

FAILING FORWARD: THE POWER OF BEING FEARLESS, NOT FLAWLESS

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Further Information
This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>

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Introduction

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. Despite this, more adolescent boys are being crippled by anxiety at the fear of failing.

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.

The Research Question

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



Research Context and Participants

The Southport School, Australia, was established in 1901 and currently has 1600 boys from Prep to Year 12, including 320 boarders from Years 7-12. The action research participants for this project were members of a Year 7 English class, who had been streamed together since Year 3 due to being academically gifted. There were 25 boys in total and the action took place during Term 3 2019 for one 50 minute lesson per week, over a nine week period.

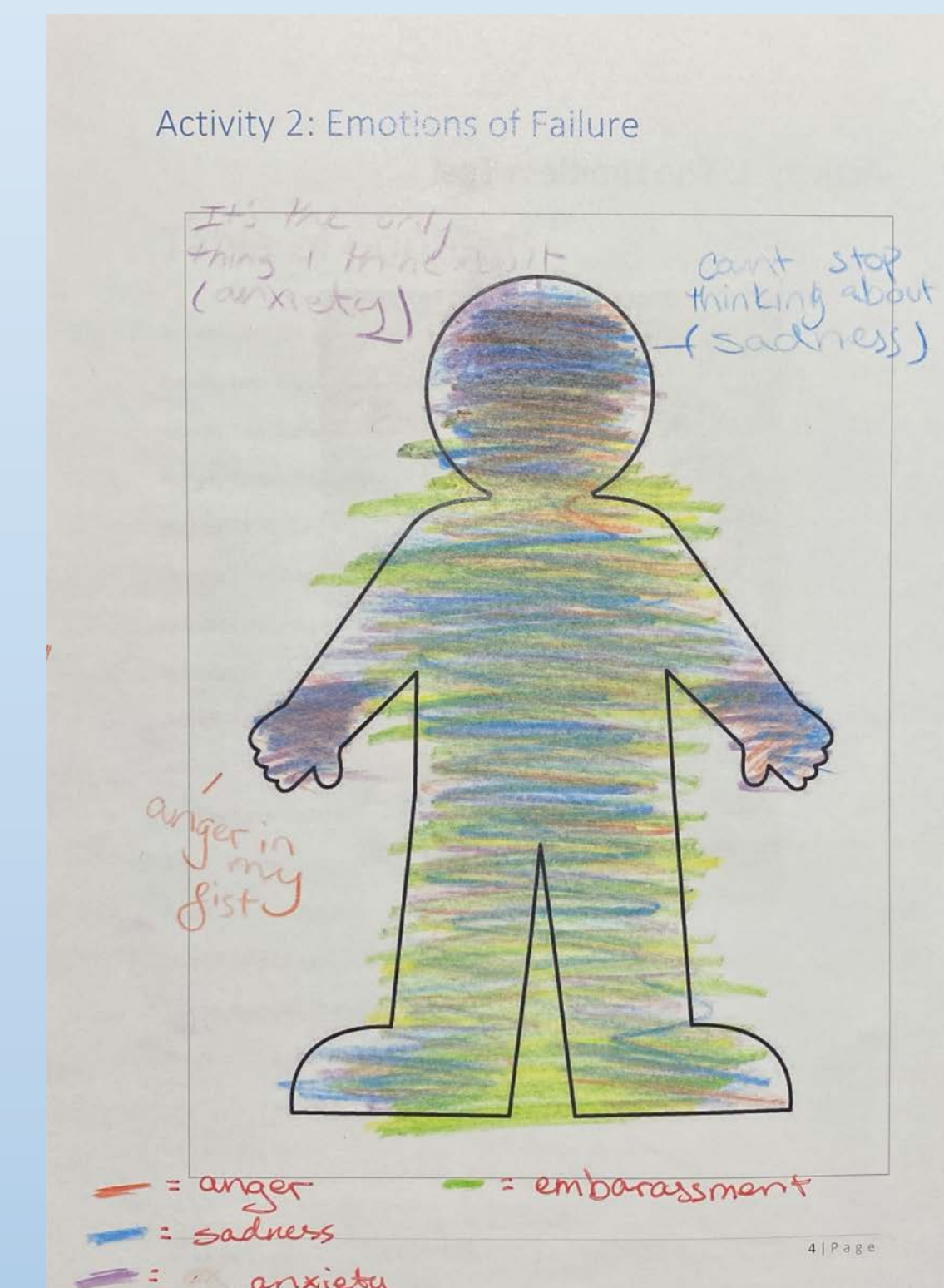
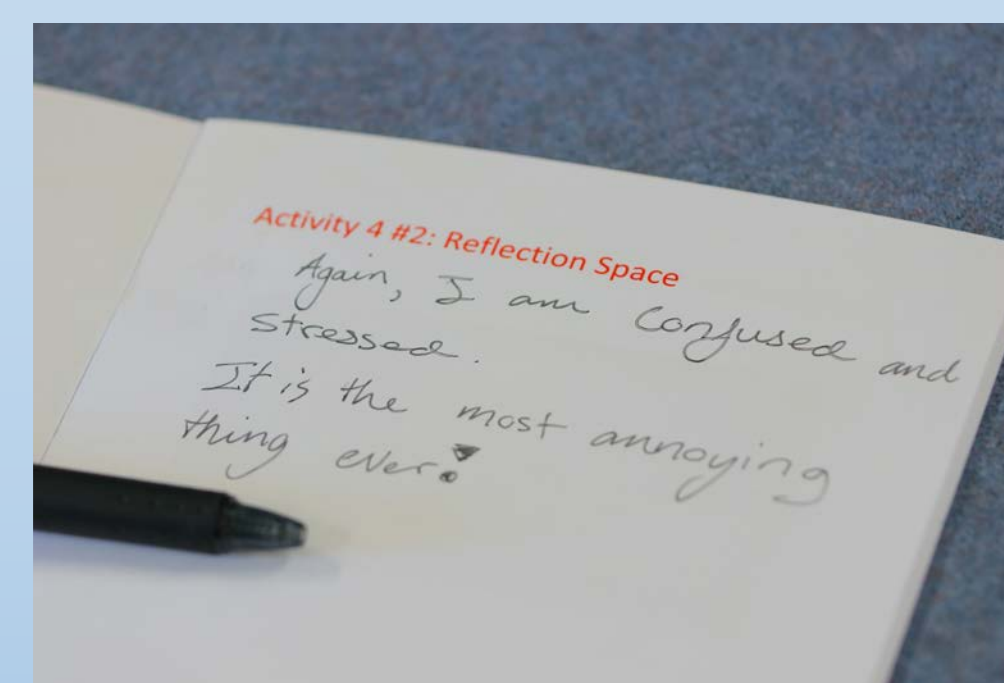
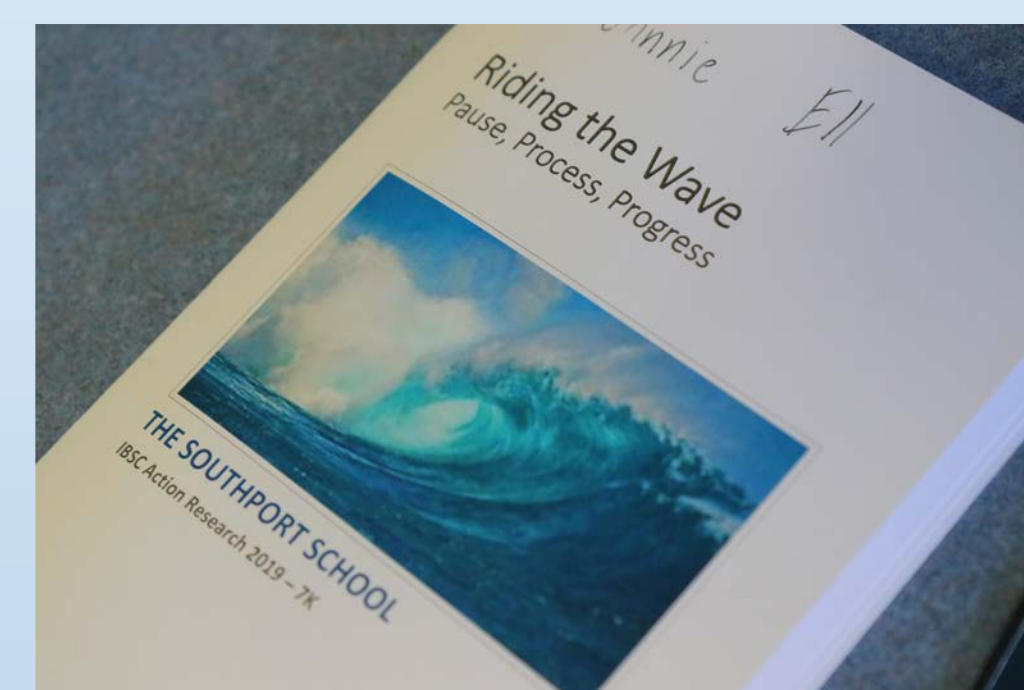
The Research Action

