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Understanding Student Perception of Failure to Promote Self Worth

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Understanding Student Perception of Failure to Promote Self Worth

by

Stephanie Grubaugh

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

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Signature Sheet

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the department chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Abstract

Teachers strive to create a safe learning environment where students can learn from their mistakes and/or failures. Even though teachers are creating safe spaces for learning, many students will not engage in activities that might be challenging to the point of that students experiencing failure. The purpose of this qualitative action research study is to examine what perceptions students have about failure in order to help teachers find non-material incentives or reward structures to help give students self-worth. The research method involved the collection of data through surveys, a guided research project about the failures of famous people and an accompanying study guide for students to fill out, researcher facilitated discussions, and classroom observations.

This study was conducted at a suburban, predominately homogeneous, and middle-class K-6 grade public school in Northern California. The participants in the study were 22 students from a 6th grade class, ages 11-12.

The primary findings suggest that students have an easier time understanding their own failures in social engagements. Students are able to vocalize cultural phrases like: *You learn from your mistakes*, but it can be hard to transfer those into action when failure happens. The findings presented in this study have the potential benefit of adding to the conversation surrounding failure in schools.

Chapter 1 Introduction

It can be hard to fully assess all that encompasses failure. For one thing, it is highly personal and subjective. No two people are the same and no two people have the same experiences. For one person, failing a math test might be inconsequential, but failing to bring home a soccer trophy can be earthshaking. While another person, on the other hand, might feel the complete opposite. This all depends on what motivates the individual to succeed. Unfortunately, not every student that enters a classroom is motivated by education. It's understood that education is important, yet, "United States educational policy, unfortunately, has created a platform where successes are celebrated and failures are punished — in line with the culturally popular but problematic catchphrase 'failure is not an option'" (Smith & Henriksen, 2016, p. 6). Educational policy, school culture, and cultural rhetoric has had a devastating effect on the students, the dropout rates in the United States are at an all-time high (McMurrey, 2017). Academic motivation and failure seems to be one of the triggers that, potentially, leads to students to dropout of school.

Theories in motivation and achievement motivation refer to the human drive to excel (Chao, Visaria, Mukhopadhyay, & Dehejia, 2017). Whereas, attribution theory believes that humans ask themselves questions about how and why success and failure happened. Through these theories, one can better understand a student's relationship to failure by promoting student to self-analysis and will ultimately help students build a higher sense of self-worth.

Statement of Problem

Teachers try to provide a safe learning environment where students can learn from their mistakes and/or failures. Yet, even though teachers are creating safe spaces for learning, many students won't engage in activities that they might fail at because failure is viewed as unacceptable or it makes them feel negative. Some students can become conditioned to accepting failure and give up on higher achievement.

While student teaching and during her first year of teaching, the researcher encountered an array of student responses to failure, yet most of the students either showed failure aversion tactics, not willing to try for fear of the potentiality of failure, or failure acceptance. This lead the researcher to examine how students perceive failure and how teachers can use this information to better their teaching practices and classrooms.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative action research study is to examine what perceptions students have about failure in order to help teachers find non-material incentives or reward structures to help give students self-worth. This study uses a qualitative action research design approach to answer the research question: How does a select sample of sixth grade students from one classroom in Northern California perceive failure personally, academically, and socially? The primary goal of an action researcher study is to improve teaching practice rather than to only produce knowledge (MacDonald, 2012).

Significance of the Study

This study provides a perception of how a current generation of sixth graders perceive failure. This study also allows teachers, who have experienced similar situations, to gain some insight ,like how students feel about failure and what drive them to become motivated, into how they can develop strategies for the students to cope with failure.

Summary of Methods

The research method involves a collection of data, from all 22 student participants taking part in the study, through two surveys, a guided research project about the failures of famous people and an accompanying study guide for students to fill out, two in class researcher facilitated discussions, and two observations during the guided research performed by the students. This type of research approach collects data in the participant's setting, building specific details to general themes through data analysis, and the researcher interprets the meaning of the data.

This study was conducted during the spring semester of 2018 school year at a suburban, predominately homogeneous, and middle-class K-6 grade public school in Northern California. The participants in this study were 22 students, fifteen females and seven males, from a 6th grade class, ages 11-12.

