

HOW REFLECTING ON MANAGED FAILED EXPERIENCES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION  
AFFECTS

RISK-TAKING IN YEAR 7 BOYS

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to provide Year 7 boys with opportunities to respond to challenging situations in Physical Education class and allow them to reflect on situations when they felt they had not met the standards set for themselves. The project looked to see if the boys could respond in a positive way and demonstrate risk-taking skills to try again, despite the most recent failure.

My initial prediction was that the boys did not enjoy failing in PE and that this affected their desire to continue and to persevere with tasks that required them to continue retrying failed attempts. It became more evident that the boys were, in fact, much more accepting of failure as evidenced by their willingness to retry failed attempts. There was a considerable range of physical competence and confidence within the class in PE and the boys in the project had all had varying experiences with failure in their lives.

The action for this action research project was to present boys with a series of challenges to help and to encourage the boys in my study to embrace failure, reflective, not to be risk-averse and to dismiss the notion that success is all that matters. It is believed that acceptance of failure must surely help in developing the boys to become robust, resilient, and adaptable learners in any learning environment.

**Introduction**

I saw, in adaptability, a perfect opportunity to explore failure in the Physical Education context. Miriam-Webster (2018) defines failure as an omission of occurrence. Psychologist, Alex Russell, in his book *Drop the Worry Ball* (2012), openly promotes the value of “non-catastrophic” failure for children. I became excited about the prospect of identifying the concept of failing as a learning experience for my research participants in the hope that they could take this idea into their wider lives and beyond.

I am somewhat critical of an education system that does not allow for failure. Unfortunately, this is not how things operate in the “real world”; people do fail and get rejected. They may seek a job and miss out, they might miss selection in a sports team, fail their driver’s licence test, even fail in relationships. Surely a primary role of any education process is to prepare students for this inevitable consequence and to teach them how to be resilient and adaptable. This argument is supported by Raworth (as cited in Paynter, 2006) who notes that success in the workforce is often defined as the ability to overcome adversity. If we encourage boys to embrace failure as a life-learning experience then success and satisfaction will be all the more rewarding.

An abundance of literature was very supportive of my thoughts on this topic. It was with this support that I wanted to encourage and reward failure in a situation where the stakes were not seen to be high and the boys could become comfortable and accepting of failure and the desire to try again. To this end, I created the research question *How does reflection on failed experiences in Physical Education affect risk-taking in Year 7?*

To address the research question, I decided to develop a range of structured physical education (PE) experiences where the majority of the group would need multiple opportunities to succeed. Initially, I spoke to the boys, their home-room teachers, their parents and my colleagues within the PE faculty at my school to gauge their impressions and thoughts. I needed the boys to understand that this project would not see them “crash and burn,” but see how failure allowed them to reflect and try again. All were overwhelmingly supportive and enthused by my ideas. Whilst the boys were aware they were involved in this project and were prepared for the activities, which were embedded into regular PE class time, they were not aware when a Challenge Experience (CE) was upon them. Following each CE, the boys and I reflected on the experience and considered ways to adapt and cope with future experiences.

The danger for me from the outset was assuming too much and avoiding the perception that the boys did not like failure. There was always the likelihood that the boys were, in fact, more comfortable with failure than I gave them credit for. This was a possible project outcome that I had to accept. I considered what might be a problem for me was the worth the students saw in the activities they engaged in and how high the stakes were for them. In the activities that I offered the stakes were not high and failure was possibly seen as less intimidating to them. Further attempts or opportunities for the boys to succeed in a prescribed activity were always available and suggested their preparedness to accept and learn from the failure and to adapt in order to succeed.

## Literature Review

There is an abundance of extremely compelling articles, books, and statements on failure and risk-taking. The prologue by the late renowned NFL coach Bill Walsh (as cited in Walsh & Walsh, 2009), in *The Score will take care of itself – My Philosophy of Leadership*, is entitled, “To succeed, you must Fail.” Walsh states that there is only one thing common to the success of individuals in the highly competitive NFL environment; that is, failure and their ability to overcome it.

