

# FAILING FORWARD: GIVING YEAR 7 BOYS THE POWER OF BEING FEARLESS, NOT FLAWLESS

Stephanie McQuillan

The Southport School, Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia

## **Abstract**

In this action research project, I sought to explore the emotionally charged topic of failure. As a Housemaster and English teacher, I was becoming increasingly concerned by the number of boys who presented with signs of stress and anxiety, most of which seemed to stem from a fear of the unfamiliar and the unknown. Curious to discover why this was becoming more prevalent in young adolescents, I invited my academically gifted Year 7 English class to participate in this project.

This action research project promoted failure as purposeful, normalised the emotional response to perceived failure, and empowered boys to take control of their learning. Specifically, the boys were taught to view every obstacle as an opportunity and learnt to pause, reflect, and learn from the experience. Throughout the project, the boys completed journals, responded to surveys and participated in activities, which were challenging on the first attempt. The results confirmed that by normalising the emotional response to perceived failure, explicitly teaching resilience strategies and developing a sense of agency within the student cohort, it strengthened the boys' ability to bounce back after set-backs, as well as fostered increased emotional resilience, perseverance and tenacity.

## **Introduction**

### **Background**

The research question I set out to answer was “How does normalising failure help foster emotional resilience in Year 7 boys?”

I was particularly interested in this topic as I began to notice a growing number of boys who were becoming crippled with anxiety at the fear of failing. They seemed to derive safety and comfort in making the decision not to try in the first place and failing, rather than making an unsuccessful attempt and failing. Boys were becoming more hesitant to take risks with their learning, which produced a domino effect outside the classroom with regards to taking part in unfamiliar extracurricular activities.

I was further intrigued when I started hearing the phrase, “that made you sweat” within the context of one particular English class. The boys had been clustered together since Year 3 after having been identified from an early age as being academically gifted. Despite their academic ability, however, a large number of the boys exhibited anxiety towards impending assessment tasks and the unknown. This anxiety, I believed, stemmed from a fear of failing. The boys celebrated the fact that they could complete an activity with zero effort. Those who were able to do this, were acknowledged as clever and superior. In comparison, the boys who struggled to complete an activity successfully on the first attempt, regardless as to whether they were eventually successful or not, were ridiculed for not being smart enough. Excuses were made with a dismissive air, but I was curious. In an age where so much emphasis is placed on character education and emotional well-being, why was I seeing an increase in boys who wanted to avoid failure at all costs, regardless of the context? I wanted, therefore, to conduct an action research project that delivered a sense of agency within the classroom, normalised the reactions to perceived failure, and gave the boys a more emotionally resilient voice within their current learning and as preparation for their life-long learning journey.

### **Research Question**

How does normalising failure help foster emotional resilience in Year 7 boys?

### **Action Research Methodology**

Action research provided an appropriate method for investigating my research question because it put student voice and student agency at the centre of the study. This allowed me to reach conclusions and identify themes not just based on my own observations, but from using the thoughts and reflections of my students.

This project was particularly relevant and useful in my role as Housemaster. Being able to identify the core reasons behind the boys’ aversion to failure enabled me to make proactive changes within both the classroom and wider pastoral care context.

### **Literature Review**

Over the past decade, there has been a firm embrace of character education in schools across the globe. Headmasters, teachers, and parents have recognised and celebrated the responsibility schools have to cultivate and nurture the emotional and social development of those in their care, alongside the academic and extra-curricular.

Parental engagement towards a school environment which promotes the development of character education concepts and attributes is always positive. Parents are eager to endorse a school environment which cultivates a sense of resilience, emotional intelligence and grit. However, the theory of character education is often far easier for parents to support, compared to the hard hitting reality of making it happen.

Educator Jessica Lahey (2016) argues that today's overprotective, failure-avoidant parenting style has undermined the competence, independence, and academic potential of an entire generation. In response to these concerns, schools now develop support programs to assist student welfare and resilience. Greenberg (as cited in Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010) suggests that a growing portion of school aged children are experiencing myriad social, emotional and behavioural problems and this can interfere with their school success. Clearly, this underscores the need for schools to develop effective school-based protective programs, for example, programs that develop and support leadership, mindfulness and resilience.

Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck (2017) believes people can be divided into one of two mindsets: fixed or growth. A person with a fixed mindset believes that intelligence, talent or ability are innate and remains the same throughout life, no matter what a person does. A person with a growth mindset, however, believes that these qualities are simply a starting point. They are more motivated to learn for learning's sake because they believe that by pushing and stretching themselves they can do more and become more accomplished. They thrive on challenge and understand that failing and trying again is part of becoming smarter, better or faster. If they discover limitations in themselves, they search for ways to overcome these challenges.

