

THE CUTTING EDGE

Risk Management and At-Risk Students: Pernicious Fantasies of Educator Omnipotence

by Gary K. Clabaugh

For tens of thousands of years human beings relied on oracles, prophets, medicine men, and resignation to try to manage unknown risks. Then, in the transformative 200-year period from the mid-17th through the mid-19th centuries, a series of brilliant insights created groundbreaking tools for rational risk taking.¹ Discoveries such as the theory of probability, the law of large numbers, the structure of the normal distribution, standard deviation, and Bayes's theorem transformed our understanding of risk. For the first time in human history, possibilities and dangers could be logically analyzed and managed.²

In modern times most serious endeavors—medical research, engineering, investment management, economics, space flight, and planning for war—use such tools.³ But more than a quarter of a millennium after the new paradigm of rational risk management was invented, school policy is still largely a matter of guessing, wishful thinking, and wistful longing.

Children Placed at Risk: Promises Unlimited

Consider the contemporary discourse about youngsters “placed at risk” of school failure.⁴ Then ask yourself if this conversation resembles contemporary analytic decision-making in, say, the insurance industry. Clearly, there is little resemblance.

Realistically, a forest of evidence discloses that innumerable factors, both in school and out, place youngsters “at risk” of school failure. Importantly, most of these causes are far beyond any educator's grasp. Hence, the evidence overwhelmingly favors limiting our expectations for schooling. Nevertheless, the regnant educational discourse is limitless in its promises. Consider the “No Child Left Behind” Act. What promise could be more boundless (or irresponsible) than that?

Let's put this silliness aside for a moment and ask what really is necessary for school success. The requisite conditions occur in four clusters.

First, there are necessary personal conditions. Such matters as developmental disabilities, emotional or physical illness, malnutrition, unmet psychosocial needs, inadequate self-esteem, debilitating anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and indifference or hostility toward schooling can all take a fatal toll on student achievement. Crucially, none of them are under educator control.

Second, there are necessary social conditions. Poverty, unaffordable health care, juvenile gang activity, broken homes, unhelpful mass media messages, and abusive, neglectful, or inept parenting can all place a child at risk of school failure. These too are totally beyond any educator's control.

Also, necessary school conditions must pertain if learning is to occur. School mismanagement, a badly crafted curriculum, overcrowding, dilapidated classrooms, inadequate or unsuitable instructional materials, rampant bullying or other disruptive behavior—every one of those can cripple learning. Once again, teachers have little say here. School administrators do, but even they are limited by money constraints and the frequent absence of public support.

Finally, if children are not to be placed at risk, the necessary instructional conditions must be in effect. Lessons must be well planned and expertly implemented. Classroom management also must be effective. In addition, within practical limits, individual differences have to be accommodated. (In this area, finally, teachers have considerable control.)

Crucially, it takes only one unmet necessary condition in any of those four clusters of necessary conditions to place a child at risk of failure. Such are the intimidating odds that educators face daily. Yet even in the face of this humbling and inhospitable reality, foolish true believers as well as pedagogical snake oil salesmen insist that, given the right attitudes, skills, and perseverance, schooling practices alone can prevail. Foolish school administrators, dreamy professors of education, worried parents, and unwise politicians all participate in this irrational celebration of the impossible.

True Believers, Bogus Revolutionaries, and Hucksters

Given rational risk management's nearly universal acceptance in other serious endeavors, we should ask: What is going on here? Why are these plainly daffy flights of fancy so persistent in education?

True Believers. To begin with, these castles in the sky plainly serve those who embrace them. The fantasies imbue the otherwise opaque and unpromising world of pedagogical true believers with clarity and hope, for instance—even if they serve no one else, and school kids least of all.

We all have compensating personal fantasies of one sort or another. But normal people keep a lid on them. Our true believers in pedagogical omnipotence exercise no such self-control. They utterly give themselves over to their fantasies.