A number of high profile learning institutions in the USA have promoted failure as a pathway to success and have even celebrated failure in its students. Notable is the story about Smith College in Massachusetts, reported in the New York Times by Jessica Bennett (2017, July 2), where Rachel Simmons a leadership development specialist and a self-confessed failure at school, now actively encourages failure. To Simmons, failure should be a learning feature not a learning bug. She is critical of educational systems that become overly success and achievement focussed, that have lost sight of the process, and do not develop adaptability or resilience. Interestingly Harvard, Stanford, Princeton and Penn State, all high profile colleges, are now similarly encouraging and promoting the development of skills to learn from failure.

Haimovitz and Dweck (2016) pursued the belief that a very fixed parental mindset of failure can predict their children’s fixed mindset associated to failure. When parents had a very fixed mindset about failure and treated failure as a debilitating learning experience, they unfortunately encouraged a similar mind-set in their sons who became risk-averse and avoided failure experiences.

Weinzimmer and McConoughey’s 2012 book, *“The Wisdom of Failure – How to learn the tough leadership lessons without paying the Price”* provides important insights into understanding the role failure has in our lives. Whilst this book is more directed towards the corporate world of business and company leadership, it does have many inspiring quotes and references that can easily transfer into the educational world. For example, they note:

Real failure doesn’t come from making mistakes, it comes from avoiding errors at all possible costs, from fear to take risks and from the inability to grow. (p. 8)

The authors go on to reflect on how we live in an era of perfectionism that does not allow for failure and where failure is not an option. Our sons are being taught that to make mistakes is bad and that to succeed we need to strive for perfection. As a result, they become overly concerned with goal achievement and much less focussed on process and “how.” A downward spiral is created from the achievement of more and more success. Failure becomes even more unthinkable. When we think of the generation of people these boys will become, I feel this next quote reflects this philosophy perfectly:

Well, my boss used to do everything for us so that we wouldn't fail, so I must do the same thing so my subordinates don't fail. (Weinzimmer & McConoughey, p. 184)

Weinzimmer and McConoughey (2012) go on to say that when the drive for perfectionism becomes too powerful, the desire to succeed is overshadowed by the fear of making mistakes. My belief is that this mindset needs to be dismantled so that students once again feel comfortable failing, knowing that there is a mechanism to grow through failure and that we, as teachers, should teach adaptability from this angle.

Smith and Hendriksen (2016) suggest that intellectual risk-taking, have long been considered an integral component in creativity. This point has a great deal of relevance for my own exploration of risk-taking and failing in a physical education environment because personal creativity, especially amongst children, is hugely important in their games and play. Avoidance of risk-taking in sports and games destroys the creative urge to challenge performance standards, to be adventurous, and seek higher levels of achievement. Boys are frequently recognised as risk-takers. It is one of their learning strengths and despite the fact that they may take risks that are seen as dangerous and ill-considered, risk-taking should not be removed from a boy's learning tool-box. Youngsters' spontaneous play abounds with risks and failures and it is through this experiential learning that they become resilient and adaptable and ultimately successful.

Much of the enjoyment in sports and games is lost when the challenge and adventure components are removed. Boys willing to risk, to challenge themselves, and to be adventurous in physical education surely will continue to be those adaptable students we wish to produce in other aspects of their lives.

I see resilience very closely akin to adaptability and therefore see real value in this statement coming from a very high profile educational figure in New Zealand. Professor Rowarth is

critical of the educational system and its inability to prepare children for the real-life obstacles that will ultimately confront them.

### **Research Context**

Lindisfarne College, a Presbyterian school of 500 boys, is in Hawke's Bay on the east coast of the north island of New Zealand. Opened in 1953, the College population is an equal mix of boarders and dayboys.. The ethos of the school is to develop young men of good character and to recognise that standards are important and should be maintained. The College is known as a "special character school," where Christian values are one of the four important cornerstones of the school and all boys are encouraged to appreciate and "live" the importance of these values. The other three cornerstones are academic excellence, sporting endeavour and cultural participation.

The participants chosen for my action research were Year 7 boys (ages 11-12) from my Physical Education class. There were 18 of the class of 22 who actively participated in the programme as they were the ones from whom I received parental approval. The remainder of the class for whom I did not receive approval still experienced the activities and were fully involved in all lessons, but data were not collected from them. Relationships between me and the students, and also between the students themselves, were well established by the time the research project began and PE was always eagerly anticipated by them.

Approval from parents was gained by email, as well as a letter to all of the parents of the boys seeking their permission for the boys to be involved. It was made very clear that anonymity would be respected at all times in the reporting of the research.