Summary of Findings and Implication of the Study

This study presents findings that have been triangulated from the collected data. This starts with finding the intermediate themes. The findings from survey-1 and observation-1 and, subsequently, survey-2 and observation-2 are initially analyzed independently to create the intermediate themes before being triangulated to find the primary themes.

Survey-1 and observation-1 yielded intermediate theme one: Students perception about failure is generally negative and intermediate theme two: Students have a hard time assessing failure in their own lives. After the guided research and researcher facilitated class discussions, Survey-2 and observation-2 yielded intermediate theme three: Students show a more positive look at failure. Lastly, from survey-2 and observation-2, intermediate theme four: Understanding the failure of famous and how students relate.

This was then followed by the method of triangulation of the collected data from survey-1, observation-1, survey-2, and observation-2 to create the primary themes. The primary themes are as followed: Understanding the failures of peers or in group setting and how students relate and Student perception of the idea of failure v. the reality of failure.

The first primary themes: Understanding the failures of peers or in group setting and how students relate, indicate that students have an easier time relating their own failures when they are able to compare the failure to another person's failure. The second primary theme: Student perception of the idea of failure v. the reality of failure, show that students need to have concrete examples of failure in real time. Students are

able to vocalize cultural phrases like: *You learn from your mistakes*, but it can be hard to transfer those into action when failure happens.

The findings presented in this study have the potential benefit of adding to the conversation surrounding failure in schools. The results show that students ultimately have a drive for self-acceptance in school, as well as, out of school. Students also showed predominantly negative feelings associated with failure and a hard time recollecting failure, which could be the student's reaction in self-preservation.

Teachers, administrators, etc. could use this study to guide their own questions and concerns about failure. The findings are site specific but the information can add to the conversation.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This section is an examination of research literature on the psychology of student motivation that would influence their perception of failure. Information was gathered from academic library searches using online resources. Research information is organized into 2 sections.

First, the research will examine theories of motivation. Research in motivation has been studied for decades. Wiener's attribution theory promotes the idea that all people ask themselves questions about how and why the individual failed or succeeded in an endeavor. These questions and self analysis help to provide the individual with a greater knowledge what to do and what not to do in order to succeed. This leads to the understanding of how failure can affect motivation and how motivation can affect a student's behavior.

Then, the review research will examine shame and defense strategies for self preservation. Students who experience failure have a higher likelihood to have repeated exposure to failure which can lead to a multitude of problems in their lives.

Motivated or Unmotivated

Failure is the state of not meeting the intended objective and can be viewed as the opposite of success. According to Smith and Henriksen,

Psychology tells us that in our evolutionary past, survival was dependent on minimizing loss of what you have. To risk or explore unnecessarily and lose (even a little) was dangerous—building risk-aversion into human psychology.

Yet, human ingenuity and discovery have always indulged curiosity, and curiosity requires being open to failure. (p. 6)

This has led humans to study, analyze, and theorize the actions a person may take in his or her life (Andersen & Jennins, 1980). Motivation can be defined as the driving force behind our actions which is geared ultimately to succeed in life (Elliot & Covington, 2001). There are different forms of motivation including physiological (organic and social), achievement motivation (e.g the need to succeed or achieve excellence), extrinsic (e.g external rewards like money, fame, grades, and/or praise), and intrinsic (e.g internal gratification, no external rewards) (Elliot & Covington, 2001; Chao, Visaria, Mukhopadhyay, & Dehejia, 2017). These differences in motivation are important because they affect our lives everyday (Elliot & Covington, 2001; Chao, Visaria, Mukhopadhyay, & Dehejia, 2017). All of our behaviors, actions, thoughts, and beliefs are influenced by this drive to succeed (Elliot & Covington, 2001; Chao, Visaria, Mukhopadhyay, & Dehejia, 2017). However, what success means is based on the individual interpretation (Elliot & Covington, 2001; Chao, Visaria, Mukhopadhyay, & Dehejia, 2017).

Every student that enters a classroom, cares about being seen as competent in the eyes of others (De Castelle & Byrne, 2013). "United States educational policy, unfortunately, has created a platform where successes are celebrated and failures are punished..." (Smith & Henriksen, 2016, p.6). This has led to a negative view towards failure, preventing opportunities for teachers and students to take risks in the classroom. According to Smith and Henriksen (2016),

...when it comes to creativity, it is clear that anyone who succeeds creatively must be willing to try and fail-and to learn, regroup, and try again... the ability to understand this-to grapple with the struggles and creative work, and build resilience and tolerance for ambiguity, is a key to learning outcome. (p.6)

Educators promote classrooms as safe environments that should promote learning. It is key to promote a safe space for students to try, fail, and persevere. This research sets out to understand the ways in which failure affects a student's willingness, ability, and effort to learn in a classroom.

