Failing to Succeed: Success Through the Lens of Failure

By

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Teaching
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Abstract

The capacity to learn is a core component of the human experience. Our unique learning process plays a key role in the success and longevity of our species. Failure is an integral part of that process. This qualitative research study seeks to recognize failure as an fundamental component of the learning process, while investigating various causes for failure-adverse behaviour in students. The data presented is a culmination of two sources of knowledge: an investigative literature review, and by way of semi-structured interviews conducted with educators experienced with failure-adverse behaviour. This research breaks new ground for the discourse of failure, and builds on Carol Dweck’s work on Growth Mindset, and Angela Duckworth’s work on Grit and Resiliency. During this research, two new concepts emerge from my analysis, and provide new language for the discourse of failure: Failure-Normative Behaviour (FNB) and Zones of Proximal Resilience (ZPR). The data uncovered by this research shows that the combination of these two concepts will result in learning environments that are conducive to learning through the failure-experience.

**Key Terms:** failure, success, growth mindset, grit, failure-adverse behaviour, student success
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents for providing me with the opportunities and support to succeed. All of my life, you have provided a learning environment that was conducive to risk taking, and supported and strengthened me through my various ups and downs in life. Your dedication to the learning process has been an inspiration.

I would also like to thank the various staff at OISE for all of their support and patience with me as I’ve wrestled with writing this monster over the past fifteen months. A special place is my heart belongs to Cristina Guerrero, Laura Landertinger, and Arlo Kempf, whose guidance and council during the writing process was essential in its successful completion.

To the participants who gave their valuable time to be a part of this research, I would like you to know that without your priceless insights and willingness to share, none of this would have been possible. Samantha and Rudy, thank you.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Lauren. The endless nights of listening, editing and support that you have provided will never be forgotten. You encourage me to risk, lose, love and succeed. You are stability in a storm. Thank you.
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Introduction and Research Context

The capacity to learn is a core component of the human experience. Although our world is teeming with various forms of intelligent life, none learn with the aptitude and efficiency of human beings. Humans are capable of reason, deduction and learning from cause and effect. The learning process is what has established our position as the dominant species on Earth. More often than not, failure is a necessary part of this learning process. It is extremely rare that a learner can have mastery over new information. While there are some things that a learner is naturally good at, there will always be new knowledge that is the source of struggle and frustration. This struggle is conducive to the learning process. Failure is conducive to the learning process. It is a universal experience, and exists in every facet of our lives. Every living person on this planet will fail at countless junctures of their lives, acknowledging this is the first step to normalising the experience.

In the classroom, every student will engage in failure in a deeply personal way. Those who regard failure as a negative, and reductive to the learning process will be less inclined to push through the experience towards success. In my experience, this attitude against failure seems to be stronger in our schools than in our day-to-day lives. When a child is learning to ride a bike, the common advice is to simply dust yourself off and try again after a fall. When a student frequently fails in a subject, they are often met with far less enthusiastic advice. I believe that fear of failure is a learned concept, and this paper, I will investigate origins of this fear and suggest strategies for normalising and demystifying the failure experience.
1.1 Research Problem

There is a negative relationship between learners and failure. All students, including students that appear to be unmotivated, care immensely what other people think of them. They care about being seen as competent, and not a failure. (De Castella, 2013). I believe that this is a learned behaviour, which means that it can be corrected. Given that failure is a necessary step to success, it is important that we as educators, work towards demystifying failure for our learners. Students who accept failure as a necessary step are often times more likely to succeed. Those who are high on fear of failure are classified as self-protectors. Self-protectors lack confidence, and rather than learn to renegotiate their relationship with failure, they try to reduce its implications (De Castella, 2013). Educators who are able to mitigate this, by respecting the impact and importance of failure, are more prepared to create a learning environment that carries learners towards success.

We need to stop hiding from failure. We need to stop hiding failure from our students, from our discourse, from our classrooms. We need to embrace it, both students and teachers alike. By doing so, we will reduce stress and increase motivation, having removed the anxiety of an inevitable learning process.

1.2 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the student relationship between failure and motivation. Students with an unhealthy relationship to failure can sometimes adopt a practice called defensive pessimism. In doing so, they hold unrealistically low expectations for tasks where performance is to be evaluated (Norem and Cantor, 1986). Yet failure is a necessary step in the learning process, and one by which learners become aware of their mistakes and can begin
corrective steps. Failure is essential for learning. In our day to day lives, we encounter failure in many different shapes. We slip on ice in the winter when we aren’t careful of where we walk. We pick ourselves up when we are learning to ride a bike. We fumble through song lyrics until we finally learn them correctly, or sometimes… not at all. There are failures that we are perfectly comfortable with. Yet, there are others that we cannot tolerate. In this paper, I investigate those failures. I investigate where the anxiety comes from that prevents learners from attempting new challenges. I identify sources of this fear, because it is my belief that this fear of failure is an entirely learned behaviour. In my investigation, I look at three primary educators of fear: the home, the teachers, and the school.

1.3 Research Questions

Throughout the course of my research, I strove to investigate failure through multiple lenses. To further my investigation, my research was focused through the following three questions:

1. What does failure mean to teachers?
2. How do these definitions translate to their students?
3. What are strategies that teachers can adopt to begin the process of destigmatizing the failure experience for students?

1.4 Reflexive Positioning Statement

I am the son of two teachers, whose combined experience in the classroom totals over seventy-five years. I have been a student in two very different educational ecosystems (Bahamian/Colonial and Canadian), and an educator in two more (Korean and Canadian). In
these experiences, I have encountered many differences and want to further investigate how they shape the way that education is delivered to students. One particular experience that stands out, was the way in which the Colonial system in The Bahamas handled student advancement in the 1990s. Ontario elementary schools utilise a social promotion model, whereby students are promoted to the next level based on their age. During my elementary schooling in the 1990s, students in The Bahamas were held accountable to a merit-based system. It would be common for a student to repeat an entire grade level if their performance did not meet the system’s expectations. The result of this practice was that by the time students had graduated from their mandatory schooling, the majority had achieved competency over the required materials. These results were measured by national standardized tests known as the Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGSCE).

Although there have been changes to the Bahamian education in recent years, I am fascinated by a system that acknowledges failure as a positive part of the learning process. During the course of this research, I interview a Bahamian teacher to learn more about the changes since the years I studied there, and if they are experiencing the same problems that are present in the Canadian system.

On a more personal note, I have recently come to terms with failure in my own ways. Having explored Buddhist ideologies while living and teaching abroad in South Korea, I am comforted by one tenet in particular. The First Noble Truth in Buddhism states that suffering is inevitable. In my understanding, this extends to failure. It is an inevitability that we must all face with optimism, in order to overcome it. I feel that if this were a more widely appreciated and held belief, the overall mental health and success of our learning population would see overall improvements.
1.5 Preview of the Whole

In response to the research questions, I have conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview two teachers concerning their instructional strategies for teaching with failure in mind. My interview questions have been designed to probe for a deeper understanding of the teachers’ perceptions of failure, and how those perceptions transfer to their students. In Chapter Two, I review existing literature in relation to failure, focusing on the effect of learning environments, relationships with failure, and transitions to success. In Chapter Three, I elaborate on the research design. Chapter Four reports my research findings, and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature. I conclude with Chapter Five, by identifying the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I have reviewed relevant literature as it relates to my discussion and investigation into failure. Understanding and demystifying our relationship with failure is integral to stepping past its limitations. To do this, I have focused on four specific aspects of this relationship. First, I look at the learning environment, and its many shapes and expectations. Given that learners are situated in a number of unique learning environments throughout the course of their lives, looking critically at these settings can help to understand where the relationship with failure begins, the pathways it leads to, and the effects it can have on learner self-efficacy. Next, I look at understanding failure itself. What is failure? How do learners understand failure? Where do learners learn how to deal with failure? What roles do schools have to play in this relationship? These are all questions that need to be investigated. Without a thorough understanding of failure, it is difficult for learners to grasp its importance to, and its impact on the overall learning process. The third component to this literature review looks at aversions to failure. More and more, students in schools are taking steps to avoid failure. In this section, I will connect back to where these ideas around failure first surface, their effects on motivation, and the cost of this unhealthy relationship. There are structural and procedural elements in schools that allow this relationship to intensify, further incentivizing students to become averse to both failure and risk. These will be called into question. Finally, I steer this review in a positive direction. I believe that surmounting failure and welcoming it into the learning process is an achievable goal. Teachers, administrators and students alike will all benefit from renegotiating this relationship. It simply is not enough to steer students towards success without teaching them to trust failure. The two are intrinsically bound together, and learning to
connect the two is a lesson that each and every person in this world will face at one point in their lives. This lesson belongs in the classroom.