Boys are being taught from a young age that without their parent's guidance, support and assistance, they will not be able to improve. This in turn is having a powerful impact on how boys approach their learning and their long term goals.

### **The Dangers of Avoiding Failure**

Educators are currently facing a generation of young children and teenagers who fear failure. Parents have bulldozed every uncomfortable obstacle in the way of their son, resulting in boys who have rarely, if ever, encountered failure or disappointment (Lahey, 2016, xii). By preventing their child from experiencing disappointment or suffering from low self-esteem, modern parents have had a detrimental influence.

Research confirms that children and adolescents whose parents do not allow them to fail are less engaged, less enthusiastic about their education, less motivated and ultimately less successful than children whose parents support their autonomy. (Lahey, 2016). The issue should not be avoiding failure altogether, but instead embracing the opportunities and lessons which arise from failure and learning how to fail well.

## **The Classroom Implications**

Failure is commonly associated with feelings of embarrassment, frustration, and disappointment. Many boys choose to get rid of these uncomfortable feelings by moving on as quickly as possible or avoid feeling them at all costs. Boys avoid challenging work, which not only reduces their motivation to achieve, resulting in poor educational outcomes, but robs them of important life experience.

A 2017 study of intellectually gifted students conducted by Lance King at a New Zealand high school, revealed one significant factor that distinguished the highest achievers from the lowest achievers. This factor was the ability of the highest achievers to “fail well.” In this study, failure was defined as not reaching a goal. While all students identified procrastination as a problem as to why they didn’t achieve their expected outcome, the high performers actively took steps to overcome the problem, whereas the underachievers succumbed to it, resorting to last minute urgency to get them through.

King (2017) further highlighted that it was the understanding and acceptance of failure which was the most compelling. In his study, underachievers tended to deny that failure had ever existed for them or took steps to avoid the possibility of failure completely. In comparison, the high achievers viewed failure as a learning opportunity. They understood that it was temporary, were prepared to try new strategies and apply more effort and took responsibility for their actions. In other words, they knew how to “fail well” not avoid it altogether.

According to King (2017) when a student fails well, they acknowledge their failure. They work out what they did wrong, make changes and have another go. As identified in King’s (2017) research, when students fail badly, they are often in denial. They deny the failure happened in the first place; they blame other people or the school; they avoid future activities that could possibly result in failure or they drop the activity after the first failure. Their reaction to the failure and their inability to move forwards and learn from the experience, is the problem.

Renowned psychologist Dr Gabrielle Oslington (2018) further supports the importance of learning to fail well. Oslington believes that both parents and educators need to permit gifted students to experience frustration, failure and consequences. By rescuing them from today's problem, we injure their capacity to cope in the future and those problems will be larger than today's. Instead, we need to help them apply themselves and develop the discipline and rigour required to master the hurdles.

The literature suggests that the focus for educators and parents should be to normalise the emotions associated with failure and reinforce the learning opportunities available to students whenever they encounter failure; to empower them to move forwards with confidence and bravery—to be fearless, not flawless.

## **Research Context**

The Southport School is a private, all boys Anglican School on the Gold Coast, in Queensland, Australia. The school was established in 1901 and currently has approximately 1600 boys from Prep to Year 12, including around 300 boarders from Years 7-12. Given the school's high tuition fees, the boys generally come from high socioeconomic backgrounds.

The action research participants for this project were my Year 7 English class, who had been clustered together since Year 3, due to being identified as academically gifted. There were 25 boys in total. Two of the boys were new that year, only joining at the beginning of 2019 as boarders.

The action took place during Term 3 for one 50-minute lesson a week, over a nine-week period.

The class selected for this project was not a random choice on my part. Despite being academically gifted, the boys in this particular class were very hesitant to take risks. I was curious as to why boys who had the highest chance of success due to their intellectual ability, were also the most reluctant risk-takers.

## **The Action**

Failure is commonly associated with feelings of embarrassment, frustration and disappointment. Like a wave that rolls onto the shore, these feelings will wash over us. Due to the nature of these emotions, many adolescents prefer to escape these uncomfortable feelings altogether by moving on as quickly as possible or avoid feeling them at all costs.