### **The Action**

I invited all of the 22 members of the Year 7 class I saw three times each week for Physical Education to participate in my study that ran from September through November. I used regular lessons and activities for our PE curriculum, however, the boys were not aware when we would have our reflection moments. Whilst the boys presented with many different abilities, I was hoping that the reflection moments allowed all of them to try again.

Diversity and variety within the activities to be used as CEs were seen as important. I wanted the boys to be extended in a range of ways and so the activities I developed were as follows:

- A gymnastics/parkour type confidence course where participants tried to beat a pre-established personal target time.
- 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. Participants had to attempt to hit 6 pitches.
- A water-based survival activity involving swimming fully dressed, undressing, and using clothing as a buoyancy aid.

All of these activities aligned with the programme normally followed in PE classes for this level and so the CEs were embedded within the usual lesson process. It was not until group meetings/discussions after, that boys realized they had completed an CE. This “element of surprise” was helped by all members of the class participating and not just those on the research programme.

Activities were videoed so that responses and actions of students could be observed. This was often done by a colleague. I could then re-visit the reflections that the boys and I had for each experience.

### **Data Collection**

Following the model proposed by Stringer (2014) of “Look, Think, Act”(p. 99), it was always my intention to collect qualitative data. The reactions and responses of my participants were where the real content of my data would undoubtedly be and so I chose the following data gathering techniques:

Questionnaires: These were used frequently and were the most productive source of information.

Interviews : Both individual and group were used, although the group focussed were more useful.

Observations: Formal and informal, and also the observations of a colleague were certainly useful.

Field Notes: Notes taken throughout the project proved useful.

Video and photography: All CEs were videoed and reviewed.

To ensure authenticity of the activities, I had to be quite discrete as to when the boys were completing a CE. I did not want their actions/behaviours or performances to be influenced by their knowledge that a CE was actually taking place. In the interviews/discussions, during the

reflection period, I found their oral responses to be more genuine and sincere. An example of this was:

“Ah, I didn’t even know we were doing one of those failure things.”

### **Data Analysis**

It was my plan to have the boys find some activities challenging and then reinforce to them that failure needs to be acceptable and that it is through failing and adversity that we become more resilient and adaptable. Interestingly, their overwhelming desire to retry failed attempts suggested to me that they were, in fact, using strategies discovered during the reflection period. Three conclusions emerged from the sorting and coding of the data.

#### **Evidence of Initial Emotional Responses to Failure**

The first conclusion from my data led me to understand that the boys had emotional reactions to their failure of reaching standards for the challenge experiences. Negative body language (head dropped down, shoulders slumped, looks of disgust) were common initial reactions. Feelings of embarrassment emerged as well as shared by one boy who “felt like I did it all wrong.” At times, some boys struggled with others’ success and began to doubt their own levels of confidence in the activities.

Occasionally, criticism from others, constructive or otherwise, sometimes leading to divisive situations within team, as well as, accepting others’ success, would impede the reflective moments.

#### **Evidence Suggesting They are Accepting of Failure**

This theme was to me quite critical as it suggested where the students’ mind-set towards failing sat. There was an overwhelming desire to try again and, in some cases, as necessary to reach success. The boys were inspired by the opportunities to reflect and try again as mentioned by more than one boy: “Failing encourages you to want to do better”; “So I know what to work on”; and, “You learn from your mistakes.”

It was interesting to note that the more confident and competent students in the group sought a retry as soon as possible and those with less confidence and proficiency liked to wait, take a chance to reflect, and discuss with peers before a retry. Regardless, all boys did participate in re-tries. By failing, it encourages focus onto technique to ensure improved performance. As put by a participant: “I wanted to improve my technique and try again.”

Some factors which need consideration at this point could possibly have influenced the boys' responses. One is, the "stakes" were not high in these CEs. The stakes are inherently higher when the activity is team or group based as they do not wish to let down others, or if they were to only get one chance and there is more pressure on the individual to perform. I learned that providing opportunities for another try is important learning tool to use.

### **Evidence of Adaptable Behaviours/Habits**

In the examination of my data it became apparent that the students were indeed exhibiting adaptable habits in their learning experiences in the CEs. Students were happy with their efforts, they knew I had done my best, but were always keen to try again. An indication of this is in this student statement, "Good knowing I had done my best and that I'd done well."