2.1 The Home as a Learning Environment

My niece turns three in a few months. Over the last two years, I have watched her stumble, try, fail and succeed her way through life. This is a child who at one point, would cry if she was not allowed to sit with my family on top of the kitchen table. This same child, invariably wandered to the edge of the aforementioned kitchen table, and every so often, would tried to throw herself off the edge. Does my niece have a death wish? There’s a very slim chance of that. More likely, she is discovering her world. She is learning. In this way, my niece is not a unique child. On a day-to-day basis, infants and toddlers all over the world are discovering their surroundings. The home is a child’s first learning environment. The International Association for Child Safety (IAFCS) is an organization that certifies child proofers, and has over 150 members. These members include giants of the childcare retail industry, including companies like Toys R Us. (O’Donnell, 2012). The very existence of this industry relies on the inevitability of failure. We live in a world where the act of discovery is tied to the potential of failure. It is completely reasonable to safeguard and protect our society’s most vulnerable sector. It would be irresponsible to let them take this journey unguided.

To our credit, we don’t. Parents everywhere are dedicated to protecting and fostering growth in their children. In doing so, they begin to create a culture of learning. These are the rules, boundaries and expectations that young learners must exist within. These are the first guidelines for success. In his 2004 paper, Failure-avoidance: parenting, the achievement environment of the home and strategies for reduction, psychologist Ted Thompson looks at the
significance of the home as one of the first arenas for learning. He focuses on the concept of failure-avoidant patterns of behaviour, and their common features and links with parenting. This is a relationship that is inescapable for young learners. At this point in their development, learning is a top-down relationship. They are captive students, unable to diversify the source of their education. Here, parents are everything. Parents are diverse; parents are unique. Some parents come with instruction manuals, and an arsenal of how-to books and supporting family members. Some parents have no choice but to make it up as they go along. What unifies these parents however, is their primal need to protect their children. It is from the shade of our parents’ protection, that our first learning culture is created.

It is a culture that is guided by two dominant goals, creating a learner that has high self-efficacy, and protecting them from losing it (Thompson, 2004). It is learner-centric, in that the child is the most important variable in the equation. They must be protected in the learning process. At this point, parents often succumb to a common trap called the competence complex (Berglas 1990), where achievement becomes linked as a criteria of personal worth. The problem however, is that the competence complex does not only affect the learner. Many parents look at their child’s learning process as a reflection of their own competence as parents. This increases pressure on both groups to perform. Children who develop at a rate that does not suit their parents’ expectations are then failing for the first time. How parents deal with this failure, will help to shape the way that a learner navigates the learning process for the rest of their lives.

Unfortunately, many parents adopt failure-avoidant behaviours. They do so in a number of ways, and for a number of reasons. One of the most common ways of avoiding failure is to simply embrace success. Some parents recognize the strengths of their children at a very early age, and attempt to build on them. An infant who taps their feet and dances to their parent’s
music, may be enrolled in dance classes as a toddler. Children who show themselves to be mathematically-oriented will be cultivated to build on this strength. While this is in many ways a logical progression, it subtly tells a learner to lean into things that come easily. This is the beginning of failure-avoidant behaviour. In his paper, Thompson (2004) writes that ‘by enabling an individual to avoid the negative effects of failure, in terms of damage to self-worth, the strategies that characterise these avoidant patterns of behaviour inevitably propel the individual towards failure” (Thompson, pg. 5). Failure is after all, an unavoidable life experience. By avoiding this lesson, and by focusing primarily on success, parents fail to prepare their children for learning environments that no longer resemble the home, and no longer have a vested interest in protecting their child’s self-worth. When a child enters their first classroom, they enter into a transformed culture of learning. Whereas homes are learner-centric, classrooms are often group-centric. Students are no longer guaranteed individual attention as class sizes increase. The learning habits that young children bring with them from their homes are less effective in this new space. The source of their education has become diversified.

2.2 Effects of Different Learning Environments

In 1991, researchers Entwisle, Meyer and Tait studied a group of 123 first-year electrical engineering students in Cape Town, South Africa. The students were given a questionnaire that delved into their study habits, and what they liked, or disliked about the courses they were currently enrolled in. Their findings shed an interesting light on different types of student relationships with failure, and the learning preferences that accompany them. How do the diverse learning cultures of 123 students come together? What tendencies emerge after many years of education? How do different learners learn best?
The researchers found that the students were best categorised into two segments, students who focused on meaning orientation, and students who focused on reproducing orientation. They found that students who had a meaning orientation, adopted a deep approach to learning supported by intrinsic motivation, and preferred teaching, examinations, tutorials and courses that build on freedom of expression, experimentation and opportunities to demonstrate their own thinking (Entwisle, Meyer & Tait, 1991, pg. 249). In the framework of failure, these are students that seem to have a healthy relationship with the risks of failure. These students embrace the freedom of the unknown and being able to take risks and explore the learning process with high levels of personal agency and self-efficacy. Contrary to this, Entwisle, Meyer and Tait also encountered students with a reproducing orientation. These students “adopted a surface approach to learning sustained by a fear of failure or an instrumental motivation” (Entwisle, Meyer & Tait, 1991, pg. 249). In terms of their classes, these students wanted lectures who told them exactly what to put into their notes, and tutorial environments where teaching assistants only revisited the lecture and clarified the professor’s notes (Entwisle, Meyer & Tait, 1991, pg.250). Compared to meaning-oriented students, these are students who have a more complex relationship with the risks of failure. Whereas meaning oriented students leaned into the unknown, these students are frightened by it. They are failure-adverse, and rely on strong guidance to navigate the learning process. Their learning is described as a “surface approach”, it is not a comprehensive process that full reaches into the course concepts. Meaning-oriented students want freedom to demonstrate their own thinking. Reproducing-orientated students are too afraid of failure in their own thinking process to accept this risk.

In his 2004 paper, Ted Thompson takes a critical look at the developmental years of a learner’s life. His focus is on the complex underpinnings of the home, and its life-long effects on
a child’s relationship with failure. This is a time that determines how a learner will interact with failure in future learning environments. In Entwisle, Meyer and Tait’s research, they look at the opposite side of the spectrum. Their research breaks learners into two categories, as defined by their complex relationships with failure. What happens however, in between these two points? What happens to students at their most vulnerable time, as they learn the landscape of their lives in elementary and high school?

2.3 Growing Success and Neglecting Failure

In Ontario, the answer to that question is confusion. The transition between elementary and high school currently confuses the student relationship with failure. Ontario schools lack a uniform policy on failure. What it does have however, is a relatively uniform policy on success. Published in 2010, Growing Success is an Ontario document that outlines the Ministry of Educations’ stance on student success. On page 1 of this document, the Ministry states:

The Ontario government is committed to enabling all students to reach their potential, and to succeed. Our challenge is that every student is unique and each must have opportunities to achieve success according to his or her own interests, abilities, and goals. We have defined high expectations and standards for graduation, while introducing a range of options that allow students to learn in ways that suit them best and enable them to earn their diplomas. (Ontario, 2010)

At first, this mission objective seems admirable, and in many ways it is. The problem however, is that this policy is only inclusive of student success. It overlooks failure. Through the lens of Ted Thompsons’ paper, this mission objective reinforces that primal, parental need to protect students
from the reality of failure. It builds on existence strengths, and does not permit the opportunity to experience, cope and navigate a healthy relationship with failure.

In Ontario schools, a student’s time of study between kindergarten and Grade 8 is fundamentally different from his or her time of study between Grades 9 and 12. Between kindergarten and Grade 8, there is no real consequence to failure. The culture around learning emphasizes success, as students are socially promoted from one grade to the next. At this point in their learning, students are entrenched in a learning culture that tells them that their academic performance is unrelated to their academic progress. Failure does not impede progress, promotion is guaranteed. In high school however, the system and the learning culture suddenly shift. Students are no longer permitted academic progress without academic success. Growing Success states as much. Graduation occurs when “high expectations and standards” (Ontario, 2010) have been met. In order to succeed, students must meet these standards. Regardless of whether or not this current configuration is the best system for our schools, there is an undeniable shift in the learning culture. Students who have been prepared by their teachers, principals, superintendents and policy makers are suddenly held to unexpected expectations that they have never been taught to meet.

