



Educators Who Turned to Politics in Oklahoma in 2018

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand, through the lens of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), factors that elected educators have experienced that have influenced their ability and their motivation to affect increased funding for education in the State of Oklahoma. The epistemological perspective guiding this study was constructivism. This study is a qualitative case study so its purpose is to understand factors that influence Legislator decision-making and how those decisions and behaviors align with their stated goals for funding education. A case study is appropriate for this study because it allowed for this specific issue to be studied in its context. This study is important for two reasons: the small amount of research in this particular area and the long-standing problem with educational funding in Oklahoma. The population for this study was Oklahoma Legislators who serve on the House and Senate Common Education Committees which is comprised of a total of twenty-eight individuals. Surveys, interviews, and observations were used in this study to investigate the legislators' decision-making processes. The study focused on decisions made by politicians who were once educators, elected to office in 2018 or afterwards, and who are now serving on the committee(s) which make the proposals concerning education. Given the small number of potential participants (11 members) in the population, all members were emailed the survey. The sample was those who chose to participate. Those who wished to participate in the interview were allowed to do so by contacting the researcher. A qualitative research commands the use of abundant data resources so observations, surveys, and interviews were administered to investigate the legislators' decision-making processes. Coding was used to analyze the data because it explained phenomena that unexpectedly appeared while conducting observations, surveys, and interviews. The SCCT considered how self-efficacy, outcomes, and goals impacted educational funding since 2018. Results of this study could show understanding in relation to the many decisions taken to fund K-12 public education.

Keywords: Teacher Walkout, Funding Formula, Leadership, Politics, Relationships, and Finance.

1 Introduction

Building upon national pressure to make educational changes in the 1980's, Oklahoma passed House Bill 1017, also known as the Education Reform Act of 1990, which increased taxes with the intent to add \$250 million dollars into public schools. In this bill, the Oklahoma Legislature established new standards in student performance, class size, and teacher evaluations. Even though the Legislature had good intent, many of these mandates in the 1990 bill were gradually repealed over the years because they could not be fully funded. Since the 1990 reform act, educational research has focused on the many possible causes for these unfunded mandates, especially the lack of funding overall. The Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) completed a study in 1998 of educational progress since House Bill 1017 and reported that the Legislature could not fund the requirements established by 1017, even with many of the mandate repeals that were put into effect. The OSDE's report even called the funding problem a "crisis."

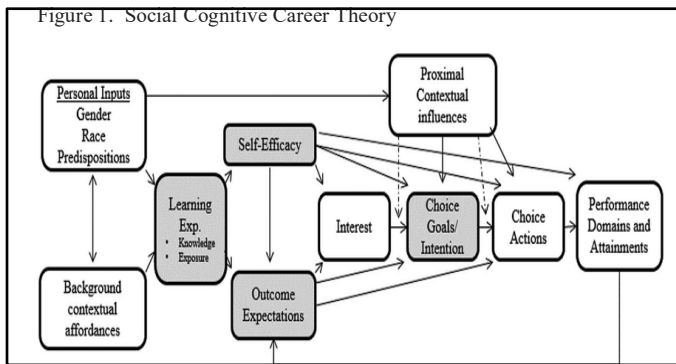
Legislators in state governments are elected by the people to represent them in decision making to enhance government institutions, such as public education, using limited resources (Mezey, 2008). However, despite an outcry from their constituencies, legislative actions toward K-12 public education in Oklahoma have had a long history of funding inadequacies. In response, educators, tired of experiencing repeated funding shortages, made their "voices" heard through a teacher walkout in 2018, which led many educators to run for office. Research shows that despite an increase of educators elected to legislative positions, funding for education in Oklahoma continues to fall well below educator expectations/needs, indicating that the goals of these elected educators remain unsatisfied (Baekgaard, et. al., 2017).

The reason that stated funding goals have not been reached may be explained by factors that these educators experienced once they moved into governmental leadership positions. For example, these educators may have stepped into an environment that undermines or challenges the decisions that they had intended to make in support of funding for educa-

tion in ways they had not expected. Specifically, to execute bold influence in decision-making, it is logical to assume that a strong sense of self-efficacy combined with favorable outcome expectations would be needed to sustain and motivate goal attainment efforts (Bandura, 1986, 2001). When self-efficacy is lacking or when outcome expectations are diminished, it is likely that persistence to goal attainment would suffer, limiting the influence of these elected educators on funding decisions.

2 Methods

Constructivism is the epistemological perspective directing this case study. Qualitative research uses a theory to guide the study, and this research will use the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) developed by Albert Bandura. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) has utility for explaining findings from this study because it states that a combination of self-imposed influences and externally imposed influences combine to influence action/decision making. The population was Oklahoma Legislators who were previous educators and now serve on the House and Senate Common Education Committees, which total eleven potential individuals. Surveys, interviews, and observations were used in this study to investigate the legislators' decision-making processes. This research allowed for the individuals to take part in the survey and interview at their choice; however, prior personal contact was made with all individuals to encourage them to take part in the survey which was sent to their work email. Coding was used to analyze the data because it can explain phenomena that unexpectedly appear while conducting observations, surveys, and interviews.



