



FAILURE IS THE NEW SUCCESS

Intentional Failure Experiences in Physical Education

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Further Information
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"I was disappointed but I wanted to try again and try harder"

Introduction

For sometime, failure has intrigued me in boys' learning. Boys are well known as risk-takers and as active and adventurous learners. I saw in the action research theme of adaptability the perfect opportunity to explore failure in the PE context. An abundance of literature supported my thinking on this topic, but none more so than Professor Jacqueline Raworth (2014) of Waikato University in New Zealand who is openly critical on NZ's education system and its inability to allow for failure to be experienced. I chose my group of Year 7 (11 and 12 year-olds) to be participants in my research to investigate, using qualitative research techniques, how failure impacted on them in their learning in the PE context.

The Research Question

How might intentional failure experiences in Physical Education affect risk-taking in Year 7 boys?

Research Context and Participants

Lindisfarne College is a Presbyterian school of 500 boys in Hawkes Bay on the east coast of the North Island of New Zealand. Opened in 1953, its ethos is to develop young men of outstanding character. The students in my project came from my regular Physical Education class. They were all invited to participate; 18 became involved following parental approval. The remainder of the class, however, continued to participate in the activities designed for failure as they were embedded within usual class activities.

The Research Action

I needed to design and implement activities—the intentional failure experiences (IFE's)—without the students knowing they were occurring. This was necessary to ensure authentic and genuine data were obtained. I wanted to challenge the students in a diverse range of activities in which many would fail. The five activities chosen were:

- A gymnastics/parkour type confidence course
- A frisbee throwing at a target activity
- A team bat and ball game, where failure in the games had an effect on the team
- Baseball/softball batting in a pitching cage.
- A water-based survival activity involving swimming fully dressed, undressing and using clothing as a buoyancy aid.

These activities aligned with the programme normally followed in PE classes for this level and so the IFE's were embedded within the usual lesson process. This element of surprise was helped by having all members of the class involved.



"Failing encourages you to want to do better"

"I would have tried again a hundred times because it was fun"

Data Collection and Analysis

Inevitably, the real content of my data was going to be in the reactions and responses of the students following IFE's. The following data collection techniques were used:

1. Questionnaires
2. Interviews, (both individual and group focussed)
3. Observations
4. Field Notes
5. Video and photography

Valuable material was obtained, especially from questionnaires, discussions, observations and video recordings. Once gathered and arranged the following three broad categories developed:

1. Evidence of initial emotional responses to failing: (body language, embarrassment, some criticism and difficulty in accepting others celebrating success.)
2. Evidence suggesting the students were accepting of success: (An overwhelming desire to retry failed attempts, a strong desire to overcome initial emotions of failing, a refocus on technique following failure.)
3. Evidence of adaptable behaviours and habits: (Happy with best efforts, a reflection period prior to retrying, leaders devising of strategies following a team/group failing, sense of satisfaction once failing is overcome with success.)

Key Findings and Discussion

- An outcome that pleased me most was that the boys were actually fine with failure. They enjoyed the opportunity to retry failed attempts to improve.
- The boys proved to be resilient in that they chose to continue trying until success was achieved and performance levels met their own personal expectations.
- Importantly the boys proved to be adaptable. Devising strategies to improve, wanting to focus on technique to get better are evidence of this.
- The boys were mostly supportive of peers who failed, especially when the team or group was eliminated or put-out.

Conclusions

My initial feelings are that this study has just "scratched-the-surface" on this topic and there is enormous room to investigate risk-taking more, see how boys' approach to failure changes when more is at stake and the pressure to perform is greater, or if their attempt at an activity was a one-off, there are no second attempts. The boys clearly had failure reinforced to them as a positive learning experience and were not made to think of it as a debilitating experience. *Experiential learning* is a very powerful medium for learning in PE. I am a very strong believer in it and this project has certainly reinforced this to me.