Each boy was issued with a personal journal, 'Riding the Wave,' to document his journey through the action research phase. The boys were engaged in a variety of activities that were specifically designed to be very challenging on the first attempt, such as: origami and demanding literacy and numeracy games. The focus was to promote **bravery and risk-taking** and included implementing explicit mindfulness strategies into classroom practice. The main goal of the project was to strengthen the boys' ability to **bounce back** after setbacks as well as to foster increased **emotional resilience** and tenacity.



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. Once this content was summarized, reviewed and discussed, I searched for common themes and developed a coding scheme for analysis. Three key themes were identified: **Equipping**, **Normalising** and **Empowering**.



Analysis and Discussion

When I fail, I can't stop thinking about it. It's like it is the only thing I can think about.

All boys, without exception, had an immediate and intense emotional reaction towards the word "failure" and all had encountered failure one way or another. Further analysis of student journal entries, interviews, and discussions clearly revealed there was still a lot of anxiety towards potential and future failures. This discovery guided my research practice and approach and reaffirmed the importance of:

Equipping boys with wellbeing tools to foster emotional resilience towards failure.

"I think I've been a bit foolish to think that everything will be easy on the first attempt."

Normalising the negative emotions attached to failure by learning to "ride the wave."

"If we don't have moments of struggle then what's even the point at being successful at something?"

Empowering students to take risks and challenge their fixed mindset.

"I realised that I had nothing to lose ... If I forgot some of the words, what's the worst that could happen? I wanted to take the chance."

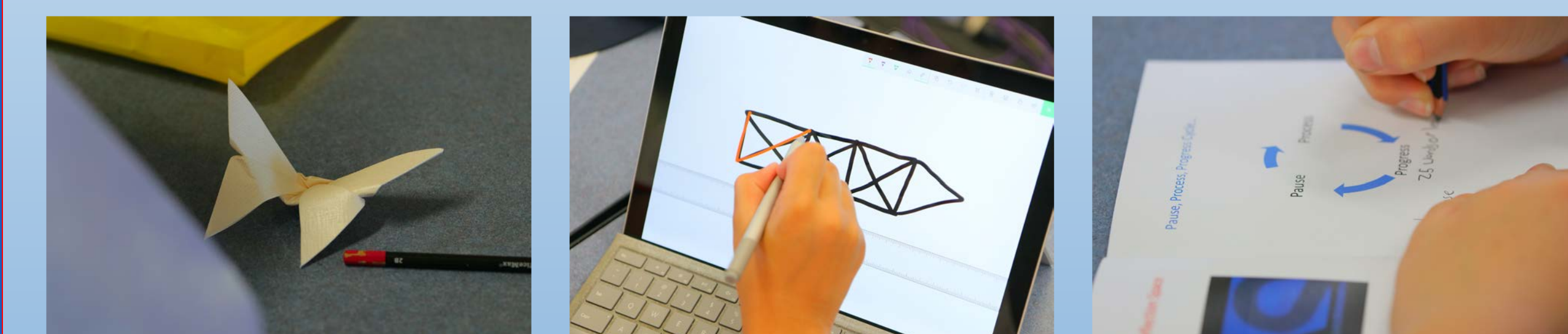
Conclusions and Implications

The most powerful impact from this project was the boys' ability to tackle challenges and obstacles with a **fresh sense of optimism**. 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 and took greater risks with their learning. They had discovered the power of **being fearless, not flawless**.



As an educator, I have a better understanding of the need to be **flexible** and the careful **balance of care and support** required to encourage the boys to move out of their comfort zone.

Five months after completing the project, many of the boys indicated that they were still able to **self-regulate successfully and independently**. By removing the fallacy of failure and empowering the boys to take risks with their learning, they **rediscovered a love of learning** and the joy that comes with appreciating and conquering the unfamiliar.



Key Readings

- Dweck, C. (2007). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Ballantine Books.
- Lahey, J. (2016). *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*. Harper Publishing.
- Schonert-Reichl, K. & Lawlor, M. (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.