3 Results

Data collected for this study was observations, interviews, and a survey. Observations from twelve combined meetings of the House and Senate Common Education Committees showed they are professional and conduct their meetings following a certain protocol, but the atmosphere of the meetings are very different in that the House is more relaxed while the Senate is much more formal and some question/answer periods were slightly contentious with much many more questions and much more discussion and debate. This observation was supported in the interviews as the Senate Minority reported that they did not feel included in bill authorship. The House Minority did mention supermajority but did not express the same feelings of exclusion that the Senate members did.

The interviews showed common words and themes that emerged from the interviews were as follows: teacher walkout, leadership, relationships, politics, money, supermajority, and funding formula; support for education; teacher retention and recruitment; classroom discipline; and the surprising themes of religion and vouchers.

The Appraisal Inventory Survey showed that all participants felt confident about their ability to do the job, but the primary differentiation is how they could lead or effect change on their perspective committees. The survey revealed that the Minority had more confidence over the Majority because of their numbers in the House and Senate.

3.1 Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Oklahoma Common Education Members

- (1) What motivated you to run for this position?
- (2) What are your stated goals for holding this position?
- (3) What opportunities have you experienced that have supported you in meeting these goals?
- (4) What challenges have you experienced that have not supported the meeting of these goals?
- (5) Please explain your confidence level, at this time, for meeting your stated goals in this position.
- (6) From your perception, what are the greatest needs of education in Oklahoma?
- (7) How does the legislature work to meet those needs?
- (8) What factors influence the legislature's ability to meet educational needs in Oklahoma?
- (9) What are the legislature's greatest strengths in supporting educational success in Oklahoma?
- (10) What are the legislature's greatest challenges in supporting educational success in Oklahoma?
- (11) What suggestions/changes do you have for supporting education in the State?
- (12) Is there anything else you would like to add?

Ten interviews were completed. After the interviews, one participant had reservations so that data was not included. Nine interviews were analyzed for coding. Six interviews were done in person while the other three were done by Zoom, phone, and through email. Common words and themes that emerged from the interviews were as follows: teacher walkout, relationships, leadership, politics, money, supermajority, and funding formula; support for education; teacher retention and recruitment; and vouchers.

3.2 Survey Questions

Appraisal Inventory Survey Questions for Oklahoma Common Education Members

- 1 Cannot Do
- 2 Possibly Can Do
- 3 Can Do
- 4 Moderately Can Do
- 5 Highly Certain Can Do

- (1) I am confident I can state my own political opinions openly even in hostile settings.
- (2) I can build and maintain relationships with members on my committee.
- (3) I can play a decisive role in decisions made on my committee.
- (4) I feel I have enough experience to be knowledgeable to make decisions on my committee.
- (5) I believe my work environment encourages collaboration.
- (6) I am confident that I can effect change (or play a leadership role) on my committee.
- (7) I believe I can accomplish professional goals I have established while serving on my committee.

Surveys provide rich data because they measure an individual's self-efficacy. Caprara, et al., (2009) asserted that self-efficacy beliefs, especially in politics, are founded in "specific group-based identities and ideologies" whereby membership in such a group "implies different experiences and life conditions which may affect individual political self-efficacy" (p. 1004). The Appraisal Inventory Survey showed that all participants felt confident about their ability to do the job, but the primary differentiation is how they could lead or effect change on their perspective committees. The survey revealed that the Minority had more confidence over the Majority because of their numbers in the House and Senate.

Figure 2 Majority's Responses to Survey Questions

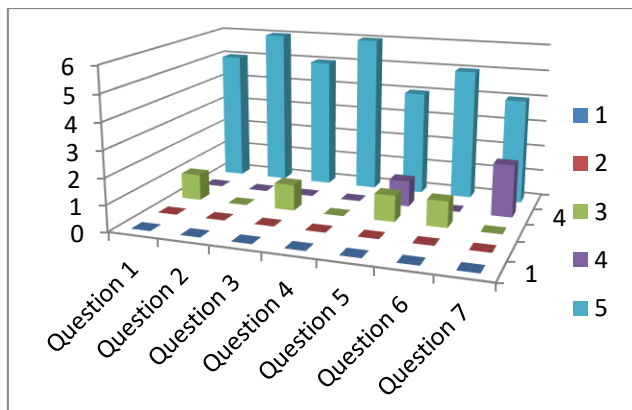
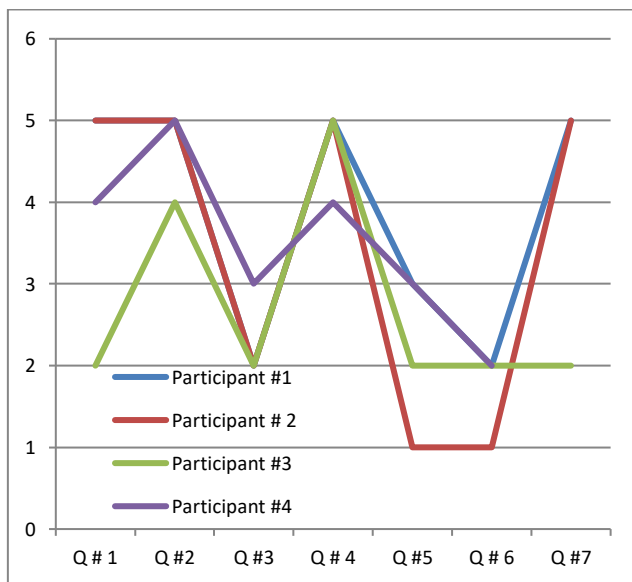