The waiting period between the initial attempt, which was a fail, and this led to a reflection period for the students, often consulting with their peers to ensure a greater chance of success in the next attempt. As said, "In my third try I knew what I was doing."

The natural leaders and the more extroverted students were quick to devise strategies in team/group situations to ensure mistakes leading to failure were not repeated. They would communicate effectively, act more decisively and interact much more with others. Students with already high personal standards in their performance in PE displayed a greater desire to retry failed attempts and were more desperate to succeed. As said by a participant, "I was disappointed in myself and I wanted to try again and try harder."

Overwhelming satisfaction was a common emotion when initial failure was followed by success and confidence rose. This observation reinforced that providing opportunities for reflection and retrying is a valuable practice as a teacher. There was little evidence of students not wishing to retry attempts following failure for fear of repeated fails. A student said, "I was confident. I had done it once. I knew what to expect."

### **Discussion of Results**

The results obtained from this study were, to some extent, surprising to me, although they were always a possible and likely outcome. I had anticipated (rightly or wrongly) that for the boys of this group, failure was something they avoided and that success was to be celebrated. My initial analysis of my results suggest this was not the case and that, if the activities in which I set up challenge experiences were a fair indication, then the boys viewed failure as something to be overcome. It would be very wrong for me, however, to make the inference from this finding that this is the case for all boys of this age and any activity that they engage in.



The idea was for many of the students to fail and then gauge their reactions and responses to this failure experience. This was to identify behaviours which would determine if they were resilient enough to try again and display adaptable characteristics that would be desirable in young learners to help them succeed.

I believe many of the responses participants had given me were very powerful. Retrial certainly evidenced the desire to succeed and I am pleased that their willingness to retry failed attempts was as common as it was. There was little or no evidence of lack of willingness to retry because of fear of failing again and this helped support my feelings that the boys displayed resilient characteristics and had the adaptability to improve following failure.

Support and encouragement from peers in a failure experience assisted in overcoming initial feelings of disappointment but helped the failed boy to “bounce back” and retry. The power of the group in this respect had a major influence on how individuals coped with failure in the CEs. This is not always evident in normal class situations, but through reinforcing it and encouraging the students to support each other, it became a very significant element in the study.

I felt the activities that I established for the challenge experiences worked very well, and the fact that I was able to be discrete about them and “hide” them within normal activities in the PE curriculum added to the learning situation. If I was to fault them in any way, it would be that they were too enjoyable and no matter how often they failed, the boys simply wanted to continue to retry anyway. Their energy and enthusiasm were always commendable and worthy of acknowledgment.

### **Conclusion & Implications for Practice**

My feelings are that this study just “scratched-the-surface” of this topic and that much more can, and should be, done to investigate it further. If I were to further the exploration of failure, I feel the raising of the stakes, where there is more to be lost through failure would be well worth resolving. The implications and life-lessons this topic exposes are significant. The experiences young people have and how they accept failure in those experiences is likely to have a profound effect on them. The scope for further study is well beyond the parameters of the study I have started, but it certainly deserves consideration.

Weinzimmer and McConoughey (2012) challenge the notion of how we prepare children when they are told that failure is not an option or there is no room for failure. This, unfortunately, is too often said in high pressure situations where regrettably, failure becomes intimidating to such an extent that no attempt is seen as preferable to being the one who fails. It relates

strongly to the point mentioned above about higher stakes situations, but it is felt that surely it is better to fail trying than failing to try at all. Confidence obviously plays a very important part in this and we as educationalists must empower young people to have the self-belief necessary to try no matter what the costs.

I have had little opportunity here to investigate risk-taking in the failure context and this also needs further study. I am very familiar with risk-taking in boys and how powerful a learning strategy it can be. We are constantly reminded of risk-taking going wrong for young men, but when channelled correctly it is enjoyable for them and a great way for them to learn. Boys love active learning. They love to be challenged and moved beyond usual comfort zones and by extending themselves they heighten their confidence and reach a fulfilment and personal satisfaction that is sometimes hard to reproduce through other methods. Again, physical education provides the perfect platform in so many contexts for boys to take risks in controlled environments and surely this must be promoted .