Intrinsic motivation refers to the, "motivation that comes from inside (enjoyment, satisfaction)" (Bè nabou & Tirole, 2003, p.489). Whereas, extrinsic motivation, "comes from outside (money, grades, detention, awards, prizes)" (Bè nabou & Tirole, 2003, p.489). External rewards work in the short term and that's why they continue to be so widely used in education to control behavior and coerce students (Vallerand, 1997). As a long-term goal, internal motivation is much more powerful for students to experience. They learn a positive feeling towards learning, setting goals, and working hard (Vallerand, 1997,). Dweck states that, "educators commonly hold to beliefs...(1) praising students' intelligence build your confidence and motivation to learn, and (2) students' inherent intelligence is a major cause of their achievement in school" (p. 34). Dweck (2007) goes on to explain that the research shows that these two believes can be harmful towards students in the long run.

Effects of Failure

When a student experiences failure, feelings associated with failure can manifest into a variety of issues. According to self-worth theorists, in school where one's worth is largely measured by one's ability to achieve, self-perception of incompetence can trigger feelings of shame and humiliation (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002, p.2). Turner, Husman, and Schallert (2002) explains that, "Shame is typically viewed as a highly distressful emotion that can be intensely disturbing and motivationally disruptive (p.2)." The feeling of shame can be viewed as a powerful motivator, not necessarily to promote academic success, but to avoid failure by not investing effort (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002). "The experience of shame has been described by clinical psychologists as acutely painful because it involves a personal, negative evaluation stemming from perceived failure relative to personal ideals, standards, rules, or goals (Turner, Husman, and Schallert, 2002, p.2)." This can render the individual with an "all-encompassing sense of being fundamentally flawed (Turner, Husman, and Schallert, 2002, p.2)." As the feeling of shame and embarrassment can be crippling, along with a student's motivation to be seen as competent, students can generate defenses measure to protect themselves from these feelings (Turner, Husman, and Schallert, 2002).

Inspired by motivational and "drive" theorists; De Castella, Byrne, and Covington discuss the idea of Self-Worth Theory and Self-Protective Strategies as a function of student preservation. Self-Worth Theory assumes that the search for self acceptance is the highest human priority and that the need can give rise both to fear of failure and to an orientation to approach success (De Castella, Byrne, and Covington, 2013). In these

settings, efforts to regulate one's feelings and protect one's sense of self worth, sometimes, leads to deflective strategies designed to alter the meaning of failure by minimizing information about their "true" level of ability (De Castella, Byrne, and Covington, 2013).

One of these strategies is Defense Pessimism, which is "used to alter the meaning of failure by holding unrealistically low expectations for tasks where one's performance will be evaluated (De Castella, Byrne, and Covington, 2013)." In connection with Defensive pessimism, Self-handicapping, also means to alter the meaning of failure, yet, "it does so by deflecting the cause of failure away from the students' ability onto premeditated escapes, should failure occur" (De Castella, Byrne, and Covington, 2013). When students rely heavily on these strategies it can put students at great risk of learned helplessness, which can have a much greater range of negative effects on student's motivation, academic performance, and physiological health, as well as, -the potential long term impact of these behavioral patterns in later life (De Castella, Byrne, and Covington, 2013).

According to Seligman, learned helplessness is defined as, "an organism learning to accept and endure unpleasant stimuli, and an unwillingness to avoid them, even when it is avoidable" (Klein, Fencil-Morse, Seliman, 1979). A student, through repeated exposure to failure and conditioning, has learned to expect failure because it does not have control over the situation. The person believes that whatever he or she does, or does not do, will not have any effect on the outcome. Learned helplessness has been linked to depression and vice versa (Klein, Fencil-Morse, Seliman, 1979). Learned helplessness and depression have similar symptoms including, "passivity, sadness,

anxiety, hostility, etc. (Abramson, Metalsky & Alloy, 1989, p. 359).” As for the cure of learned helplessness, Seligman defined another theory called “learned optimism” (Klein, Fencil-Morse, Seliman, 1979). The idea is to cultivate positive feelings such as joy, happiness, etc. (Klein, Fencil-Morse, Seliman 1979)

When students are forced to take responsibility for these failures but fail to see these outcomes as things they can control, they may ultimately respond helplessly by disengaging from school all together” (De Castella, Byrne, & Covington, 2013, p. 862).

