempted to explore domains of educational failures and the application of an LFF approach at educational organizations. The LFF approach has previously been studied and discussed in business organizations. This study applied the concept to the education field.

Keywords School principals, Organizational learning, Failure management, School failures, Learning from failure

Paper type Research paper

Failure is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his successes. - John Dewey

Introduction

Failure in education is not much celebrated (Lottero-Perdue and Parry, 2017; Tawfik et al., 2015); instead, a failure-avoidance approach is embraced because of the psychological, political, cultural and social dynamics steering public opinion (Clifford, 1984). However, failure is an unavoidable part of the educational process. Failure or dissatisfaction occurs as often as success or satisfaction in both educational (Cuban, 1990; Hess, 2010; Payne, 2008) and business organizations (Lewis, 2019). According to a global survey, only one-third of organizational change attempts are considered to be successful by the leaders of the participating organizations, indicating the extent to which failure occurs in organizations (Meaney and Pung, 2008).

Notwithstanding, stories about successful outcomes in education predominantly attract the attention of policymakers, management scholars and practitioners (Darling-Hammond and Rothman, 2011) due to the negative image attributed to failure in education (Tawfik et al., 2015). Yet, failure may offer a vast amount of learning potential for managerial practices (Bledow et al., 2017), considering characterizations of failure as “early warning signs” to avoid disaster and as a “feedback mechanism” for continuous excellence in the management of
organizations (Edmondson, 2011). Indeed, failure can be a better teacher than success if it is handled intelligently (Schumpeter, 2011). The critical point is that the meaning of failure espoused by administrative units determines how the concept of failure will be valued and integrated into managerial practices. The value attributed to the failure depends on the beliefs or assumptions held by the individuals in charge of the respective organization. To this end, Dweck (1986; 2017) offers a theoretical approach, Implicit Theories, in which she explains how failures are experienced by identifying two beliefs, a “fixed mindset” or “growth mindset,” each of which offers differing interpretations of failure. From a fixed mindset perspective, failure is considered to be the limit of one’s abilities; however, from a growth mindset perspective, failure is regarded as an opportunity to learn. As such, the perspective adopted affects the way in which individuals respond to the failures that they encounter.

From the perspective of Dweck’s mindset framework, school principals’ understanding of and response to failure in terms of their leadership practices could provide insights for exploring a learning-from-failure (LFF) orientation in educational contexts. Building on this assumption, the purpose of this study is to answer the following research questions:

1. What domains of failures are identified by school principals?
2. What perspectives do school principals have regarding failure as a learning opportunity (growth mindset) or as a loss to be avoided (fixed mindset)?
3. To what extent do school principals adopt an LFF perspective in their managerial practices?

**Learning from failure (LFF)**

Failure means any deviation from the expected outcome occurring in both avoidable and unavoidable circumstances (Athanassoulis, 2017; McGinn, 1999). In educational settings, failure is often unwelcomed, especially in the era of increased accountability with the introduction of mandated standards and comparative international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) (Benoliel and Berkovich, 2018) and publications stressing “schools without failure” (Glasser, 1969) or “turning around failing schools” (Murphy and Meyers, 2007). In fact, over a century ago, the concept of “trial and error” was introduced as a learning method by Morgan (1894). In spite of the learning potential inherent in failure experiences, the conventional approach limits the ability of individuals and organizations to learn from the wealth of knowledge embedded in failed experiences because of the negative affective valence associated with failures (Clifford, 1984).

By contrast, empirical studies have indicated that stories of failure as a learning source have a more profound effect on people than stories of success (Bledow et al., 2017), revealing the validity of the phrase “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister et al., 2001). Failure can be a valuable source of learning if it used intelligently to inform prospective attempts. According to Petri (2006), “How individuals react to failure separates leaders from followers, true designers from mere users of things” (p. 64). In that sense, a wise leader can draw lessons from failures and turn them into a resourceful guide for future attempts. The idea that failure can be a valuable source of information for organizations has attracted scholarly attention, but the implementation of an LFF approach is rarely practiced (Baumard and Starbuck, 2005) and can be influenced by individual, organizational and sociocultural dynamics.