The encouraging thing that appears as a result of this project is that the participants quite clearly have grown to feel that there is nothing wrong with failure. It is hoped that this idea can be shared with parents as well. This also gives support to the study referred to by Haimovitz and Dweck (2016) and their belief that parents with a growth mind-set are more likely to be accepting of failure whilst those with a fixed mind-set are reluctant for failure to be part of their language. There can be little dispute that when parents and other role models for young people, approve of failure, are willing to fail and don't pretend that they always succeed, then they are likely to influence young people to have similar attitudes.

Two elements that I feel are also worthy of further consideration if this project were to be extended are the concepts of risk-taking and experiential learning. The two concepts are closely related, because experiential learning allows for exploration, trial and error, and changing and amending things as the learner progresses. Risk-taking is crucial here. It can, however, be very time consuming. Are we as teachers guilty of wanting to rush the learners, conscious of the restricted time to cover all of the curriculum content that we fail to use one of the most powerful learning tools for the boys; risk-taking and learning from experiences? It is certainly my intention to try to include these more in my own teaching so the learners become more empowered and in control of their progress. With that, I hope, more engaged also. Fortunately, because the boys at my school enjoy PE and the positive experiences it brings, this should not be difficult. Further, I will be enthusing my fellow PE colleagues to also develop this approach into their teaching.

I feel, having completed this study, that the open-mindset of the students was most encouraging. Failure was not a “dirty-word” and to the participants it was something you deal with. Admittedly, some dealt with it better than others, some failed more than others, but I was heartened by their willingness to accept it. This, I feel, was evidenced by their desire to retry failed attempts, adapting where necessary and persevering until things changed. Despite initial displays of disappointment, this to me, as their teacher, was extremely heartening. It was also heartening to observe their support for one another in failure situations. I have always trained and encouraged them to adopt this supportive attitude towards each other and for them to do it naturally and genuinely was quite powerful.

### **Reflection**

There can be little doubt this project has had a significant effect on me as a Physical Education teacher with over 30 years of experience in this curriculum area. It was not until I took stock of failure that I realized how powerful it can be as a learning strategy and to think that we as teachers so often avoid telling students that they have failed. We are very quick to remind them of their successes, but on the evidence of what I have found, maybe we should also consider embracing failure more. My real regret with this project was that I did not develop a certificate of failure to present to the students as Rachel Simmons did at Smith College, Massachusetts. Acknowledging failure in the students is something however that I can still do, and, I feel, I should do.

An important consideration is ‘Experiential Learning’, for which I am a strong advocate, especially in the active and mobile Physical Education environment. Learning by experience is hugely powerful for boys and it is an area where failure has to be accepted as a vital part of the process. It is a teaching strategy that can be referred to as the trial-and-error approach. This strategy is based on “experiences,” where learners try and retry, change, modify, and adapt appropriately. It lends itself superbly to Physical Education and much of my teaching, I would like to think, reflects this. The teacher establishes the learning environment whereby students understand the parameters, scope, and boundaries for whatever it is they are learning and then are left to experience the activity and develop an understanding and appreciation through repeated trials, often with peers. Teacher assistance and guidance is sought if and when needed. Learners fail and adapt to the situation accordingly, correcting progressively, succeeding gradually and benefiting greatly from the evolution of something they are empowered to develop themselves. It is through an approach such as this that students are taught to accept and approve of failure and ultimately understand how vital it is to the learning process.

This project has given me strong support for continuing and strengthening this learning strategy. The boys' willingness to try and to try again reinforced this to me and I am determined to ensure that this approach remains a crucial teaching tool for me. The boys' love for PE and for physical activity promotes this as well.

Failure is something many boys experience constantly and this project has made me very aware of how failure needs to be presented in a positive way. The ones who fail frequently are really the winners. They do not remain focused solely on the end result, but on the process they must undertake to succeed. This reminds me of the significance that Weinzimmer and McConoughey's (2012) proposal that when perfectionism and goal achievement become the sole focus then regrettably we lose sight of the process. For those who experience failure often, they deal in the process phase constantly and this is why I feel they are the winners.

The opportunity to be a part of this International Boys' Schools Coalition has been extremely rewarding and satisfying. It has allowed me the opportunity to collaborate with teachers from a number of other countries, to network and connect with them and to work towards producing a body of work that I hope will enlighten and strengthen others in their teaching. Adaptability is a powerful word and a quality we all want in our boys and if I have contributed in some small way to enhancing and developing this then I am proud of my efforts. I acknowledge and thank the IBSC for their vision and thinking behind the action research programme and for allowing me to be a part of it.

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