Although the Ontario government claims that Ontario schools ended classroom streaming over a decade ago (Rushowy, 2013), the practice is still very much alive in Ontario schools and classrooms. Previously, classrooms were divided into three streams, basic, general, and advanced. In basic classrooms, students were streamed towards vocational studies, general classrooms to colleges, and advanced classrooms to universities. Today, students are given the opportunity to choose between only two streams, applied and academic. While the names of these segments are less derisive than their predecessors, their purposes are the same. Students in
the academic classes have higher prerequisite grades than students in the applied stream. Academic students have failed less. As a result, they are often thought of as smarter, or more intelligent than their counterparts. Advocates for this system argue that the two segments allow teachers to diversify their teaching styles. One of the first principles of child development that is widely accepted by all theorists is that people develop at different rates (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 5). Creating two distinct learning environments should complement this, in theory. Unfortunately, the applied and academic designations fail this goal.

Instead, the two streams create a divisive learning environments that foster Entwisle, Meyer and Tait’s two learner categories. Academic classrooms create more opportunities for meaning-oriented learners to emerge. Teachers in academic classrooms often have more faith in their students’ abilities, and push them to overcome fear of failure and to experiment with independent thinking, and intrinsic motivation. Contrary to this, applied classrooms lack these opportunities. Instead, they foster more opportunities for the creation of reproducing-orientated students, who may “[adopt] a surface approach to learning sustained by a fear of failure” (Entwisle, Meyer & Tait, 1991, pg. 249). Students in applied classrooms already have the potential to suffer from issues with self-efficacy. Their positioning in this new learning culture has unfairly put them in a disadvantageous position. Growing Success makes provisions to provide them a pathway to graduate, but it does so without addressing the underlying, fundamental impediment to their success: managing failure.

2.4 Understanding Failure

In her 2014 Master’s Thesis, To Heed the Lessons of Failure: Individual Differences in Cognitive, Affective and Behavioural Responses to Failure, Justine Danielle Zatzman looks at
the psychological effects of failure on a sample of 143 participants. In her results, she highlights that responses are assessed and slotted into an evaluative dichotomy as constructive or destructive. “Some individuals”, she writes, “are motivated to appropriate the failure experience for use in future pursuits – to learn from their mistakes … others do not share this… and react with hostility, discouragement and demotivation” (Zatzman, 2014, pg. 2). These findings reinforce the notion that renegotiating student relationships with failure is an attainable goal. In order to succeed at this goal however, research must identify what criteria must be met in order to foster healthier relationships with failure. Zatzman’s research narrows in on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) as one possible way of doing this. SDT describes an individual’s three fundamental needs for a healthy psychological well-being. These needs are: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000, pg. 63-64). When an individual experiences failure, it calls into question these three fundamental human needs.

A student who feels as though they have lack competence, feels insignificant and inferior when compared to those who have succeeded. In Ontario schools, classroom streaming highlights disparities in student competence. This creates a negative relationship with failure. Compounding on this, is the paradoxical relationship between failure and relatedness. All learners should technically be united by their shared experiences with failure. Yet, the structure of Ontario schools is one that divides students based on the frequency of failure. This transforms the unifying qualities of failure into one that divides and harms a student’s healthy psychological well-being. Finally, students who fails must come face-to-face with marginalised autonomy.

Failure is healthy; failure is universal. Every learner benefits from a teacher, who is ready, willing and capable of supporting students when they fail. Students can and must be taught that the relieving their own autonomy into the hands of a teacher is a healthy step. Yet in every
school, there are students who distrust teachers. This distrust comes from extended histories and experiences with teachers and administrators who have punished them for failing, instead of supporting them through this inevitable step of the learning process. If the system can reconcile its own relationship with failure, and begins to teach students to navigate failure in a healthy way, then the effects of SDT will no longer have such a frighteningly strong grip on students.

2.5 Building Relationships Through Failure

In 2015, School Psychology International published a case study on ‘Gunilla’, a secondary school teacher in Sweden, who negotiates educational relationships with students who have a history of failure (Frelin, 2015, pg. 589). Positive relationships between students and teachers are particularly important for students who risk school failure (Pianta 2006). When students maintain positive relationships with teachers despite failure, it makes it clear to students that the teacher is there to support them despite failure. When students are aware of this, their willingness to continue learning through failure increases. In her work, Gunilla is in daily contact with students with a history of school failure, or being failed by school. She tells them:

Welcome! From now on we’ll be looking to the future, we don’t look back. This is your second chance, take it if you wish. If you want to go forward, and if you want help, we’ll do our very best to provide all the help we can. (Frelin, 2015, pg. 594)

These statements help to convey to students that their past failures will not be used against them in this new learning environment. It emphasizes the normalcy of failure, and allows students to unshackle themselves from its previous limitations. Furthermore, it creates trust. Gunilla says that “her trust in a student makes a difference… [i]f students feel trusted by the teachers, they are more likely to come to school” (Frelin, 2015, pg. 595). By conveying trust to her students,
Gunilla is helping to restore her students’ autonomy. She is also rebuilding the relationship between the student and the teacher. A student who views a teacher as inhumane and unfair will often refuse to be taught by that teacher, increasing failure rates.

Strong student-teacher relationships have been shown to transcend fear of failure in a number of different environments. Some researchers have looked at cultural differences to help to illustrate this. In Japan for example, there is a greater societal acknowledgement and encouragement of interdependencies on family, teachers and peers in the academic process (Castella and Byrne, 2013, pg. 863). An attitude of duty to a respected role model, be it a teacher or a parent, can help a student to overcome their fear of failure. By strengthening relationships between teachers and students, the weight of failure is less centralized on the individual, and supported by the many bodies that help to bear it.

All of these factors contribute to restoring the three fundamental needs as described by SDT. It means to help students to renegotiate their own self-image. Students who have been categorised by their failures are more likely to associate failure as a fundamental component of their self-image, instead of a conduit by which they can achieve success. A teacher’s work means coping with these tensions, and ensuring that students are aware that their failures do not define them, they are only a step in the learning process.

2.6 Owning Failure

The first step to renegotiating our relationship with failure is to accept and to own it. I will fail. You will fail. It is only natural. A 2002 paper in Psychology in the Schools titled “Teacher Attributions of Student Failure and Teacher Behaviour Towards the Failing Student” looks at the importance of teachers learning to own failure. In this paper, researchers Stelios
Georgiou, Constantinos Christou, Panayiotis Stavrinides and Georgia Panaoura compile self-reported data concerning teacher behaviour towards failing students. As the mediators of the classroom experience, teachers play an integral role in shaping the expectations that students have of themselves. They are the backbone of the classroom. Yet at the same time, teachers are continually learning alongside their students. Most schools cycle through an entire cohort of students every four years, this means that every four years, a teacher faces a completely new student population. Every cycle, teachers must relearn group dynamics, trends, fads, and learning habits. While there are some constants in the classroom, new variables are emerging every cycle. Cell phones and social media have replaced paper notes being handed between students. As the wealth gap in society widens, so too will wealth disparity appear in Ontario schools. Every year, teachers are being asked to succeed against new challenges, and every year, there will be teachers who fail.