Canon and Edmondson (2005) argue that the intelligent process of learning from failure requires three essential actions to coexist for an individual: identifying failure, analyzing failure and deliberate experimentation. School leaders who lack the necessary skills and knowledge to handle failure (know-how) may not be capable of utilizing failure as a learning experience. In such cases, it is probable that any encountered failure will be overlooked, will not be discussed on time and subsequently will lead to greater harm rather than become a
learning experience in the school setting. To avoid this, school leaders should be open to feedback from all stakeholders (teachers, students, and parents), create a learning-oriented environment and handle small or large failures with expertise. School leaders should behave as facilitators and should “walk the talk” to motivate organizational members to provide feedback, discuss pertinent issues and offer solutions in a psychologically safe environment through open communication channels (Edmondson, 2003). Another important factor is the organizational capability of organizations to facilitate LFF among its members. In view of the term “learning organizations” offered by Senge (1990), schools are described as learning organizations (Hallinger, 1998; Schechter and Feldman, 2010). However, it seems hard to characterize schools as genuine “learning organizations” (in terms of the ability to learn from failure) because schools are often more like bureaucratic institutions with rigid rules, policies and hierarchical structures which may hinder purposeful learning spirit inherent in learning organizations (Field, 2019; Fullan, 1995). Despite these bureaucratic challenges, minimizing traditional hierarchical structures by adopting a system of site-based management instead of a centralized administrative structure and by increasing the principal’s autonomy may lessen some of the current organizational barriers that exist in educational organizations, thereby facilitating the effective implementation of LFF at schools. Furthermore, given the role of the dominant culture in shaping society’s expectations (Hofstede, 1984; Schwartz, 1992), a nation’s sociocultural context is likely to influence how individuals interpret and perceive the concept of failure in educational practices (Lottero-Perdue and Parry, 2017). As a result, the mainstream assumptions framing the term failure in education will inevitably influence the managerial mindset of school leaders. A culture of blaming or “shooting the messenger” may dishearten people to report failures on time, which eventually brings about the occurrence of catastrophic situations (Hoy et al., 2006; Wilson and Dobni, 2020) and repression of constructive error culture and LFF approach (Rami and Gould, 2016).

Conceptual framework: leader mindset

Observing daily school practices and serving at the core circle (school) of the education system, school principals along with teachers are close observers of small (everyday) educational failures in school settings. Small failures are identified as “early warning signs,” and if they are not detected on time and addressed appropriately by leaders, larger and catastrophic failures may occur (Sitkin, 1992; Tucker and Edmondson, 2003). Hence, school principals may act as role models, to some extent, in turning failures into learning experiences for both the school and the larger educational system. In the literature, the impact of leaders’ characteristics, traits and abilities in building effective leadership is stressed (Burch and Guarana, 2014). However, as Guillén et al. (2015) noted

Knowing how (to be a successful leader) is not enough to make one effective in managerial roles...one must also be truly motivated to lead to persist in the leadership role despite the challenges leaders face in modern organizations (p. 1).

There are several factors that cause some leaders to persist more than others in their leadership tasks. Scholars have argued that leaders’ beliefs, assumptions and mindsets about the nature of their abilities and traits are likely to influence their motivation and performance (Dweck, 2017; Loftin, 2016). With respect to the effect of motivation on an individual’s performance, Dweck (1986) described the concept of implicit theories, in which two distinctive individual mindsets – entity implicit theory (fixed mindset) and incremental implicit theory (growth mindset) – determine an individual’s perspective of the situation. According to this approach, individuals perceive issues differently because of their assumptions and beliefs. Drawing upon these two mindsets, Dweck (2017) offers insightful perspectives about an LFF approach by redefining the concepts of failure and success with fixed mindset and growth mindset, each of which offers differing interpretations of learning from failure.
Individuals with a fixed mindset tend to experience life as a constant measure of their abilities and intelligence. Thus, they are more performance oriented, see failure as an unresolvable issue, respond to failure with negative feelings and avoid coping strategies in times of challenges and failure. Such individuals tend to see success as a validation of personal growth and failure as a validation of personal worthlessness; therefore, they believe that achievements come only through talent and intelligence rather than commitment and effort. In terms of their management approach, such leaders are more likely to prefer a nonparticipative management approach. In brief, failure is considered to be a (negative) reflection on their identity rather than an ordinary experience in life (Yan et al., 2014; Yeager and Dweck, 2012).