Figure 3 Minority's Responses to Survey Questions



The SCCT suggests that external factors, such as an individual's work environment, may affect an individual's self-perceptions and efficacy to make favorable decisions. Internal factors such as personal beliefs and self-perception of abilities to perform the requirements of the job also influence behaviors (Swanson & Fouad, 2014).

4 Findings to Research Questions

- What factors have influenced the decision-making of these newly elected as they have sought to increase funding for education in the State of Oklahoma on their education? a. What factors are external (work environment)? (self-efficacy) b. What factors are internal (beliefs and/or perception of abilities)? (self-efficacy)
- What goals did they claim during their election and what goals do they currently have while serving on the Education Committee? (goals)
- Are there discrepancies between those goals and what they have currently? (outcome expectations)

- How does the Social Cognitive Career Theory explain these findings? Through the lens of Bandura's Social Cognitive Career Theory, participants were studied using an analysis of external and internal factors.

The observations show that the SCCT's learning experiences are invaluable to the participants. They recognize that not everyone knows as much as they do about education and legislation moves slowly. One participant said, "We have a lot of people (legislators) that truly don't understand education." And the same participant stated, "Legislation moves through the process at a slow pace where many people get eyes and ideas on it." During the committee meetings, it was evident that legislators were informed because of their questions about a bill. They were very insightful and mindful of teachers, students, parents, and administrators' needs as well as the possible expectations the bill might place on schools.

The interviews reveal that their learning experiences significantly impacted their self-efficacy because they are caring individuals. One participant shared, "Sometimes people think we don't care about education. That is so untrue. We do care. And have a heart for it. We do have more educators as legislators now than what we've had in a long time." These participants are motivated to meet their goals of helping education in any way possible whether it's through supporting bills in committee or creating them. They set goals to meet the best possible outcomes possible.

The surveys establish that the participants were confident in their self-efficacy despite external and internal factors. Although their bills might not be placed on an agenda or be passed out of committee, these former educators were highly motivated to get their bills heard in the next year. They seemed determined to do what their districts wanted, especially when it came to education. One participant stated, "I just decided I needed a bigger microphone" so that's why they ran for office on the education platform.

5 Limitations

This study is not without limitations because I am not a politician and do not have experience in the research, creation, and presenting of a bill. I would like to have done a follow up interview toward the end of the session to ask legislators if their bills passed the House and Senate and what the process was to do so. When legislators present bills in committee or on their perspective Floors, sometimes members ask that "title be stricken" or that amendments be made to the bill. All of the members who were asked to do these things agreed, and I am curious whether that helped their bill get passed on their Floors. To add an amendment means that other members have concerns about the bill's language or funding, and they would like the author to look at those specific areas. Although the Legislature's website shows the phases a bill goes through, it does not have the ability to explain all the conversations that take place in order to get that bill to that specific place. The informal external conversations that take place influence this process. Leadership and funding have a significant impact on bills. After conducting the research, my assumptions are that many individuals are involved in that process and much research has to be done on financing the bill, pleasing committee members and leadership's concerns to get the final approval for it to move forward.

6 Conclusions

Political context and money are significant conclusions that emerged from my findings. The first conclusion is it makes a difference what party you're in and if the party is in power. The Majority party means your bill is much more likely to be heard and that it's easier for you to create relationships since your party is in power. Those in leadership are in the political majority so they are more likely to support bills from their own members. An example of this is legislators do not have to be present to vote on their perspective Floors. The question arises, "How can you convince people to accept your bill if they're not on the Floor?" This could perpetuate a stalemate because people don't have to listen. There is

a possible gap between what they think they can do and what they actually can do. Party and leadership play a significant role and simply put relationships matter.

Funding is a significant issue. They all know it takes money but the conclusion is they don't know exact numbers on how much it takes to fund something. The Funding Formula is a problem that it needs to be addressed but no one has solutions. If a legislator does propose changing the Formula, most others balk in response. Changes to the Formula would most likely come from those who are at the end of their term. Despite the velocity of addressing the Funding Formula, it was addressed in last year's session.

During the 2021 Legislative Session, House Bill 2078 addressed an area of the Funding Formula in that it allowed schools to modify the calculation of state aid funding, allowing for schools to carry over more money for the next school year. Although the bill received enough votes to pass, some Majority party members in the both the House and Senate voted against the bill. Both sides claimed that the bill would encourage schools to not spend money on hiring teachers and improving curriculum so they could have a larger carry over. Much debate occurred and the bill was signed into law by the governor effective for the 2022-23 school year.

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