Sometimes, in failing to address these new challenges, teachers may be responsible for their students’ failure as well. How teachers manage this potentially traumatic realisation, can shape the outcomes of their students’ efforts. In their research, Georgiou, Christou, Stavrinides and Panaoura find that “some teachers will persevere in their attempts to help students”, while “some tend to stop trying more easily” (2002, pg. 592). Additionally, the research team noted that the more teachers are ready to accept part of the responsibility for a student’s low performance, the less likely they are to give up trying to help the child improve (Georgiou, Christou, Stavrinides & Panaoura, 2002, pg. 592-3). Teachers have an integral role to play in supporting failing students. We are sometimes the cause of it. Reconciling this difficult truth is the first step to renegotiating our own relationships with failure, and successfully modeling the practice for our students.
2.7 From Failure to Success

In his paper, *Redos and Retakes Done Right*, American teacher Rick Wormeli (2011) argues that:

The goal is that all students learn the content, not just the ones who can learn on the uniform time line. Curriculum goals don’t require that every individual reaches the same level of proficiency on the same day, only that every student achieves the goal. (Wormeli, pg. 23)

Student success is the goal of teaching. It is the goal of *Growing Success* (2010). However, if we continue to reach towards it without normalising and demystifying our relationships with failure, we will continue to support only a disproportionate number of our students. A diverse group of learners will never reach success on a uniform timeline, but our system makes that assumption, and promotes success while ignoring the fundamental importance of failure. Wormeli writes, “Can you imagine telling a [Olympic] runner that his earlier 68.74 seconds from two years ago would be averaged with his new and improved 51.03 seconds, and that this time mash-up would be his official label as a runner (Wormeli, 2011, pg. 23). We would never do something like this, doing so would undermine the entire learning process. It would overlook the importance of incremental steps towards success. Yet, we do this every day, all across Ontario with the most vulnerable sector of our society.

Schools and teachers tamper with student motivation each and every time that we allow failure to deter success. Schools do not exist within a bubble. They are structures that exist within a larger system, and have a responsibility to reflect the expectations of the world they are preparing students for. When students leave high school, they leave with the history of the previous four years behind them. Based on the academic and applied divisions in Ontario,
students are being sent out into the world on sometimes completely different footings. They are painted by their failures and thrown into a world that in many ways, they have not yet been prepared for. Students have been taught that failure is harmful to the learning process, when this simply is not true.

In Japan, there exists a practice called kintsugi. It refers to the process of mending old pottery or ceramics. Broken shards are collected and fused back together with a resin that resembles gold (Gopnik, 2009). By the end of the process, old cups, saucers, and bowls are given a second chance at life, at function and at beauty. Kintsugi acknowledges the complexity of a life, and the rise and falls of our journeys through it. We must find a way to bring this ideology into our classrooms. We must celebrate the fall, because it has the potential to predicate success. It has the potential to motivate, incentivize and support a vulnerable student, who relies on his or her teacher for guidance, love and forgiveness. We are turning our backs on our students when we punish them for trying. We are turning our backs on the system when we support derisive divisions that tell a student that he or she is less. Failure is too important a step in the learning process to ignore. Doing so means casting our students aside, like broken pieces of clay.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I will expand on my research methodology. I begin by reviewing the general approach, procedures, and data collection instruments, before elaborating more specifically on participant sampling and recruitment. I explain data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. Furthermore, I identify a range of methodological limitations, but I also speak to the strengths of the methodology. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary of key methodological decisions and my rationale for these decisions given the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

The study was conducted using a qualitative research study approach, including a review of the existing literature pertinent to the research questions and purpose of the study. I conducted a total of two interviews: one semi-structured, face-to-face interview with a Toronto teacher, and one interview conducted over Skype with a Bahamian teacher. Carr (1994) points out some of the limitations that qualitative research has had to overcome in order to achieve recognition for its current contribution to the body of research knowledge relative the more ubiquitous quantitative method. Carr (1994) contends that neither quantitative or qualitative research is superior, however, they do explore empirical understanding differently. Qualitative research is much maligned due to the fact that is doesn’t seek to universalize results, but seeks to find commonalities that can explain experience and understanding. In sum, qualitative research seeks the perspective of participants to better explain as oppose to confirming a preconceived hypothesis. Qualitative research study is the best way to undertake this study because it provides
me the opportunity to examine the lived experiences of a small sample of Ontario school teachers. Furthermore, unlike quantitative studies, which are beneficial for answering mechanical ‘what?’ questions, qualitative studies explain the nuances of phenomena not easily explained by quantitative data. Therefore, the phenomenological nature of this research approach will be harnessed to investigate how teachers in Ontario cope with, teach and manage failure among their students.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection used in this study was the semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to hear about participants’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). The semi-structured format allows for the design of an interview that specifically addresses research questions with the depth consistent with a qualitative approach, while providing participants opportunity to expand in areas relatively uncharted by the researcher. The semi-structured interview protocol was the main instrument of data collection used in this study. This includes a set of pre-determined questions, but allow for additional questions to emerge through dialogue during the interview (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The protocol (located in Appendix B) is organized into four sections, beginning with the participant’s background information, followed by questions about their teaching beliefs and perspectives, then their teaching practice, and concluding with questions regarding supports, challenges, and next steps for teachers.
3.3 Participants

In this section I review the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment as well as examine possible methods with which to execute said recruitment. The final subsection will introduce each of the participants.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria. The following criteria will be applied to teacher participants:

1. High school teachers must have experience teaching both applied and academic classrooms.
2. Teachers will have at least 10 years of teaching experience.
3. Ontario teachers should be familiar with and comfortable discussing *Growing Success* (2010)

Due to the in-depth nature of these studies, qualitative research usually comprises of a small, selective sample (Carr, 1994). In order to address the main research question, the participants that I select must at least be open to entertaining the idea of failure as a positive step in the learning process. High school teachers should have experience teaching both sides of the streamed classroom, as their comparative data will be invaluable to the research process. I preferred teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience, simply because it adds depth to the data that they will be sharing with me.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures/Recruitment. The strategy employed in recruiting participants for study can involve various forms of recruitment outlined. Random sampling is an approach consistent with the purpose of finding generalizable data sought by quantitative studies, but doesn’t best explain the nuance of phenomena (Marshall, 1996). The three over-arching methods to selecting a sample for a qualitative study include convenience, purposeful, and theoretical sampling. Convenience sampling refers to the selection of the most accessible
participants (Marshall, 1996). Purposeful sampling instead, seeks out the most productive participants that are likely to provide deeper insight and understanding to a subject due to experience (Marshall, 1996). Finally, theoretical sampling involves building interpretive theories from data that emerges by successive interviews (Marshall, 1996). A combination of both convenience and purposeful sampling will be used in this study. The sampling procedure will be purposeful in that participants of this small sample will need to meet a set of defined criteria established above in order to provide the richest possible data. Convenience sampling will also be used due to the ease of accessibility to working professionals who are versed in the requisite knowledge and experience.

3.3.3 Participant Bios. One participant, pseudonym Rudy, is a Bahamian teacher with international teaching experience. He brings over twenty years of teaching experience to my research, and speaks to unique strategies for dealing with failure that are not employed in Ontario. The second participant, pseudonym Samantha, is a Toronto-based teacher who has been teaching for more than ten years in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Her experiences speak to the immediate threats and weaknesses in the TDSB’s methods of educating around the failure experience.

3.4 Data Analysis

During data analysis, researchers begin with a unit of data such as a word, narrative, or phrase, which is then compared to other units of data, while looking for common patterns throughout the information (Merriam, 2002). These patterns are given codes, which are sorted into categories and then further redefined into major themes, a procedure that DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006) refer to as template approach. During my analysis I have drawn on this
procedure, which involved transcribing interviews and coding the data, as it relates to my research purpose and questions. Subsequently, I identified and categorized frequent themes or discrepancies in the findings, while also recognizing null data in the research, and discussing the significance of it.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Ethical issues present themselves in all forms of research not just qualitative approaches. DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006) elaborate on four ethical issues specifically associated with qualitative interviews; decreasing the risk of unforeseen harm, safeguarding participants’ information, appropriately informing participants about the study, and decreasing the risk of exploitation. I have reduced this risk by providing participants with the interview questions well in advance of the scheduled interview. Furthermore, I have informed participants before beginning, and throughout the duration of the study, that they have the right to refuse to answer any questions that they do not feel comfortable with, and can remove themselves from participation at any point. This is important to point out that all participants are not coerced nor feel undue pressure to respond to something they feel uncomfortable with. Privacy of the interviewee is crucial, and because of the nature of sensitive information provided, every effort has been made to maintain their anonymity. Participants in my study have been provided with pseudonyms and their identities and any identifying indicators will not be released. Data will remain on a private, password protected external hard-drive and will be erased after five years. Participants have been appropriately informed of the study in person and/or written documentation. Interviewees have also been provided with a summary of the purpose of the study, the associated ethical implications, and the expectations of participants, within a consent
form in which they will be granting permission to be interviewed and audio recorded (located in Appendix A).