In contrast, individuals with a growth mindset perceive life as a path toward improvement through effort and learning. Accordingly, this feeling enables people to become more learning and effort oriented, to consider errors as an ordinary part of the learning process and to believe in enthusiasm and development. Therefore, such individuals do not see success and failure as a validation tool but as an ordinary experience. In terms of management styles, coaching is more valued than managing. In short, the power of effort and commitment is prioritized over ability and intelligence (Yan et al., 2014; Yeager and Dweck, 2012).

The existing literature has emphasized the importance of mindset in a variety of ways. Individuals’ mindsets are found to be more influential in learning from failure than their leadership styles (Yan et al., 2014). In addition, Zingoni (2012) reported that individuals with a growth mindset found negative feedback more valuable and less threatening, leading them to allocate more time to understand the feedback. In contrast, individuals with a fixed mindset responded to negative feedback by reducing their attention and effort, and they were then less likely to correctly comprehend feedback and learn from their failures. Utilizing attribution theory (Weiner et al., 1976) to further explain the two mindsets, Deng et al. (2010) argue that individuals with a fixed mindset were more likely than individuals with a growth mindset to associate their failure with external causes like the mistakes of others and a lack of appropriate resources, which led such individuals to consider failures as uncontrollable and therefore necessary to be avoided in subsequent circumstances. However, individuals with a growth mindset were more likely to attribute their failures to internal dynamics which were temporal and controllable, in turn making them think that achievement would come through effort and commitment.

Regarding the importance of mindset, Dweck (2017) emphasized that failure is as valuable and meaningful experience as success. Recognizing the true essence of failure or success in our practices enables us to think and act wisely instead of slipping into a mood of pessimism or overconfidence, both of which can be risky for healthy growth. With both success and failure, having a fixed mindset makes us concerned with the judgment of others. Even in times of success, there is the risk of becoming preoccupied with praise concerning our intelligence or personal traits instead of focusing on praise related to our efforts. In his bestselling book about the relationship between parent and child, Ginott (1965) says, “Praise should deal, not with the child’s personality attributes, but his efforts and achievements” (p. 57). Likewise, Dweck (2017) quotes the political theorist Benjamin Barber: “I do not divide the world into the weak and strong, or the successes or failures... I divide the world into learners and nonlearners” (p. 67). Accordingly, the sensible way is to believe that our intellectual skills can be cultivated with experiences gained from successes or failures. In addition, if intelligently handled, failure teaches us to notice the importance of risk, the value of effort and the power of persistence. However, among individuals having a fixed mindset, failure can be transformed from an action to an identity, forcing them to define themselves as failures, while failure should instead be considered as an ordinary experience, like success. In brief, Dweck’s mindset proposition offers insightful perspectives for examining how education leaders learn from their failures.

Learning from failures
Methods
This study adopted a general qualitative research approach (Yin, 2015) to portray school principals’ understanding of the concept of failure and experiences of the LFF process. This research was conducted in a middle-sized city located in the middle of Turkey. The city has approximately 120 public schools including preschool, elementary, middle and high schools. The data for the current study came from individual semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 school principals working at public schools, located in the downtown area of the city. The sampling criteria for the selected schools included public schools that did not have special characteristics distinguishing them from other public schools across the country, and issues concerning convenience of access for data collection were considered. In selecting the participants, purposeful sampling criteria were used to include principals from every school level (i.e. preschool, elementary, middle and high school), with different years of experience and balanced gender distribution as much as possible since relevant and diverse cases may provide in-depth information about the topic (Patton, 2014). The interview protocol was developed relying on the conceptual framework of mindsets developed by Dweck (1986, 2017) and the relevant literature. Some of the interview questions were, “What types of failure do you encounter at your school?”; “How do you feel when you experience failure?”; “When you confront failure at your school, how do you react and handle it?”