My action research project promoted failure as purposeful, normalised the emotional response to perceived failure, and empowered boys to take control of their learning. Specifically, the boys were taught to view every obstacle as an opportunity and when confronted with failure, the importance of taking a breath in order to pause, reflect and learn from the experience. The main goal of this project was to strengthen the boys' ability to bounce back after set-backs, as well as to foster increased emotional resilience, perseverance and tenacity. Discussions surrounding how students felt about failure and how they had reacted to it in the past was integral. This was also an opportunity to explore different mindsets - growth versus fixed.

Throughout the project, the boys were also engaged in a variety of activities specifically designed to be very challenging on the first attempt, that included origami and demanding literacy and numeracy games. The focus was to promote bravery in having a go despite the high probability of failure. In other words to be fearless, not flawless.

Most importantly, the following mindfulness strategies were explicitly implemented into classroom practice to promote resilience: focused breathing, grounding in nature, positive visualisation and enhanced stress control. The aim of these strategies was to assist boys to recognise the physical responses generated by failure and to respond in a proactive, yet soothing and conciliatory way. Rather than instinctively ignoring or dismissing the stress, they instead began to take back control of the negative situation in which they may have found themselves.

The aim was to assist boys to recognise the physical responses generated by failure and how to respond in a more proactive way. Ultimately, I wanted to empower the boys to take back control of their learning through developing a sense of agency in order to effect positive change within their learning journey and throughout their lives.

### **Data Collection**

The data collected for this project were primarily qualitative and generated through surveys, individual journaling by students, notes from teacher observations, photos, and videos and interviews with the boys. In the initial phase, the boys were provided with a series of open-ended questions to ascertain their prior experience and understanding of failure. The process was repeated at the conclusion of the action to detect any pattern changes or development in the participants' language or emotional responses.

Additional time for individual interviews or opportunities for follow-up was also built into the timeline. Including video footage in the data collection methods was key to capturing student voices and ensuring trustworthy research. My mentor was allowed full access to the research process and data collection to ensure an unbiased and critical eye was cast over the project.

Due to the nature of this project, qualitative data was the most appropriate type of evidence to use. It was important that the boys felt comfortable providing honest reflections and unbiased feedback throughout the process. Students need to feel safe before they are prepared to place themselves in vulnerable positions (Boeder, 2017). The intention was to identify student response and reaction via observation by teacher, observation by an invited staff member, student verbal response and student written response.

The four key methods utilised to collect data were:

- Surveys - entry and exit interviews
- Observations
- Journals
- Interviews

Initial surveys took place prior to beginning the project and looked to identify how the boys viewed failing and their previous emotional responses towards this. The survey included open-ended and polar questions and also provided the boys with an opportunity to reflect on prior experiences. The boys were asked to articulate a time in their life when they had encountered failure and how they had responded. This provided an interesting baseline. While the boys recognised that failing is a natural part of the learning journey, and is at times inevitable, the reality of failing proved much more difficult and this was reflected in their response.

Following the initial survey, the boys were each provided with a journal which they used throughout the project. Mertler (2017) believes journals allow students to articulate their thoughts, perceptions and experiences. In my experience, this certainly provided the boys with multiple opportunities to clearly articulate their thoughts and feelings towards the topic of failing. The boys were encouraged to document their reflections after completing each challenge, noting any frustrations. Prompt questions were provided to assist the boys in their reflection. It also enabled me to see the progress they were making throughout the journey and how their thoughts and feelings towards perceived failure altered over the course of the project.

In addition, I also kept notes of observations as the researcher. Mertler (2017) defines effective observations as carefully watching and systematically recording what you see and hear going on in a particular setting. I utilised his method of notetaking using two columns: one for actual observations and the second for interpretations. I did this whenever I introduced a new activity or while the boys were completing a task. This also provided relevant insights.

Crucially, one of the most telling forms of evidence which proved the most compelling were the comments the boys made to each other when participating in these activities and their self-talk (negative and positive) while attempting a difficult task. The importance of student voice and agency was highlighted on several occasions, especially with regards to how the boys tackled and persevered with a particular challenge. The data were collected through observation and interviews.

Over an eight-week period, the above forms of data were used to interpret and analyse the data. Regular meetings with my mentor, who was also able to attend multiple sessions and provide additional observations and insight, provided an unbiased perspective on the work and research at hand.

### **Data Analysis**

Content was summarized, reviewed, and discussed with my mentor. With a large range of data collected, I then searched for common themes and established a coding scheme for analysis. I identified key themes,

noting any changes in attitudes and emotional responses from participants regarding failure, and where possible, linked back to the research question. Boys were re-interviewed to seek clarification if there was conflicting information.