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

The largest drawback to this study is that the data will not be generalizable to the population due to the limited number of participants (Jackson II et. al., 2007). As discussed above however, this is not always the intention or most crucial aspect of all research. The strength of this methodology is that it will allow for a much deeper understanding of the effects of failure and fear of it, than a more rigid quantitative research approach would have (Carr, 1994). Specifically, the ethical parameters of the study allow me to interview teachers and obtain first-hand accounts. As the researcher plays a key, interpretative role in a qualitative study as a ‘human instrument’, it may result in biases and shortcomings within the data (Merriam, 200). Merriam (2002) insists however that rather than attempting to remove these subjectivities, it is more valuable to be able to identify and monitor the ways in which they may be influencing the data collection and interpretation. Depending on the abilities and insights of the researcher can also make the assessment of reliability problematic (Carr, 1994). Alternatively, however, qualitative researchers have less difficulty with validity than quantitative researchers do, as it becomes more difficult to confirm that a research condition resembles real life when the controls on a study increasingly become tighter (Carr, 1994).

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I explained the research methodology. I began with a discussion of the research approach and procedure, delving into the meaning and significance of qualitative
research and highlighting some of its major differences from quantitative research. I then described the instruments of data collection, identifying interviews as the primary source of data. I explored the various types of interviews conducted in qualitative research, and spoke to some of the benefits of semi-structured interviews. I then identified the participants of the study, listing the criteria applied to all interviewees, and providing brief introductions for those selected. I also described recruitment procedures, which entailed purposive sampling in order to maximize the richness and depth of data obtained, as well as convenience and snowball sampling due to the overall extent and scope of the research study. I proceeded to describe how I have analyzed the data, examining individual interviews before looking for common patterns and themes across the data. Ethical issues such as consent, risks of participation, member-checks, right to withdraw, and data storage were also considered, and ways to address these potential issues were recognized. Lastly, I discussed the methodological limitations of the study, such as the interpretive abilities and biases of the researcher, while also highlighting some of the strengths, such as first-hand accounts with teachers. In the next chapter, I report on the findings of the research.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

4.0 Introduction

This study aims to improve the relationship between students, teachers, parents and school administrations towards the failure experience. I will make a case for the importance of failure, and suggest strategies for implementing programs that will support learning through failure. My research is built on two foundations: a literature review that investigates various educator experiences with failure in classrooms, and qualitative interviews with two experienced educators.

One participant, pseudonym Rudy, is a Bahamian teacher with international teaching experience. He brings over twenty years of teaching experience to my research, and speaks to unique strategies for dealing with failure that are not employed in Ontario. The second participant, pseudonym Samantha, is a Toronto-based teacher who has been teaching for more than ten years in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Her experiences speak to the immediate threats and weaknesses in the TDSB’s methods of educating around the failure experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed. Both participants were asked the same set of interview questions, but follow up questions deviated based on content and context. The sampling procedure used in this study was convenience sampling, as it was the easiest and most expeditious recruitment method. I coded the interview data over numerous cycles, and used a variety of methods to understand my results. These methods included in vivo, and descriptive coding, which identifies and builds on trends in language that emerged from the transcripts.

In this chapter, I will connect my findings with my original research questions:

1. What does failure mean to teachers?
2. How do these definitions translate to their students?

3. What are strategies that we can adopt to begin the process of destigmatizing the failure experience for students?

In pursuit of answers, three dominant themes emerged from the transcripts:

1. Mindset

2. Developing Grit and Resiliency

3. Zones of Proximal Resilience / Failure-Normative Behaviour

The first theme builds on Carol Dweck’s work on mindset. “Some students,” she writes, “view intelligence as a fixed, something that they can not change (a fixed mindset), whereas others view intelligence as a malleable, something they can develop over time (a growth mindset)” (2006). Mindset plays a large part in determining a student’s relationship with the failure experience. This theme is further understood through the subcategories: Growth Mindset and Deficits, and Fixed Mindset and Motivation. By introducing these concepts, I lay the groundwork for further discussion into failure-normative strategies.

The second theme takes a look at Angela Duckworth’s concept of Grit. She defines grit as “a combination of passion and perseverance for a singularly important goal” (2016). This theme is further understood through two subcategories: Teacher Attitudes Towards Failure and Methods of Overcoming Failure. Through these categories, I chart a trajectory for new strategies that develop grit and resilience. If implemented, these strategies can support students through the failure experience, and help to reframe their understanding of the experience as a necessary step towards effective learning.

The third, and final theme breaks new ground. Using new language and terminology I have created for furthering discourse around failure, I investigate the idea of a Zone of Proximal
Resilience (ZPR), and Failure-Normative Behaviour (FNB). I look at what is required to create an zone of learning that inspires students to become resilient. When considering the classroom, I think it is important that the learning environment reflects the learning process; this includes the failure experience. In order to develop resilience, students must be exposed to it. They must be exposed to Failure-Normative Behaviour in which teachers and peers look directly at the failure experience, acknowledge it, and learn through and beyond it. These zones and experiences are crucial to the development of grit and resilience.

Three subthemes further this discussion. Remediation provides an opportunity to develop FNB, but if implemented incorrectly, can have significant disadvantages. I address Standardisation and Academic Gatekeeping as a complex, but necessary evil in the education system. It is a structure that is ripe for further research and remodeling.

Finally, I look at the dangers of Internalised Failure and address structural changes that must be made to support the development of FNB in students. I align myself alongside Dweck’s work, opposing a fixed mindset in classrooms. In the teaching practice, we often hear students, teachers and parents use expressions like, “He’s not really a math student, he’s more of an English student.” By using this language, we suggest and reinforce the idea that the potential to learn has an innate cap. We tell students that they are defined by their limitations. This is a notion that I firmly denounce. With the exception of Learning Disabilities, I refuse to acknowledge an artificial limit to human learning. Mathematically speaking, we will fail more times in our lives than we will ever succeed. Ignoring the importance of this truth in our schools is a fundamental oversight that has long-term consequences to the success of the learners that we are entrusted to teach.
4.1 Mindset

In the classroom, everything has a cost. Classroom materials cost money, remediation costs time, and if it takes neither of these resources, then it probably costs energy. Getting home at the end of the day often feels like a scramble to recoup losses, and reorganise for another expensive day. An effective teacher is one that can manage these expenses. An effective teacher finds the best investments, and makes smart choices that pay dividends over time. Mindset is one of these choices.

4.1.1 Growth Mindset and Deficits. Students with a “growth mindset foster greater learning and achievement … from elementary school through college, especially during challenging transitions or in difficult courses” (Rattan, Savani, Chugh, Dweck, 2015, pg. 722). They recognize that intelligence is malleable, and that there is a relationship between failure and future development. As such, growth mindset becomes more than just a way to think about learning; it becomes a vehicle by which students can imagine the possibility of a better self. It links the failure experience to personal development. This is an attitude that we as teachers must foster in our classroom. We can do this by first fostering a growth mindset in ourselves.

A teacher’s mindset has a large role to play in this equation. A teacher who adopts a growth mindset views their students’ intelligence as malleable, and is more likely to support them when they struggle. I believe that developing a growth mindset begins when we look for and acknowledge the deficits in our lives. In both of my interviews, participants shared various hurdles that they have encountered in their lives, and how these deficits contributed towards developing their current mindset. At the age of nine, Samantha immigrated to Canada and was faced with the realisation that she needed to learn English. She was faced with a deficit that had long-term ramifications on her perceptions of self. She explained:
When you land in a country where you don’t know the language… you experience [failure] a lot. Everyone can do this, you can’t. Everyone else can know about this, you can’t… I always felt like I had to catch up. I didn’t measure up to the Canadian Standard… but now I think, I’m 37… you can either feel bad about it for the rest of your life, or you can just accept it, and now I think I’ve started working towards accepting it.

Her ideas around the Canadian Standard are important when thinking about mindset. A learner who measures themselves against a standard is engaging in a very challenging process. They are recognising the gap between where they are, and where they are told they need to be. The space between their development, and their potential should be guided by an adult (Vygotsky, 1979, p.86); here, teachers are essential. In this story, it appears that Samantha’s mindset simply changed over time. There was no teacher to trigger this transformation. I think that as individuals mature, and as life presents its challenges, they come to better understand the importance of struggle and failure in the learning process. That however, is not a growth mindset.