Prior to data collection, the required ethical permission was obtained from the responsible units. When arranging interview appointments, I visited each principal at their school. With the permission of the participating principals, the interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed to facilitate analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 40 min. Interviews were done in the participants’ native language (Turkish), but later selected quotations from the interviews following data analysis were translated into English. In order to warrant anonymity, the participants were identified by pseudonyms, and the names and locations of school were not identified. The demographic information of the participating principals is displayed in Table 1.

Data analysis
The analysis of interview data was performed in NVivo12, a piece of qualitative data analysis software. The interview data were coded to identify themes (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) based on the framework of mindsets (Dweck, 1986, 2017). In order to ensure the reliability of the coding process (Miles and Huberman, 1994), an expert from the field of educational sciences and who had experience in qualitative data analysis coded the interview data. The coding consistency analysis was conducted using a subsample of the entire interview texts (Hodson,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal name (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of experience in principalship</th>
<th>School level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rahime</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Derya</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Five years</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Can</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Yilmaz</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Zafer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Mert</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Cemal</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Four years</td>
<td>Middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Tekin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Six years</td>
<td>Middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Atilla</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Agah</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Eight years</td>
<td>High school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Selim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>High school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Tarkan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>High school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Participant demographic information
The intercoder agreement was calculated using the following formula: the number of agreements/total number of agreements plus disagreements (Miles and Huberman, 1994), and the overall agreement rate was calculated to be 83.5%. Last, the researcher and the second coder also discussed the disagreements to improve consistency.

Findings
In accordance with the three research questions, the presentation of interview data is structured around three main themes: (1) domains of educational failures; (2) perspectives of failure as either a loss to be avoided or a learning opportunity to be utilized; (3) adoption of an LFF approach in managerial practices.

Domains of educational failures
The educational failures shared by the principals were classified under two main categories: (1) failures pertaining to learning and instruction and (2) failures not pertaining to learning and instruction. Overall, the interview data suggested that principals mainly talked about failures not related to learning and instruction. This supports the notion that school principals are more likely to observe failures out of the classroom, where learning-related failures are mostly experienced by teachers, and it suggests that classroom failures can be solved by teachers without reaching out to principals. Another important finding was that the principals’ primary classification of failure was not similar at each school level, which largely stemmed from the principals’ assumed roles and responsibilities at each level put forward by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). In addition, the expectations of families about education at different educational levels shaped the priorities and thereby failures experienced by the principals. For example, parents of preschool children were more likely to prioritize a safe and caring environment at school, while the families of high school students primarily sought to get their children prepared for the university entrance exam. These diverse interests from parents shaped the principals’ primary definition of what qualifies as failure in their contexts. The principals’ classification of failures is displayed in Table 2.

Regarding the examples of failure at each school level, preschool principals were mainly concerned about nonlearning-related failures including safety measures at school and in the classroom, food quality standards, annual student registration numbers and communication problems among stakeholders. As for learning- and instruction-related failures, principals reported parents’ dissatisfaction with teachers’ classroom performance as an important failure for their school, which adversely affected the reputation of their school and student registration numbers in the following year. As an aspiring, energetic and novice principal from a preschool located in a lower socioeconomic neighborhood of the city, principal Rahime associated failure with fewer registered students to the school and continuous complaints from parents about the school and teachers as in the following:

By failure here, the number of registered students each year is an important indicator for us. For example, last year, we received several complaints from parents about teacher-parent communication problems and insufficient school facilities, which have affected our registration numbers this year.