That is when the damage begins. This harm has its deepest origin in the true believer's objectification of the "other." For them, all others are mere actors in a highly personal fantasy drama. Perceived by the true believer as having no minds or wills of their own, all others exist solely to play a role, whether or not it fits their actual reality. Moreover, our true believers cling to their delusions even when the others obstinately refuse to play along.⁵

Consider the true-believing teacher educators who, in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence, promote the fantasy of pedagogical omnipotence. Day after day, these self-deluded dons fit novices with counterfeit superhero capes and urge them to rush to every kid's rescue. It takes awhile for the propagandized novices, particularly those who teach in inner city or poor rural classrooms, to recognize the utter folly of what they have been taught. In the interim much damage is done. Day after day false optimism and unrealistic choices are repaid with indifference, contempt, hostility, and sabotage. Day after day real opportunities for rational decision-making are sacrificed. Day after day teachers and conscientious students suffer.

Bogus Revolutionaries. Meanwhile, back in the ivory tower, another dreamy branch of the education professoriate preaches a competing, though equally unfeasible, delusion. In place of wistful optimism, these petit bourgeois Bolsheviks urge revolutionary fantasies on their befuddled charges. Rather than provide aspiring teachers with analytic tools that help them make sense of the world of the public schools, these faculty-club guerrilla fighters "actively engage them in revolutionary transformation." Rather than provide tools for risk management, they prattle on about the despotism of the marketplace, the exploitation of workers by capitalists, and the distribution of the conditions of production. And should any student dare suggest that Marx is defunct because communism failed so utterly, they are prone to reply with a personal attack—that argument is "puerile," or "too silly even to debate."⁶

Here again, as with the true believers in pedagogical omnipotence, reality gives way to pernicious dreaming. Do these Marxist education professors see their students, not to mention the youngsters they aspire to teach, as actual human beings? Or are these others, once again, mere *dramatis personae* without personal identities or consciousness who exist solely to serve the true believers' fantasies? As Marx himself observed, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."⁽⁷⁾ In other words, only the revolutionary professoriate sees things clearly; the broad mass's perceptions are mere social delusions.

Hucksters. Further complicating the situation, numerous con men and women exploit schooling's all-permeating irrationality. Mendacious

school administrators employ phony optimism to shift blame for student failures to teachers. Devious professors of education preach false optimism to maintain program enrollment or create popularity. Two-faced parents take refuge in fantasies of educator “omnipotence” to escape personal responsibility for their children’s scholastic difficulties. Machiavellian politicians embrace it to escape responsibility for the educational consequences of their poor public administration. Taken together, this blend of folly and deceit makes rational risk management in schooling nearly impossible.

Many educators censor their own misgivings about these and similar fantasies of educator omnipotence. Troubled by self-doubt, worried that they will be perceived as heartless or excusing their own incompetence, they rarely challenge the reigning false hopefulness. Hence, the charlatans are seldom challenged.

What Should Be Done?

There are obvious difficulties in persuading people to accept the cold realities of a true risk-management approach to schooling. Regardless, when the necessary personal, social, school, and instructional conditions fail to line up, school failure is probable, and in far too many cases there is little or nothing that educators can do about it.

In the end it comes down to probability and thus, to rational versus irrational decision-making. Just as a capable military commander reluctantly recognizes the inevitability of acceptable losses and medical professionals sadly recognize that not all their patients are going to get well, so responsible educators and effective government officials both must accept the laws of probability regarding academic failure—particularly when apportioning limited resources. The reigning U.S. ideology of limitless educator effectiveness sacrifices far too many children who might learn if vital resources weren’t diverted to impossible causes.

Notes

1. Peter L. Bernstein. *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), 1–6.

2. Ibid.

3. Op. cit., 2.

4. Note that this language presupposes that youngsters’ own choices are irrelevant to their being “at risk.”

5. I derived this general idea from *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2004), 26–28.

6. This is an actual response to a similar question asked of the well-known neo-Marxist education professor Peter McLaren. “Interview with Peter McLaren (Part II).” *Professing Education*, December 2003, Vol. 2, No. 2.

7. Quoted by McLaren, op. cit.