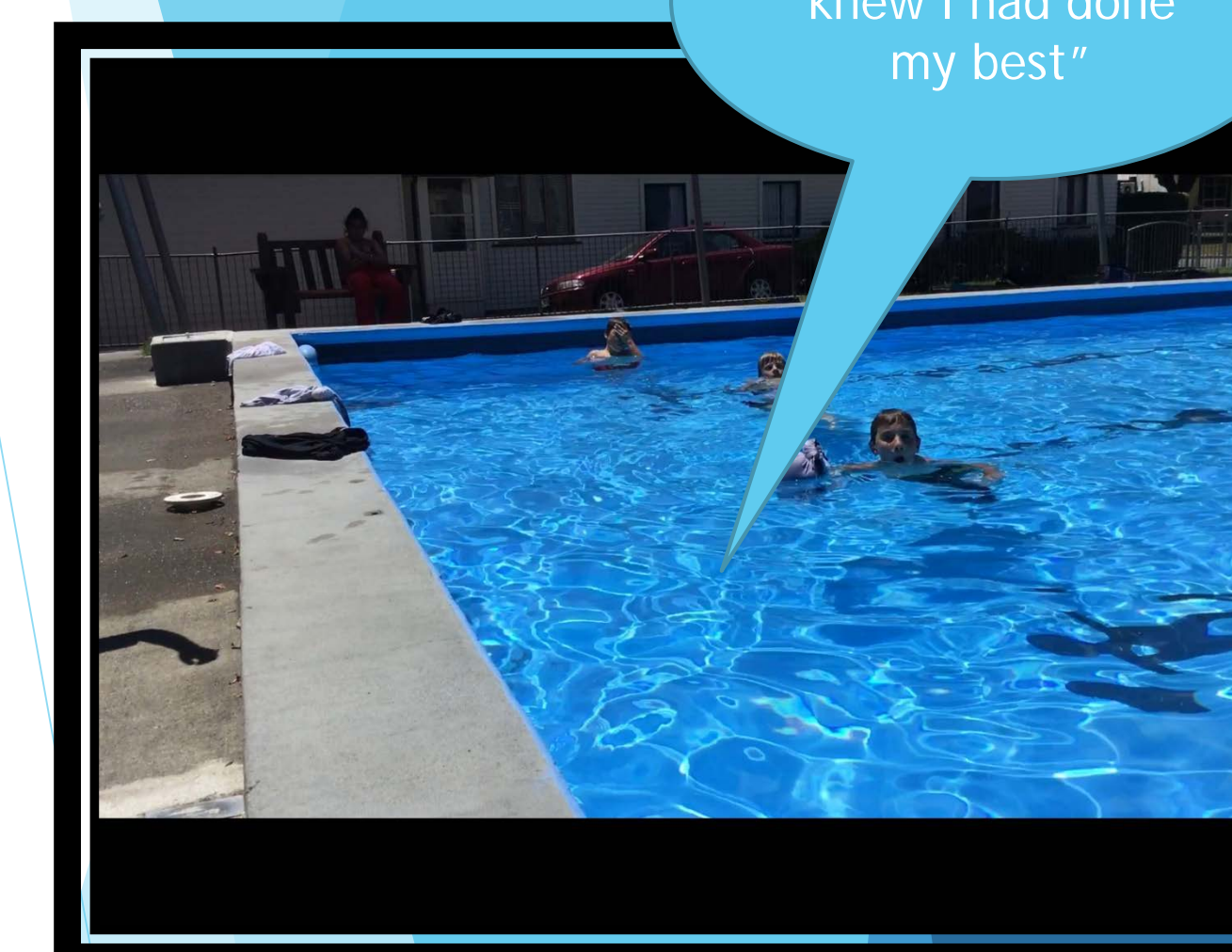
Key Readings

- Bennett, J. (2017). On Campus, Failure is in the Syllabus. *New York Times*, July 2.
- Werinzimmer, L. and McCounughey, J., (2013). *The wisdom of failure: How to learn the tough lessons without paying the price*. USA: Jossey-Bass.
- Payten P. (2016) Failure....We Need More of it! *Bay Buzz*, March/April, 28, 52-53.

"I'm disappointed but I wasn't the only one to get the team out"



"It's OK because I knew I had done my best"



"I want to improve my technique and try again"