At elementary schools, participating principals expressed more learning-related failures than preschool principals. In particular, they reported that arranging less social activities and science fairs compared to other elementary schools was an important failure for them because the principals’ annual performance is closely followed and evaluated by the district administration in formal meetings. As a hardworking principal with awards for his outstanding performance in projects related to science and the environment, Selim reported that...
Every year, the district officials gather principals, and ask, “How many family visits, social activities, and science fairs have you done?” It’s a big problem when we cannot achieve the expected targets. Academically, our goal is to organize more learning-related social activities and fairs, and to teach basic elementary school curriculum.

Another important failure articulated by elementary school principals was parents’ dissatisfaction with teachers’ classroom performance and school facilities, which negatively affected classroom climate and school reputation in the city. Moreover, principals also emphasized their concerns about keeping the school and classes safe against potential child accidents and injuries within school hours. As an experienced principal from a high achieving elementary school, Mert shared his concerns as follows:

Recent school safety rules are the biggest concern for me. It has increased our workload a lot. Think of that, once a child enters the school yard, school administration will be in charge of all kinds of problems. Falling down the stairs, “Why did he fall?” or students’ eating harmful or junk food from school cafeteria, families ask, “Who permits this food in this place?” At such failures, the first person they [the higher administrative unit] fire is always the school principal and vice principal.

For the case of middle and high schools, learning-related failures were stressed by the principals because students at these school levels take nationwide standardized exams, through which they are admitted to few prestigious high schools or universities. Principal Atilla from a successful middle school located in the downtown region of the city provided the following example for this:

Last year, our school achieved a successful outcome by sending 30 students to the city’s two science high schools. Let’s suppose that, this year, it will be ten students. That would be an important failure for us. As the principal, I have to explain the reasons behind this sharp decline when education director of the city asks me (in annual briefings).
Furthermore, middle and high school principals also shared nonlearning-related failures resulting from students’ misbehavior, conflicts among teachers and students and some paperwork errors. From these comments, it appears that middle and high school students experienced different problems because of their developmental processes to adulthood, compared with young learners in preschools and primary schools. As an experienced principal at a low achieving vocational high school, principal Agah shares his experience:

One of our teachers’ use of violence against some students was reported to me. I did not know what to do. A crisis moment. At first, I felt I had to defend my teacher, but after speaking with those students, I learned all the details and solved it without causing bigger problems among families and the teacher.

Perspectives of failure as loss or opportunity
In response to the second research question, the principals’ perspectives of failure were categorized under two mindsets, a growth mindset or a fixed mindset. Statements made by the principals which suggested that failure was a loss to be avoided were identified as belonging to a fixed mindset, while comments made by the principals demonstrating that failure was a learning opportunity were regarded as a growth mindset. Overall, most principals concerned the failures they confronted not as total losses but as learning opportunities to inform their future practices. However, their identification of failures as loss or opportunity varied depending on the principals’ particular school level, domains of educational failure and the outcomes of the failures on students, teachers and other stakeholders.

One-third of school principals identified students’ poor performance in nationwide exams and serious behavioral problems (e.g. injury, fighting) inside the school or class as losses. However, failures pertaining to paperwork and trivial communication problems among stakeholders (e.g. teachers, students, parents), which could be corrected and were not detrimental to the organization, were regarded as unimportant failures and learning opportunities by most principals. This distinction suggests that some principals understood certain failures to be a loss, which reflected the classical failure perspective already rooted in educational organizations. That is, poor performance on high-stakes tests is unwelcomed at schools because of increased accountability put forward by the public and the MoNE (Senler and Sungur, 2009; Yurttas Kumlu and Çobanoğlu, 2019).

For example, principal Selim was an experienced administrator at a medium-performing high school and a former administrator at a prestigious high school which sent students to high-ranking universities across the country. He described principalship with an unusual perspective. When asked what the secret to success in his professional life was and whether failure was a loss, he noted,

I know trading [is the secret to success in this profession]; education is like a business. If you could find a solution to your mistakes, then it is an advantage. If not, that is a loss. Failing is stressing you out. You will be embarrassed [when confronted], there is nothing to do with the mistakes you made in the past. You cannot please everyone.