I am confident that growth mindset is an active recognition that can be learned, and implemented at even younger ages. It is deliberate, and a way of thinking that Rudy holds dear to his heart. In our interview, he shared one of his favourite quotes, “I never lose, I learn.” Late in his life, Rudy began bicycle racing. He recounted his experience in our interview:

You know, I’d go into races and … whether I crossed the line first, or whether I crossed the line fifteenth, there is always something to take away from the race… I think that you can always learn from these situations.

In our interview, Rudy exhibited a strong growth mindset that he admitted to developing later in his education, as he entered his undergraduate program. He described himself as a “high-flyer” in
high school, but experienced significant struggle when entering university. He told me how he came to grips with this new experience:

[I realised] I’m not the only person failing this class, and if these guys are sitting down and buckling down and getting to it… [I] eventually was able to get through the course, but I think that my confidence in my whole self-belief was so shaken that I completely switched majors after that. [I] went from being a math-physics major to being a politics and economics major.

In this story, Rudy began to shift his mindset, but at a significant cost. When faced with what he perceived as a deficit in his abilities, his failure-adverse behaviour pushed him away from his major, and to something that he perceived was within reach of his abilities. Rudy measured himself against a standard and succumbed to the gap between where he was, and where he needed to be. As an adult, Rudy wholeheartedly embraces a growth mindset, but the juxtaposition of his two stories shows just how challenging the process can be, especially when approached without teacher guidance.

4.1.2 Fixed Mindsets and Motivation. If we allow students to embrace a fixed mindset, we are allowing them to be defined by the sum of their deficits (Yeager, Dweck, 2012, pg. 302). Deficits are natural encounters in the learning process. They are gaps in learning that can be filled. In a fixed mindset however, deficits become limits. They become the defining characteristics of a learner, and do not permit growth beyond that point. Our students are more than the sum of their deficits.

A fixed mindset poses multiple threats to the classroom. On one hand, there is the threat to the student. A student who believes that their intelligence is a fixed construct has no logical reason to pursue further studies. They have already reached their limit. As a result, a student with
a fixed mindset is not motivated to learn. This affects classroom participation, and can often
detract from the overall learning atmosphere. In my teaching experience, a distracted student is
contagious, and nearby students can easily become affected by this lower level of motivation.

In some cases, it can even have a negative effect on a teacher’s dedication to their students. In our interview, Rudy drew the line:

If there’s one thing I can not tolerate, that would be a student who is not willing to put
forth… and I shouldn’t say can not tolerate, but I will continue to work with a student as
long as they show that they are willing to put the effort in.

Although Rudy corrected his language as we discussed the matter, it is evident that this is
something that he feels strongly about. I earlier compared teaching to balancing a budget, and it
is in large part due to dialogues like this. When a teacher enters their classroom to teach, they are
entering into an informal agreement with their students. In exchange for the various currencies
that teachers bring into the class, students will make an honest attempt to learn from the
transaction. This idea was echoed by Samantha:

I hope I never get to the day when it’s just a job. It’s still … I’m not there yet, and I hope
I never get there. I love coming in [to teach], because I know I’m going to learn
something.

If teachers neglect to foster a growth mindset in their students, they are complicating the
negotiated relationship of the classroom. They are making it more difficult to find gratification in
the act of teaching. It would be hard for Samantha, or any other teacher to feel motivated if they
can not learn with their students. A fixed mindset in the classroom stifles this type of interaction.
It creates an environment in which teachers give up. They give up on their students, they give up
on the process, and they give up on their role as a facilitator of learning.
4.2 Developing Grit and Resiliency

How then, do we avoid giving up? Life is full of challenges and struggles that will shape the people that we become. Sometimes, in the face of adversity, giving up is the simplest option. Yet simple is not always what is best. In her research, psychologist and former-teacher Angela Duckworth looks at what it takes to overcome failure and rise towards success. She studied the highly successful and noticed a “ferocious determination that played out in two ways… unusual resilien[ce], and hard [work]… they not only had determination, they had direction… [a] combination of passion and perseverance… [i]n a word, they had grit.” (2016, pg. 8). Duckworth’s research has found grit to be one of the most valuable measures in education. It has a larger role to play in an individual’s success than intelligence quotient (IQ) or even innate talent. Grit determines what we do with those things; it pushes us to succeed despite setbacks and failure. By understanding grit, teachers can help to develop these skills in their students. They can foster a learning environment that promotes resilience and hard work. It begins with shaping a healthy attitude towards failure.

4.2.1 Teacher Attitudes Towards Failure. One of the core tenets of Duckworth’s theory is the balance of passion and perseverance. Passion is personal. As such, it is difficult for a teacher to help a student realise what they are passionate about. Teachers can foster passion once that spark has taken, but ultimately, that journey is student-driven. The development of perseverance however, is well within the realms of a teacher’s control. In order to help a student, develop perseverance, a teacher must provide opportunities to develop resiliency. Resilience can be defined as “any behavioural, attributional, or emotional response to an academic or social challenge that is positive and beneficial for development” (Yeager, Dweck, 2012, pg. 303). In short, to be resilient means to look challenges in the eye, and say “bring it.”
In my interviews, both Samantha and Rudy understood and advocated for the importance of a healthy attitude towards failure. Rudy explains that “one of the biggest things that [he] did with [students] was [say], ‘Look, the only way that you can achieve this is through your hard work’.” By sharing this idea with students, Rudy is laying the foundation for grit. He is telling them directly that their success is in their own hands, and more importantly, that those hands are capable if they work hard. Sometimes though, hard work still is not enough. Sometimes, despite a student’s best effort, they will fail. At this juncture, it is important to foster resiliency. In our discussion, Rudy shared his positive attitude towards failure by saying, “I put a hold pretty well to that, of fulfilling one’s potential, [and] continuing to strive to be better. [You have] to be able to be resilient in the face of whatever challenges are given to you.” Here, Rudy is intrinsically motivated, and he passes that along to his students.

Samantha on the other hand, is more pragmatic in her approach. Her attitude towards failure is influenced by the value she places on time. To her, a healthy attitude toward failure is important because otherwise, the time she has spent on a task has been wasted. In our interview, she defined failure as “not coming away with any type of learning.” She commented that she does not love everything she does, but she thinks it is important to always get something out of the experience. She provided an example by talking about attending Professional Development (PD) days as a teacher:

I don’t love every PD session I’ve been to. They’re not always useful, but I always try to get something out of it, no matter what… It’s an interesting perspective to take, and like I said, I always try to come away with something … because otherwise, it’s such a waste of time, and I hate wasting time.
Regardless of whether or not the motivation to overcome failure is intrinsic, or simple pragmatism, it is vital that we impress the importance of shifting attitudes. Looking at the different approaches between Rudy and Samantha, we learn that there are a variety of methods that can be used to change our ways of thinking about failure. For Rudy, there is something fundamentally important about positivity. It is his pathway to fulfilling his own potential, and striving to become better. For Samantha, a positive attitude towards failure just makes sense. It makes her life easier, and helps her to deal with the inevitability of boring, and mundane experiences.

This is important. As thorough as Duckworth’s definition of grit is, she overlooks the mundane. I think it’s easier to be resilient when challenged by something you are passionate about. True grit I think, comes when you can be resilient in the face of something truly boring. In the classroom, you simply can not rely on students to be passionate about every single thing that they are taught. It never happens. As such, Samantha’s pragmatism is important because it provides a logical framework to think through when reevaluating our attitude towards failure; it just makes sense.

4.2.2 Methods of Overcoming Failure, and Developing Resilience. Students will spend a tremendous amount of their time in school. The classroom sometimes becomes a second home for some of them. The environment that a student leaves when they come to school is beyond our control, but the environment that we create when they arrive is something that we can shape. When asked about how to develop resilience, Rudy stressed the importance of environment. He said,

students come in and they tend not to be very resilient at all. So the first thing is [to] try to create as non-threatening a classroom environment as I can. [One] where failure [and]
mistakes are not only tolerated, but encouraged, and emphasize the learning potential [of] mistake[s]; ... [otherwise you] undermine student resilience.