Conclusion

As the literature show, failure can be hard to process. Motivation is what drive all humans but each individual had different motivations to drive them to succeed. Some students are motivated by education while others are not. Motivation can come in different forms, like physiological, achievement, extrinsic, and intrinsic. These forms are important as they help shape the students behavior, good and bad.

Failure can have a negative effect on a student which can create a multitude of problems. Students can develop coping mechanism, Self-Preservation Strategies, to minimize the effects failure can have on them. These effects, failure avoiding and failure accepting, can vary in intensity. Learned helplessness is the most sever of these effects, paralyzing the students into enduring the unpleasant stimuli of failure. Students can use learned optimism as a way to combat learned helplessness.

Teachers and students can work together to create a safe and fruitful learning experience. Students can take responsibilities for their actions and teachers can help to facilitate the social and emotional growth of the students.

Chapter 3 Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative action research design approach to answer the research question: How does a select sample of sixth grade students from one classroom in Northern California, perceive failure, personally, academically, and socially? How do these types of failures, personal, academic, and social, relate to the student's overall understanding of failure? Do students give each type of failure adequate self reflective-analysis?

An action research project is an appropriate approach for this study as it has a direct effect on the participants. This allows them to be engaged in learning and further developing their skills in self reflection and analyzing. The primary goal of an action researcher study is to improve teaching practice rather than just the production of knowledge (MacDonald, 2012). This method allows the researcher to study a deficit within education, examine new techniques, and gather information to better meet the needs of the students. The qualitative approach to research explores an individual and/or group understanding of social and human problems (Creswell, 2014).

The qualitative action research design approach fosters collaboration among participants and researchers and allows the researcher to use methods and techniques such as observing, documenting, analyzing, and interpreting characteristics, patterns, attribution, and meanings of the human experience under study (Creswell, 2014; MacDonald, 2012). This type of research approach collects data in the participant's setting, building specific details to general themes through data analysis, followed by the researcher interprets the meaning of the data.

Research Design

This study was conducted during the spring semester of 2018 school year at a suburban K-6 grade public school in Northern California. The school's population is predominantly homogeneous with about 386 students in total: 83% white, 6% Hispanic/Latinx, 5% two or more, 3% Asian, and 2% African American. The socioeconomic statuses of the school's population a predominantly middle-class and 5% of the students on free or reduced lunch. The average class size is 26 students; according to the schools website and school profile.

Participants

The participants in this study were 22 students, fifteen females and seven males from a 6th grade class, ages 11-12 form a school site in Northern California. Of the 22 students participating in the study, four girls and two boys were of whole to partial Latinx heritage but none were English language learners. The rest were caucasian. The teacher, a caucasian woman in her early 60s, who has worked as a teacher for 18+ years and is a friend and mentor to the researcher. The researcher has volunteered in this classroom multiple times prior to the study. This enabled access and entry for the researcher to successfully recruit participants for this study.

Data Collection Procedures

Two in-class sessions were used to collect data from the participants. Two lessons, one hour each, over the span of two days were presented to the participants. Two surveys, two in-class discussions, and one participant writing assignment served as the primary sources for data collection during the lesson. The surveys and participant assignment writing prompts were created by the researcher. The researcher chose to use surveys and writing prompts as a way for students express their personal views using their own words. During the first lesson, participants were asked to complete survey-1 and participate in a class discussion. The six questions in survey-1 were as follows:

What are some words that describe failure?

Is there anything good about failure?

Can you give an example of a time you made a mistake in school? How did it make you feel? What did you learn from that mistake?

Can you give an example of a time you failed at something? How did it make you feel? What did you learn from that failure?

Can you give an example of a time you saw a friend make a mistake? How did you help them?

Can you give an example of a time you failed but kept trying? What happened?

The researcher then facilitated a class discussion. First the researcher asked voluntary students to explain what failure meant them, allowing other students to weigh

into the discussion with their own interpretations. The researcher collected the responses from survey-1 at the end of the first class session and took notes about the class discussion off site.