One of the few female principals in the city’s public schools, principal Derya served at a prestigious preschool located in a high socioeconomic district. She seemed to have little tolerance for failure, noting that she was a little bit burnt out with the demands of families and teachers. Reflecting a fixed mindset, she shared her thoughts:

The failures we suffer are losses, a waste of time. You feel sad unavoidably. There are unnecessary losses, it is really simple, and very tiring. The good part is that you gain experience. But this school is not only run with me, they sometimes attribute mistakes to me. Someone else’s mistakes, they are accusing school administration! Otherwise, failures are experience.
A high school principal from a low achieving vocational school, principal Agah stated that he did not like taking risks but also expressed that he could not do anything if he was afraid of making mistakes. Regarding his perspective on failure as a loss or opportunity, he shared,

It [failing] is sometimes an opportunity. There will be failures, so you’ll see the truth. Failures are very important in finding the right solutions, but this is not valid for teaching. Teaching especially does not accept failure, they are human [students], not broken glasses.

Offering a different perspective, principal Zafer, who was working at an elementary school with a significant amount of refugee students, seemed to adopt a growth mindset perspective toward failures in his profession. When asked whether failure was loss, he shared his thoughts:

Of course not, they [failures] are not losses! I improve them [failures] and repeat my attempt. Whatever I attempt to do is a good thing for me, the result could be a failure, then I accept that it is not working and look for alternative ways. Experience is a really good thing especially in education, you know how to behave the second time [in the potential second failing].

Likewise, as an aspiring and successful elementary school administrator with city-wide school awards for science fairs and community service activities, principal Yılmaz works at a school located in a less affluent part of the city. He found failure instructive and expressed his thoughts as follows:

It [failing] is a learning opportunity and experience. We try not to make mistakes next time. Since we are open to new things, sometimes you can encounter such things, unsuccessful results. It will not discourage us. It should not discourage us. Next time, you try not to do it, and it becomes an experience.

In brief, most principals agreed that failing was an experience that would contribute to their further practices. Yet, certain failures were unwelcomed and labeled as a total loss. This means that correctable and less serious failures were regarded as “good failures,” while unrecoverable ones were “bad failures.” However, the issue of loss or contribution should be related to the lessons learned from a failure rather than its type and consequences (Dweck, 2017).

Adoption of learning from failure (LFF) in management

In accordance with the leadership mindset framework, an LFF approach is identified as a management style in which school principals adopt one of two mindsets (growth or fixed) in handling the failures they encountered at schools. According to the assumptions about each mindset (Dweck, 1986, 2017), leaders with a growth mindset approach are likely to adopt more participative management style, prefer coaching to managing, discuss failures open-mindedly with their colleagues and make use of their failures professionally for the benefit of all organizational members. These practices enable school leaders with a growth mindset to be able to implement an LFF approach in their managerial practices. On the other hand, leaders with a fixed mindset are prone to employ nonparticipative management, favor managing to coaching, refrain from discussing failures, get obsessed with success and fail to draw lessons from their failures. These practices inhibit school leaders with a fixed mindset from performing an LFF approach. Accordingly, this theme is categorized under two codes: leaders with a growth mindset or leaders with a fixed mindset in LFF practice.

Given the interview data, all of the participating principals noted that they found an LFF approach useful and tried to implement it in their schools. Yet, when it came to the question of how they achieved this step by step, few of them could give deliberate strategies that were beneficial in making LFF effective. Some of strategies shared by the teachers were weekly or monthly official meetings, coffee hours, an open-door policy for all stakeholders, opinion
surveys for teachers and parents, brainstorming the issues with vice principals and teachers and lunch meetings with teachers out of school. The application of these strategies appeared to be mostly dependent on personal efforts from the principals rather than an organizational mission put forth by the MoNE. In addition, it is hard to say that selected principals professionally and purposefully focused on an LFF approach, but the findings suggest that they tried to do their best within the space of their limited autonomy.