In the environment that he creates, Rudy’s intrinsic motivation shines through. His focus on a positive attitude is reflected in the standards that he maintains for his classroom. This positivity helps him to understand that resilience in the face of failure is important to the learning process.

For Samantha, it was once again logical pragmatism that helped her to a similar revelation. She shared this with me:

I don’t think I understood the process of learning until I had to teach... I had always done it and I was blessed with the ability to do it naturally... but now that I have to teach, it’s like I understand... I think about why the students in front of me aren’t getting something... how I [should] reframe?

Students do not think about the learning process in the same ways that teachers do. Subsequently, there are often incongruencies between a teacher’s expectations and student performances. As a result of their formal training, teachers are capable of thinking about the learning process. We learn well. We come into the classroom with an understanding that failure is important, and that it is a necessary step. This is not as apparent to students. They have not been afforded the luxury of a formal education around learning.

A math teacher would never ask a student to plot a line graph without first introducing the student to the principles of the x, and y axes. In order to accomplish a task, students must be prepared with the requisite skills. We often forget that learning itself is a task, and there is also requisite knowledge that must be gained before students can be successful at that task. Some students will learn this at home. Some students will have the privilege of parents and family that can support and deliver this requisite knowledge, but we can not assume this of every student in
our school system. This is already an area of equity that is outside of a school’s control, but we can wrestle some of it back by teaching our students how to learn, before we expect them to just do so.

Teacher transparency is a step in the right direction. In his practice, Rudy regularly shares his mistakes with his class. Students often view their teacher as the expert in the classroom. By sharing his mistakes, Rudy reminds students that even the experts had to stumble, and fail on their way to the top. More importantly, he shows that experts still encounter failure in their lives:

A lot of teachers get embarrassed if they make a mistake on the board, for me, I don’t even try to hide it, or cover it up. Yeah I correct it, but I find, even those simple examples of mistake making, help the students feel less self-conscious about their own mistakes.

By acknowledging, fixing, and moving past his mistakes, Rudy is modelling resilience for his students. He is being transparent in his own learning process, in hopes that students will pick on this behaviour. When we discussed this further, Rudy told me about doubling back with a student if they failed a problem in his math class:

I make sure that I let them kind of struggle through it themselves first… and [if] it’s not what I’m looking for I’ll say, ‘Well actually, no… try it again from a different angle’, and I might give them a hint if they feel like they are at the point where they are stuck.

He develops resilience by redoing problems with students, and facilitating alternate methods of thinking. It is important to note that he does not just give the student an answer key. That would not demonstrate resilience. He works through the process of understanding with the student, and reinforces the value of hard work.

Spending this much time with a single student might pose as a challenge in a larger class, but based on Samantha’s experience, there might be value in handing this task to the students
themselves. In the classroom, there will be students with strengths and weaknesses that compliments one another. In learning to teach, Samantha gained a better understanding of the learning process. By grouping students who can learn from each other’s strengths, we may be able to engage weaker students in a deeper understanding of the learning process, as they will be grouped with peers who have already engaged with successful failure experiences. The goal is to create a new space, a zone that increases resiliency and creates opportunities for behaviours that normalize the failure experience.

4.3 Failure-Normative Behaviour (FNB) / Zones of Proximal Resilience (ZPR)

In his research on educational psychology, Lev Vygotsky (1930) equipped teachers and researchers with new language to understand the importance of zones and proximity in child development. He indicates that “[t]he state of a child’s mental development can be determined only by clarifying its two levels: the actual developmental level and the zone of proximal development” (pg. 80). This zone represents the space between their current development, and their potential, and should be guided by a more capable advisor, or adult (1979, pg. 86). In the years following Vygotsky’s claims, it has become apparent that proximity plays a large role in developing competencies. For example, research in language acquisition has come to similar conclusions. In 2013, a study on bilingual two-way language immersion education indicated that the “intermixing of languages may result in increased metalinguistic knowledge… and has also been shown to predict later reading skills” (Marian, Shook & Schroeder, pg. 179). When developing new competencies, proximity to authentic experiences is critical.

As such, I propose that zone-based and proximity-oriented learning holds true for the language of failure. In the same way that language acquisition is bolstered by proximity to
authentic, immersive environments, I propose that students who are exposed to what I call Failure-Normative Behaviour (FNB), will experience similar benefits. In a classroom, FNB presents itself when students are faced with the failure experience, and continue through it towards new understandings. FNB occurs when Rudy shares his mistakes on the chalkboard with his class. It occurs when academically weaker students work with stronger students, who have already overcome the challenges that lie ahead. With mixed-ability grouping, the classroom becomes what I will refer to as a Zone of Proximal Resilience (ZPR). In a ZPR, students are exposed to examples of resilience-building, and students within the zone are more easily able to develop resilience than students outside the zone.

4.3.1 Remediation. These two new concepts are important considerations when thinking about remediation. Support after failure is important. Without remediation, a student is helpless to recognize their mistakes after making them. Samantha expands on this idea in our interview:

If you don’t know [where] you went wrong, you can write five essays all you want, you’re still making the same mistakes. I think there needs to be a built-in process for understanding where you went wrong, and sometimes (maybe it’s just my experience with this particular administration), it’s ‘Just go fix it, make sure I don’t have to hear about it’… but if a student isn’t ready to come to the table and understand where he/she went wrong, I’m not so sure that multiple opportunities to make the same mistake is actually going to help.

In order to become grittier, and develop resilience, trying again after failing is important. However, without remediation, even the grittiest and most resilient individuals will give up when faced with constant failure. Remediation is a type of FNB. It allows students to acknowledge their failure, and improve through the experience. As such, Samantha is correct. There needs to
be a system or process by which we foster FNB and remediate students who have experienced failure. Currently, the Ontario school system supports two primary methods: classroom streaming and summer school.

Of the two, I think students are more averse to summer school. In its current configuration, students see summer school as a form of punishment. It is a consequence of failing. At Rudy’s school in Nassau however, summer school differs from Ontario’s version. He explains a major difference as he recalls it, in our interview:

We create[d] summer school to remediate the deficiencies of students at the end of the school year. They only do class work in the morning, and then in the afternoons, they do swimming or other outdoor activities… there could be tennis, soccer, art, music, a variety of things… some of the students respond better as a result.

Now, I should highlight a few distinct differences between Rudy’s school and the average Ontario public school. For one, the school that Rudy taught at during this time was a private school, so funding for certain programs may have been more readily available. Secondly, the school is situated on a Caribbean island, with a relatively reliable climate that allows for low-cost outdoor programming. However, those considerations aside, there is an astounding amount of value in a summer school that is structured like this. In Ontario, students who attend summer school for remediation have a half-day schedule. They show up for their class, and then go home. It’s almost prison-like in its structure. Students just want to do their time, and leave. By offering non-academic, holistic programming in the afternoon, Rudy’s school provides a positive incentive for student attendance. Furthermore, it reminds the students that they are not there because they are failures. They are there because remediation is important, and it should be recognised as a positive part of the learning process.
The other primary method of remediation that Ontario high schools employ is classroom streaming. This practice divides students into one of three classroom designations, Locally-Developed, Applied, and Academic. In Grades 11 and 12, these designations are renamed to Workplace, College and University accordingly. On its surface, these designations seem useful. They allow schools to group students by academic achievement. The marks that a student earns in Grade 8 helps high schools assign students within these designations. In theory, this method of gatekeeping should allow teachers to help students who are further behind, and provide an opportunity to catch up with the requisite knowledge that they require to succeed. In practice however, I do not think these designations are successful in achieving this goal.

I think that between the two, students are more averse to summer school than they are to classroom streaming because summer school forces students to address the gaps in their knowledge. Summer school creates a ZPR by forcing students to confront the work they failed, and by providing them an opportunity to try again. This is difficult for any of us to do, but it is an important step. Classroom streaming on the other hand, identifies students with stronger academic performance, and promotes them to the Academic stream. These are the students who I believe exhibit FNB, and by isolating them in the Academic stream, schools create, and isolate a ZPR. This is a zone that students in the Applied and Locally Developed steams do not have access to.