The second class session included a lesson that involved an in-class discussion component about understanding what it means to fail combined with an in-class research project. Participants were asked to identify a historical or cultural figure that either they admired and/or has had great success in life. Students were then asked to research his/her historical or cultural figure and find examples of this person's failure(s) that either contributed to and/or enabled them to overcome it and achieve significant success. The researcher circulated amongst the participants and asked questions about their in-class project. Participant then used a writing prompt, provided by the researcher, to help guide their research and record their findings. The writing prompt had four questions to guide the responses from the participants.

Who is the Historical and/or cultural person you chose to study?

What are they known for? What is their greatest success?

What did this person fail at? How do you think they felt?

What does knowing about their failure help you understand about your own failure?

Participants were then asked, on a voluntary basis, to present their findings to the class and participate in a class discussion. Participants were asked to reassess their understanding about failure, towards the end of the class discussion. Participants completed and returned survey-2 at the end of the second class session.

Survey-2 contained eight questions, with similar questions to survey-1 and is presented below:

What are some words that describe failure?

Is there anything good about failure?

Can you give an example of a time you made a mistake in school? How did it make you feel? Did you learn from that mistake?

Can you give an example of a time you failed at something? How did it make you feel? Did you learn from that failure?

Do you think there is a difference between a mistake and failing? If so, then what?

Can you give an example of a time you saw a friend make a mistake? How did you help them?

Can you give an example of a time you failed but keep trying? What happened?

How do you feel about failure?

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis was approached from a comparative lens. First, the researcher organized and reviewed the written responses from the participants to the questions in survey-1 and survey-2, and the corresponding field notes. Then, the researcher reread the written responses from the participants searching for and circling key words and phrases that describe feelings and/or unique perceptions indicating a main idea from each response.

Next, the researcher took the main ideas thus identified, and transformed them into intermediate themes. A list of these intermediate themes were created to organize and subsequently collapse them into primary themes relevant to perceptions and interpretations of failure. This was then analyzed through the lens of the theoretical framework and the primary research question to generate thematic findings.

Finally, the researcher included paraphrases and direct quotes from the student responses in order to support specific findings in the analysis so as to enable conclusions relevant to the research question for this study. The researcher was mindful about her own bias and made it a point to give equal weight to all perspective.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher is a graduate student at Dominican University of California obtaining a Master's of Science Degree in Education. She holds a California Multiple Subject Teaching Credential but is not the teacher of record of the participants in this study. This has made it harder to have consistent and comprehensive access to the participants.

The researcher has a personal connection toward failure, both, as a student and as a teacher. As a student, the researcher, has struggled with failure throughout her educational career and understands the emotional toll failure can have on a person. As a teacher, she bore witness to the struggles some of her students face which has led her to this topic as a way to understand how students view, process, reflect, analyze, and respond to failure.

The researcher was mindful of the potentiality for her own bias about failure infiltrating the research. The researcher made it a point to check that all student perspectives were given equal weight in the study. During data analysis, student answers were grouped based on themes and patterns.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure internal validity and reliability, the researcher used triangulation to corroborate the collected data. According to Bazeley (2013) triangulation usually involves collection of one or more alternative sources of data and checking to see if the inferences drawn is compatible with the first instances. Triangulation, in practice, can provide a rich and complex picture of the social phenomenon being studied, but rarely does it generate a clear path to a particular view of what the case is (Bazeley, 2013). The data collected from survey-1, observation-1, observation-2, and survey-2 yielded slight different answers when analyzed.

First the researcher, collected and analyzed survey-1 and observation-1 and created intermediate themes and patterns from those findings. Next the researcher collected and analyzed survey-2 and observation-2, also creating intermediate themes and patterns from those findings. Lastly, the researcher cross examined the first set of findings and the second set of findings to see if the same set of patterns emerged and were coherent with the previous set of findings.

Chapter 4 Findings

The information presented in this section are findings that have been triangulated from the collected data starting with intermediate themes from survey-1 and observation-1 and survey-2 and observation-2. Observation-2 was a lesson and a handout that students filled out that was collected and analyzed. Both, survey-1 and observation-1 and survey-2 and observation-2, were individually analyzed before being the information was triangulated and analyzed together, presenting the primary themes.