Principal Tarkan worked at a high-achieving high school and boasted about his students' nationwide success in the university entrance examination. In relation to the practices that he followed to implement an LFF approach in his school, he did not share distinctive practices but expressed that he warned teachers not to repeat their failures and looked for ways to correct failures in order to protect the image of the school. This indicates that the school's institutional image was connected to its success in national exams and was an important priority while practicing LFF. Furthermore, making an analogy between the LFF process and driving a car, he commented,

> Sometimes, you need to be able to realize the course of events that you may not have anticipated [the potential outcome]. This is learning from failure. Also, do you drive and use navigation? When you take a wrong path, it [the navigation system] says: the route is recalculated. The leader, school principal is the one who says, the route is recalculated!

As an experienced and self-confident administrator from a middle school with a population of around 1,000 students, principal Atilla thought that he was a hardworking and skillful administrator. In relation to his dissatisfaction with the failures encountered and solutions generated at his school, he stated that principals had limited resources (e.g. time, money, staff) but great responsibility; therefore, they could not spend time addressing every failure. In response to his strategy in implementing an LFF approach effectively, he did not share a well-established policy. He stated,

> You cannot correct a failure alone! There are teachers, vice principals, and parents. Through mutual exchange of ideas, we solve problems. As a principal for almost 20 years, I have worked at every school level [elementary, middle and high school] and problems differ by school type. Yet, you become the main responsible person for every failure at the end of day!

Displaying a fixed mindset in the LFF process, principal Can from a middle school stated that he was open to his teachers’ and vice principal’s suggestions in solving problems, yet associated his success (which he defined as correcting any failure that he encountered) with his hard work and stubbornness. In response to his strategy in the LFF process, he said, “I am very stubborn in handling failures. Until I solve it, that problem will not get out of my head.”

Reflecting a growth mindset in the LFF process, principal Mert expressed that he was capable of handling failures, thanks to his 33 years of professional experience which included teaching and principaship. He shared his thoughts:

> To learn from failures, first of all, as a principal you should accept your mistakes. Thus, you can brainstorm [for solving]. At the beginning, you will brainstorm on your own, then share it with your team [vice principals, teacher representatives]. Without a mindful team, it is impossible to move forward. They will trust you, love you. Your friends will believe that their principal has a high commitment and uses his best endeavour. Then, you can solve all your problems.

One of the few female administrators in the city schools, principal Rahime believes in a participative management approach at her preschool, attributes her success to her hard work and collaboration rather than individual intelligence and prefers trying novel things to following the old order. Regarding the application of an LFF approach at her school, she stated,

> I absolutely draw lessons from failure, but do not follow a special strategy. I try to be careful not to repeat it. In addition, at school, our weekly meeting on every Friday is very important for discussing
the issues. Sometimes we have lunch meetings out of school. I administer surveys and have an open-door policy for everyone. We are like friends with teachers here. They can come and share their personal matters.

Overall, the participating principals agreed that implementing an LFF approach contributed to their managerial practices. However, it seems that the individual skills of principals in implementing an LFF approach, the workload of principals, their limited autonomy in decision-making and a lack of institutional policy about the LFF process limited the effective application of LFF at schools.

Discussion

This study has attempted to explore how school principals identify educational failures in school settings and implement an LFF approach in their managerial practices. Utilizing the mindset framework (Dweck, 1986, 2017) through an empirical investigation, this research presented a practical scheme for scholars to understand how an LFF approach could be examined in an educational context.