### **Discussion of Findings**

An analysis of the data showed that the majority of boys developed greater emotional resilience towards failure. Throughout the project, the following major themes emerged: the power of equipping boys with wellbeing tools to foster emotional resilience towards failure; learning to “ride the wave” by normalising the negative emotions attached to failure; and empowering students to take risks and challenge their fixed mindset.

#### **Personal Connection to Failure**

I introduced this project with a very specific question, based upon the movie *Limitless*: *If you had the opportunity to take a magic pill, which ensured you would never experience any type of failure again, would you take it?* The majority of students indicated they would take the tablet without hesitation.

All boys, without exception, had an immediate and intense emotional reaction towards the word “failure” and all had previously encountered failure one way or another. When I asked the boys to complete the initial survey and reiterated that there were no right or wrong answers, there was still a lot of anxiety. Several boys had to be reassured a number of times that the survey responses would not count towards their academic results.

In the survey, the boys were asked to define “failure.” Responses were all very similar and captured the essence of not succeeding or not being successful at something. Participants were then asked to identify what failure meant to them and this is where the answers began to diverge. Thomas, who is in the top 2% academically in the cohort, saw failure as “getting a bad mark in school and embarrassing myself or my family in some way.” For Jackson, failure was “trying something and being bad at it or just not being able to do it.” Hunter recalled his “big failure moment” of the year when sailing: “Just as I thought I was getting better, the boat capsized. I hit my head when we fell out and I remember my hat floating away along with my drink bottle. I thought I was terrible at Sailing and it took a long time for my Mum to convince me to have another go.” For Joe, failure was associated with a National Chess Tournament. He was “destined to win (but) I came third. I was not happy and neither was my father. I should have tried harder.”

The role of family and peers in the acceptance of failure for young learners is an interesting one as many boys remarked they were more upset and disheartened that they had disappointed or let down a parent, than they were about the actual result. While the types of experiences regarding failure differed, (academic, sporting, etc.) the negative emotions associated with it were still vivid in their memories. Feelings of inadequacy during these moments of failure were common amongst participants and often linked back to the misguided idea of perfectionism. Several boys also commented that they hadn't experienced significant failure until they commenced secondary school.

### **Riding the Wave - Understanding the Emotional Complexities of Failure**

In their journal, boys were given an opportunity to reflect upon their prior physical reactions to failure. The journal included an outline of a body and asked participants to colour and label where they previously have experienced emotions/feelings related to failure. One boy coloured in the entire body. The emotions he recalled were anger, sadness, anxiety, and embarrassment: "When I fail, I can't stop thinking about it. It's like it is the only thing I can think about but I just want to move on and forget about it as quickly as possible." Another boy, a very able and intelligent young man, highlighted the majority of the body. He identified feelings of frustration and rejection and an overwhelming feeling of "hollowness" in his chest.

Overall, the most common emotions experienced by the boys were shame, embarrassment, frustration, guilt, and anger. Over the course of the project, the boys were taught how to "ride the wave" and became aware that these negative emotions whilst normal, were temporary.

By the end of the project, the boys were more empowered through the regular use of these strategies. One boy, even revealed during one-on-one feedback that, "I now feel like I am in control of my feelings, rather than them controlling me." Similarly, many boys also suggested that they felt better prepared to tackle moments of disappointment as their attitudes towards failure had changed. Rather than shying away from the fear of failure, the boys began to realise that within the learning process there will be times when they will fail, simply because the task, activity, or concept is beyond their current scope. They also began to realise that improvement is not immediate; it takes time and perseverance. Through completing these activities, the boys recognised the value of the struggle. One student had particular insight: "I've realised I've been a bit foolish to think that everything will be easy on the first attempt. What's so bad at trying and not succeeding? If we don't have moments of struggle then what's even the point at being successful at something?"

### **Aiming to be Fearless, Not Flawless**

One of the most surprising outcomes from this project was the impact it had in other areas outside the scope of this project. The boys were actively using the messages and concepts learned and applying them in other areas of their lives. Alex, an EAL (English as an Additional Language) student, was previously very reserved and shy when presenting oral assessments in front of his peers. Such was his anxiety around failing, it was common for him to shout his assessment loudly and race through it as quickly as possible. Doing so, would ultimately impact his overall grade. The completion of this project also coincided with the final English assessment of Year 7, a poetry recital, which required the boys to present in front of their peers. On this occasion, Alex rose to the challenge. He chose a pop song from Korean boy band, BTS, which he sang (and even rapped the chorus). At the end, he received a standing ovation from his peers. For this boy, this was an example of being fearless, not flawless: “I realised that I had nothing to lose. It’s a song I enjoy and has real meaning to me. If I forgot some of the words, what’s the worst that could happen? I wanted to take the chance.”