Survey-1 and observation-1 yielded intermediate theme one: Students perception about failure is generally negative. These findings found that students initially had negative feelings surrounding failure. Intermediate theme two: Students have a hard time assessing failure in their own lives. Initially students had a hard time providing examples of their own failure, they had an easier time providing examples of other people failing.

Survey-2 and observation-2 yielded intermediate theme three: Students show a more positive look at failure. The findings from this second survey and observation found that students had less of a negative response towards failure. Intermediate theme four: Understanding the failures of famous and how students relate. Students admired the famous people they researches, yet there was little understanding of how that famous person's failure could relate to the students failure.

This was then followed by the through the method of triangulation of the collected data form survey-1, observation-1, survey-2, and observation-2 to create the primary themes. The primary themes is as followed, primary theme 1: Understanding the

failures of peers or in group setting. Students had an easy time explaining another persons failures or how they failed when another person was around. Primary theme 2: how students relate and Student perception of the idea of failure v. the reality of failure. Students had a hard time relating the motivational phrases when the students was dealing with failure. This perception of failure could have been harder to deal with the students own same and embarrassment was being felt.

Intermediate theme for survey-1 and observation 1

This subsection of the findings section of this research presents the intermediate themes. The data from survey-1 and observation-1 were individually analyzed to create these intermediate finding.

Students perception about failure is generally negative

When asked 'What are some words that describe failure?' on the survey, participants generally chose words with negative connotations like: disappointed, sad, frustration, discouraged, horrible, poor, not good, hurt, angry, upsetting, mad, loser, low score, not good/your best, bad job, not trying hard enough, unsuccessful, wrong, and mistake. Yet, out of the 22 participants, four participants added at least one positive attribute to describe failure, including: learning, helpful, necessary, sucks at first, and not wrong.

Students have a hard time assessing failure in their own lives

However, students initially had a hard time relaying a personal event, from their lives, where they actually benefited from failure. A student wrote, “Last time I failed was on a[n] English test I got a lot of questions wrong and it made me sad. I learned that you can overcome failure.” Another student wrote, “I can not think of a time I completely failed at something.” While another student explained, “ I first thought I failed when I got a bad mile, but I know I can precuts [practice] harder and I can get better.” The most common statement students wrote was, “I cannot think of a time I failed and learned from it.” Student feelings, mostly negative, surrounding failure tended to overshadowed their ability to critically think and analyze their own failure.

Intermediate theme for survey-2 and observation-2

This subsection of the findings section of this research presents the intermediate themes. The data from survey-2 and observation-2 were individually analyzed to create these intermediate finding.

Understanding the failures of famous and how students relate

Part of the observations took place while the students were participating in a research project were asked to research the success and failure of a famous/historical/cultural figure. Students understanding of historical figures influenced their own understanding of failure. However, it can be hard for students to relate

themselves to historical/cultural figures. These people have been held to unfathomable success that may seem hard for students to comprehend. Some example of the people students chose to research were: Steph Curry, Elon Musk, Einstein, Beyonce, J.K. Rowling, and Walt Disney. Usually, students look up to these figures and place them on a pedestal. "What Beyonce did when she was 9 and how many times she has fallen she still gets back up and still keeps on doing what she is doing!" Students have an easier time viewing the failures of the individual because the student is seeing the end result of success.

It can be hard for students to relate to the struggles these figures have endured, yet by learning about a historical figures failure, the student assess their own worth and failures become stepping stones. One student explained, "Failing is another step forward to success. You learn from your mistakes." Initially, students generally accepted the failure of these icons as unrelatable to their own lives. When asked to write if failures of these famous people were relatable to their own understanding of failure, one student wrote, "Knowing about Einstein failing but then becoming one of the most known people in the world makes me tell myself to persevere." Many others wrote similar thoughts, "I shouldn't give up because he didn't and he eventually succeeded." and "If I fail, I can still do something else that is good for me and the Earth." Yet, some found it harder to relate these failure to their own. "Not really because I don't have millions of dollars and I don't launch things into space."

Students show a more positive look at failure

Students were more likely to associate failure with something positive after the second lesson. Students also had an easier time writing about their relationship to failure when asked to use words associated with failure fewer students used negative word like: Mistake, fail, not winning, unworthy, dislike, bad, horrible, poor, below 70% score on a test. More students tended to use words like: Building block to success, necessary, getting better at something, try again, opportunity, not to succeed but try again, helpful, common, realistic, learning, ok, try again, “you almost got it”, second chance, nice try, “did you do your best”.