The findings revealed that educational failures were classified under two main categories as related to learning and instruction and not related to learning and instruction. Overall, the interview data suggest that principals mainly talked about failures that were not related to learning and instruction. The primary examples of failures shared by principals varied according to school level. That is, for a high-achieving high school, falling behind the previous year’s scores in nationwide standardized exams was perceived as a serious problem, while preschool principals expressed their top failures as student accidents or injuries and conflicts among parents, teachers and principals. This indicates that the organizational missions of schools affected the types of failures that principals considered most important. The rules and regulations put forward by the MoNE might influence how the principals identify the importance of failures and respond to them, leading principals to adopt a personal approach in their management practices. This supports the claim that organizational policies, structures and procedures can dishearten people from identifying failures and taking precautions against them (Lee et al., 2004). In addition, this finding also validates the assumptions that educational organizations are not learning oriented and thereby are far away from being learning organizations because of their heavy bureaucracy and traditional management perspectives (Field, 2019; Fullan, 1995). Last, domains of different failures by school levels suggest that principals are challenged with balancing the demands and expectations of multiple school constituents such as bureaucratic and centralized education system, increased quasi-market context and varying societal demands. Each of the respective components assigns various roles to school principals; consequently, school administrators confront a mixture of roles, contexts and leadership challenges (Goldrig and Greenfield, 2002).

Regarding the classification of failure as loss or opportunity, most of the participants overall framed failure as a valuable learning opportunity for their future practices. Yet, “bad failures” which were irrecoverable were considered to be losses, while “good failures” which were easily recoverable and less serious were regarded as learning opportunities. This distinction reflects the classical failure-avoidance perspective rooted in education (Clifford, 1984; Lottero-Perdue and Parry, 2017; Tawfik et al., 2015), while every single failure, either big or small, involves a vast amount of knowledge if carefully observed and intelligently handled. The interpretation of failure as loss or opportunity cannot be only explained with individual perceptions but also national culture because a nation’s dominant culture reflected in its social norms guides common perspectives and behaviors (Zou et al., 2009). In societies with tight cultures, people face strong social norms and low tolerance for failure or risk-taking; however, in societies with loose cultures, individuals tend to try unexpected routes and deviate from prescribed plans (Triandis, 1989). As a result, principals’ understanding of failing can be shaped by the mainstream assumptions, values and norms observable at schools and in the country.
The findings also revealed that principals who were more experienced in administration, were more knowledgeable and were open to professional development appeared to embrace a growth mindset more than principals who were not. Such principals appeared self-confident and critical of their failures and management practices. As emphasized by Cannon and Edmondson (2005), being talented in managing individuals, having a spirit of inquiry and understanding the scientific method enabled individuals to adopt a more LFF perspective. As a result, we can claim that despite the influence of higher administrative dynamics on principals’ orientations toward LFF, through role modeling (Bandura, 1986), educational leaders with their mindset or pattern of behavior are likely to induce a state of focus in teacher behavior, either promotion focused (risk-taking) or prevention focused (avoidance of risks) (Higgins, 1997; Wu et al., 2008), leading to creation of a particular school culture which either promote- or avoid-LFF approach.

Conclusion, limitations and recommendations
Educational systems have difficulty in creating sustainable and successful outcomes as envisioned, which can increase the dissatisfaction of stakeholders. To remedy this, a greater amount of capital and human resources is repeatedly allocated to achieve the desirable success. However, perceiving failure as a learning opportunity may also contribute to this repeating cycle of attempts by helping people learn from their failures. In brief, to make schools learning organizations that utilize knowledge resources for their development, an LFF approach offers important insights for scholars, practitioners and policymakers.

Limitations regarding this study are acknowledged. The interview data represent the perspectives of selected principals working at schools in one city in Turkey, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, because an LFF approach encompasses not only school principals but also a number of other organizational members including teachers and senior managers in the education system, the perspectives of school principals reported in this study may not be shared by the rest of the stakeholders. In that sense, the findings should be interpreted with caution and further studies should be conducted with teachers and senior administrative officials to explore LFF topic in diverse contexts.

References


Hess, F.M. (2010), The Same Thing Over and Over, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.


Morgan, C.L. (1894), An Introduction to Comparative Psychology, Adamant Media Corporation, Boston, MA.


About the author
Omer Caliskan is assistant professor in the Department of Educational Sciences at Yozgat Bozok University, Turkey. His research interests include educational change, social justice leadership, higher education and educational policy. Omer Caliskan can be contacted at: ocaliskanmail@gmail.com

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com