Noah was another example of moving out of his comfort zone. As the youngest by two years, he could feel intimidated by his peers at times. After completing the project, he brought in a keyboard and played ‘Imagine’ by John Lennon while singing the lyrics.

While the majority of boys previously used their intelligence as a safety net, by the end of the project, all of the boys came to realise the power of learning through failure. That it is about the journey, and not the final destination.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Practice**

Modern-day life and the smoke and mirrors of social media seduces both adults and young adolescents alike into believing that life is picture perfect. The mistaken belief that nobody ever fails and that success is the only option, is flawed and misguided. Obviously, life is not like that.

Asking Year 7 students to tackle the confronting topic of failure was a risk, but the results spoke for themselves. The most powerful impact from this project was the boys’ ability to tackle challenges and obstacles with a fresh sense of optimism; not in the sense that they would be infallible, but in the sense that they were essentially being given the opportunity to explore and embrace their vulnerabilities. This often taboo subject, where vulnerability in males is compared with weakness, needs to be confronted and challenged, particularly in a world where toxic masculinity is all too prevalent.

While the activities chosen were challenging and intentionally difficult, they were also low risk. The greatest success from this project was the fact that the boys applied the lessons learnt to life outside the classroom. They tried a new position in sport, signed up to learn a new musical instrument or joined the

choir, and took greater risks with their assessments, as discussed earlier in this report. Essentially, they started moving out of their comfort zones; empowered, motivated and vulnerable. They had discovered the power of being fearless, not flawless. Six months after completing the project, many of the boys have indicated that they were able to self-regulate more successfully and independently, without the fear of failure when experiencing negative emotions and tackling new challenges and obstacles.

Removing the fallacy of failure and empowering the boys to take risks with their learning, yielded more positive results than I could have imagined. The boys re-discovered a love of learning and the joy that comes with conquering something new. Nurturing agency in the boys will continue to be in the forefront of my teaching practice.

### **Reflection Statement**

Without a doubt, this has been an incredible professional development opportunity. It has been a privilege to engage with a community of like-minded educators who are all passionate about achieving best practice in boys' education. As a teacher, it has been refreshing and exciting to step back into the learner role.

Personally, this was a project close to my heart. Completing this project through a global pandemic highlighted that despite our best efforts, failure is inevitable at times. It is how we deal with and overcome these challenges that matters most. Cultivating traits such as perseverance, tenacity, empathy and resilience have been a necessity, not only for myself as I navigated my way through online teaching and completing this project, but also as I helped guide, support and empower my boys, and their families, through this difficult time.

As a teacher, I now have a greater appreciation of the fragility my boys experience when they are not familiar with a topic or when they doubt their own ability to rise to a challenge. This awareness has reinforced the importance of being flexible in my approach when pushing them out of their comfort zone. It also reinforced the power of building and maintaining strong positive relationships with both my boys and their families.

The professional learning I gained from being part of the IBSC Action Research project was beyond my initial expectations. There is genuine collegiality within the IBSC network, and I have forged wonderful friendships and meaningful contacts with other staff from around the world which will last me a lifetime. I offer my heartfelt thanks to both my school, The Southport School, and the senior executive team for their support and for providing me with this incredible opportunity. I am also truly grateful to my School Mentor, Mr Andrew Stark, for his endless support, encouragement and feedback throughout this

project. The role of the school-based mentor is absolutely crucial and cannot be underestimated. I thank the IBSC team and feel incredibly proud to have had this opportunity and to be able to share my research.

### References

Bologna, C. (2019, March 15). You need to teach your kids to fail. Here's how. *Huffington Post*.

Dweck, C. (2007). *Mindset: the new psychology of success*. Ballantine Books.

King, L. (2017). *The importance of failing well*. The Chiron Trust of Education Research.

Lahey, J. (2016). *The gift of failure: how the best parents learn to let go so their children can succeed*. Harper Publishing.

Mertler, C.A. (2017). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators* (5th Edn). Sage Publishing.

Oslington, G., Dr. (2018, August 11). Why failure helps gifted children achieve so much more. *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Schonert-Reichl, Kimberly & Lawlor, Molly. (2010). The effects of a mindfulness-based education program on pre- and early adolescents' well-being and social and emotional competence. *Mindfulness*. 1. 137–151.