Students understand that one can learn from failure

Students perception of failure seemingly changed: fewer were still generally negative while others were mixed with an understanding of failure as a necessity. Some examples of these perceptions are: “I feel like failure is just a way to make you stronger and to work harder.”, “I feel like failure is just a lesson being taught.”, “What most people think of when they hear the word failure is actually a mistake. Failure is when you give up.”, and “You did it the wrong way but it’s your way” Though some of feelings surrounding failure were still the same, there was an improvement in critical analysis and understanding of the positive attributes failure can have on an individual.

Primary themes

This subsection of the findings section of this research presents the primary themes. The data from survey-1 and observation-1 and survey-2 and observation-2 were collectively analyzing to create these primary theme finding.

Understanding the failures of peers or in group setting and how students relate

The process of analyzing the failure of peers is more powerful than analyzing the failure of famous people. When a student is socially engaged with another, or in a group, the student has a different perspective of him/herself. The student may feel a greater sense of responsibility and pressure to do well. The student may have an easier time analyzing his or her own failures because they have others to compare themselves to. Students were only asked about their own relationship to failure, yet many students found that the most memorable moments happened in social settings.

Many students wrote about failure in team sports and the importance of not letting down their team. One student wrote, "In basketball, I missed the game winning shot to up my team in the playoffs. I felt awful, but at the end of the day, it drove me to work harder." There were others that wrote about a failure in comparison to another person success. One student wrote, "When I was at a friends house she had a tree climbing rope that you can do a trick on and my friend could do this amazing upside-down twirl. I decided to try this and I tried and tried but I couldn't do it. I felt embarrassed. I learned that you can't expect to do something just because your friend can." When a students

analyses his/herself against a peer, there seems to be a real-time response and processing to the situation but there seems to be a lack of critical analysis about the event due to overwhelming feeling like shame or embarrassment.

Student perception of the idea of failure v. the reality of failure

Overall, the students had a predominantly negative perspective of the idea failure and yet, when students took time to analyze their own failures, either through self-reflection or in connection with other, they understand that failure leads to learning and thus becomes beneficial. From survey-1 and survey-2, the students provided knee-jerk word association towards failure with a few stating a more positive perspective of failure. This show that the gut reaction towards failure is based on the remembrance of the moment of failure, yet when a students looks back on their lives failure seems less dramatic. So when these students were asked to analyze some failures form their own lives, after analyzing failure from another perspectives, they seemingly had a better understanding of the possibility of learning from failure in their lives.

Chapter 5 Discussion

This section examines the potential benefit this research has on adding to existing conversation surrounding failure. First, this section analyzes the relationship between the findings and the academic literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Next the subsection, Implications for Practice and Policy explains how this research could be used to further the discussion of failure in schools. Followed by the subsection, limitation of the study, which acknowledges the researchers conscious effort for validity and reliability in this study. Lastly, this section presents examples of how one could expand on this research.

Implication for Literature

The results of this research align with the findings from prior research. The results indicate the students ultimately have a drive for self-acceptance, according to self-worth theorists (De Castella, Byrne, and Covington 2013). Based on the analyzed data, the findings show that the student's predominantly negative feeling towards failure are motivators, both to succeed and as failure avoidant (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002). The sense of shame is not directly discussed, yet, through the discussion and data, related feelings are mentioned. This sense of "shame," from self and from others, can block the ability to self-reflect and analyze (De Castella, Byrne, and Covington, 2013).

The results also found that students had a hard time recollecting a time in which they failed. The literature could view this in two ways. First, some students may have a

hard time recollecting these times due in part to self-preservation strategies. Self-preservation strategies function as a way to protect the self from the emotional harm that is associated with failure (De Castella, Byrne, and Covington, 2013).

A second view of why some students may have a harder time recollecting a moment could be learned helplessness. This is more severe than just self-preservation, as learned helplessness is the endurance of unpleasant stimuli (Klein, Fencil-Morse, Seliman, 1979). Student may accept that failure, put it behind them, and/or not wish to remember it. This option means that the student has been conditioned to react this way. The overall problem with these two scenarios is that there is no definitive conclusion base on the collected data.

There is a lot in the findings that links this research with past research, yet, there are aspect that makes this research unique. First, the findings represent a small group of students and their unique perspective. The findings are presented through the student's voice, not through numbers and data points. Failure is personal and subjective, which can be hard for one to create a one size fits all approach to dealing with students failure.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This qualitative action research design approach was intended to improve teaching practice rather than just the production of knowledge. Yet, teachers, administrators, etc., who may have experienced similar situations of student failure aversion or acceptance, can use the information presented to help them think about how their own students feel about failure and how that is translated to the classroom. The findings in this researcher

have introduced a cumulative insight into how students perceive failure. Better understanding about failure should be discussed throughout education. It should be embraced instead of dismissed. We have to start an open dialogue about failure and not expect students to understand and process on their own. Failure is inevitable, and everyone experiences it. There is a benefit to understanding that one is not alone in the feeling one has about failure. This type of discussion leads to a more empathetic view, for teacher and for students. Empathy helps to better universalize the safe space of a classroom.

Teachers, parents, administrator, etc. should be asking questions that constantly assess their own selves to better assess others. They should be asking themselves questions like: how do my students and/or children understand failure? Is there anything that they may need help in understanding? What am I doing to help or hinder their progress?

As teachers, we know the benefits of learning from your mistakes. As humans, we don't want to fail and show weakness. Students need to see failure happen in real time. In the class room, it might be beneficial for teachers to openly acknowledge their own failure, not just the failure that have happened in the past, "*When I was in school I failed all the time...*" Teachers should make mistake or fail in the classroom, assess it in real time, and work through it as a class. This provides students with a model for how to deal with failure.

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, the researcher was not the teacher of record. This has made it harder to have consistent and comprehensive access to the participants, which means that the research presented is only a small snapshot and not a comprehensive body of work.

Secondly, this qualitative action research is site and participant specific. The school is located in a suburb of Northern California and the teacher student population is predominantly homogeneous white and middle-class. Expanding on this research to other school sites, geographical locations, demographics, etc. might produce completely different findings.

Lastly, as discussed in the section Researcher Positionality, the researcher has had a personal connection towards failure while a student and as a teacher. This has made the research more personal and thus the potentiality for personal biases may have limited the researchers ability to identify alternative perspectives that differ from her own.

Directions for Future Research

Future research can continue to examine how student's perceptions about failure can help teachers finding non material incentives or reward structures to help give students a sense of self worth. Action research allows teachers to examine and better their own teaching practices. One can use the surveys, presented in this study, or make their own, depending on the information they wish to uncover to broaden the scope of

understanding. For example, it would be highly beneficial to get a broader student demographic, different grade level, different school sites, etc.

Also, future research can examine other factors that influence student perception of failure. For example, if a student fails in a particular school subject how does it affect the student in other subjects? Are teachers predisposed to think badly about a student academic success and/or failure based on or in conjunction with the perspective of a previous teacher? This could include more comprehensive research in a study that tracks student progress over a long period of time. The key component for continuing this research is to understand the varying aspects of failure and how they relate to education.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

As a teacher, the researcher understood the benefits of creating a safe learning environment, and yet a fair number of students still showed an aversion to failure that ultimately hindered their ability to try. This does not just happen in one class but in countless others. As a qualitative action research study, the goal was to examine how a select sample of sixth grade students from one classroom in Northern California perceive failure personally, academically, and socially?

As this study is action research, the initial intent was to improve the teaching practice and help teachers build up their students self-worth. The primary finding culminated in two themes. The first, suggests that students have a better understanding of failure, their own and others, is when they are socially engaged. This allows students to analyze themselves in relation to others, which provide a concrete reference for how to deal and process with failure. This help students to understand failure through multiple perspective, though always through their own subjective lens.

The second theme, student perception of the idea of failure v. the reality of failure, found that students predominantly have a negative view of failure while still understanding that there are learning benefits that come because of failure. Though they understand this. This begs the question, what must educators and/or society do to solve this problem?

As this research is centered on a small select group of students, this research be used to help teachers and society ask themselves, how do my students and/or children understand failure? Is there anything that they may need help in understanding? What

am I doing to help or hinder their progress? Students should learn how to better assess and analyze themselves, instead of just relying on others to do it for them.

The overall take away from this study is that failure is a vast subject with no right or wrong answer. What a teacher might use to help one student to overcome failure might not work as well for another. The key is for teachers to guide students to learn how they can help themselves to understand failure and use it as a tool for success.

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