Instead, students in Applied and Locally Developed streams are part of a different educational ecosystem. A student in a Locally-Developed classroom is permitted to understand fewer concepts than a student in an Applied classroom. The same relationship holds true between Applied and Academic classrooms. Although this practice allows students to engage with easier material, increasing their chances of success, it also encourages students to adopt a fixed
mindset. It says to students, ‘we ask less of you because you are capable of less.’ By segregating the student population, academic streaming denies weaker students the opportunity to learn from their stronger peers. This I believe, reduces the number of opportunities that non-Academic students will have to develop FNB or a ZPR.

Although there is no current data to measure FNB or ZPR, statistics show that classroom streaming does not equally support the academic success of every student. The most recent data charts a Grade 9 cohort between 2006 and 2011 in the TDSB. At the end of this period, 78.6% of 16,365 students graduated and received an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). While this is a respectable number, it does not properly represent the disparities that appear when academic streaming is accounted for. When identified by academic streams, 88.1% of Academic students have graduated, exceeding the average. That number drops to 59.1% for Applied students, and 42.1% in the Locally Developed stream (TDSB, 2012, pg. 3). While advocates of streaming argue that modified curriculums are best for student success, the numbers do not reflect this claim. Looking again at the same cohort, we find that the drop out rates follow a reverse trend. The highest rate occurred in the Locally-developed stream, with 37.6% of students failing to obtain an OSSD. The second highest rate predictably occurred in the Applied stream, with 26.9% of students, while just 8.3% of Academic-streamed students failed to obtain a high school diploma (TDSB, 2012, pg. 3). These numbers show that despite the many arguments in favour of academic streaming, the students who reside below the Academic designation are not being equipped for success. This system is not working.

This is a system that is designed to support and reinforce itself. Without the opportunity to develop FNB, students in the lower streams will rarely be promoted. Without a ZPR, there is little that helps students to develop the resilience required to learn through the experience of
failure. Academic streaming pushes students through each grade, and towards graduation without accounting for requisite knowledge. By the time students leave high school, there has been little in the way of gatekeeping to ensure that they are not being sent into the world unprepared.

4.3.2 Standardisation and Academic Gatekeeping. One of the longest functioning roles of assessment and evaluation is that of gatekeeping (National Commission on Testing and Public Policy, 1990). This function helps educators to decide who is granted the privilege of admission, or graduation. During this process however, it is important that we as educators consider the different strengths and weaknesses of individual students. A well-designed education system takes these factors into account, and diversifies instruction to meet the various needs and learning styles of our students. Yet, it is still important to enforce standards. When public education first emerged in Canada around 1850s, quality was uneven and teachers themselves were slow to develop. In response to this, a system of quality control was developed. These exams intended to ensure a common standard, and provide an element of fairness to education (Nagy, 2000, pg. 264-5). In many ways today, these standards still exist. Before a student receives their OSSD, they will write four mandatory assessments issued by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). These tests have no bearing on their school marks, and function only to measure the performance of Ontario students. Yet, despite this important function, measuring oneself against a standard can still be an intimidating process. In our interview, Samantha discussed the long-term implications of measuring herself against what she perceived as “The Canadian Standard.”

For the longest time it was like, I felt like I wasn't good enough. Even though academically there really weren't any issues. I was successful, right? I passed all my
courses, I got into university, I did all that stuff. I still never felt like I was good enough, right? … . I didn't measure up to the Canadian Standard.

Arriving in Canada at the age of nine, Samantha was face-to-face with an obstacle that she could not overcome until later in her adult life. Despite her academic success, she still felt compromised by this measure that she held herself against. Now, she attributes overcoming this mindset to the understandings she now has as a teacher.

A good teacher, who gets teaching, understands learning. The process of teaching and learning goes hand in hand, right? And so, when I had to teach... skills, content, I understood better what learning was about. I did it as a student, but I didn't understand how I did it. Now I understand how I did it.

If Samantha can come to this understanding, I am confident that our students today can, as well. We just need to be transparent, and guide their understanding of the learning process. We need to share this information because standards have an important function in our school system. They set minimum requirements. They convey an understanding of success, and offer a tangible, functional measurement. A school without standards can not produce a reliable graduate.

In schools, standards act as a form of academic gatekeeping. In theory, they should ensure that a student has the opportunity to encounter and develop FNB. Rudy discussed standards during our interview:

The expectation is that everyone should meet a certain standard, … [and] there are two reasons why that’s the philosophy there. One is because there is a gatekeeping mechanism when students enter high school. They have to take an exam and only students who have achieved a certain level are accepted into Grade 7. [Then] again there is a gatekeeping process that takes place in Grade 10. So you know, the philosophy is
‘Okay good, we know that these are students who can achieve at a certain level’. The second thing is that, you know… this is a fee-paying school.

Rudy identifies two key concepts of standardisation that are important to its implementation in schools. First, there is the idea that students must be able to show their competencies before promotion. If we promote a student before they have developed the skills required for success, they will be trapped in a cycle of falling behind that is difficult to escape. Furthermore, standardisation and academic gatekeeping helps students and teachers to understand where there are deficits. It helps to guide the remediation process. Secondly, standardisation helps to maintain accountability. Rudy taught at a private school, and if parents are investing money directly into the school, they are paying for a service that must be rendered. If a private school fails to educate its pupils, it is failing to uphold its end of the transaction. However, should this not be an expectation held of all schools? Although the funding model is different, public schools are still supported by the parents of those who attend it. They are also supported by the employers whose taxes contribute to the success of students who will one day join the workforce. Perhaps most importantly, public schools are supported by the society of which these students will be citizens.

These functions are important. Yet, despite their benefits, they are not universally loved by teachers or students. Rudy himself has his issues with standardised tests:

I’m not crazy about [standardised tests] for a number of reasons. Yes, there is a valid assessment or diagnostic purpose behind them, but I think that that’s been lost... I say this because what tends to happen is [that] the emphasis shifts from an emphasis on student learning to an emphasis on student exam performance.
This is a concern for many teachers. In a recent experience at a TDSB school, I discovered that preparing Grade 10 students for the provincial-standard EQAO Literacy Exam was a school-wide effort. The Math department was responsible for teaching students how to answer multiple-choice questions. The Social Sciences department prepared students for the newspaper-article writing component, and the English department prepared students for the essay component. It is entirely up to interpretation whether this highlights an overall issue with standardisation, or with the design of the test itself. I believe the latter.

Standardised tests are a form of gatekeeping that allow schools to identify which students need time to further develop the skills required to succeed. Without maintained standards, schools are forced to find other ways to support struggling students, including a streamed classroom system that equips high-achieving students with a ZPR and exposure to FNB, while leaving the struggling students with limited pathways to success.

4.3.3 Perceptions and Internalisation of Failure. I will however, concede that maintaining standards can have significant effects on morale and motivation. Tests and evaluations threaten students. For a large number of learners, evaluation is a source of anxiety. I do not believe that it is the test itself that scares students; it is the fear of failure, or having to develop the resiliency to overcome it. Unfortunately, for many, failure is still a dirty word. Its connotation comes from years of internalised trauma. These students have not yet developed FNB. Rudy recognised this in his own students. He said, “the so-called ‘weak’ students tend to handle it even worse. I have an impression that they have been told over and over again that they can’t do well.” Without FNB or access to a ZPR these students will have a difficult time disassociating from this internalised failure. These students have forgotten that failure is not a
state of being, it is simply a result of trying. Sometimes, even administrations forget this. In our interview, Samantha shared her own experience with a school administration in the TDSB:

If you ask the administration, it’s all about pass rate, not how well, or vice versa. ‘Did the [student] pass?’ And it’s like … passing is 50%, if that’s all that we’re aiming for… I don’t know, I have trouble with that.

In schools, pass rate has become an incredibly important measure. Yet, it is never a measure of success, or learning; it is a measure of the bare minimum. It says to students and their parents that we know the situation is not great, but at least it is not a complete failure. This prioritisation of passing is deeply rooted in failure-adverse behaviour. A student who is promoted with a 51% in a course enters the next level without a significant amount of the requisite knowledge required for success. By allowing this student to proceed to the next level, they will never develop the FNB required to acknowledge and overcome the missing 49% of deficit. Instead, I believe they will continue to struggle, and run the risk of internalising a negative relationship with failure.

I believe that these practices have resulted in a systematic complacency towards failure. Instead of fostering a recognition and respect for the experience, students, parents, teachers and administrations have begun to look the other way. Yet, this is a predictable and understandable response. Teachers have their own part to play in this equation. Although Samantha and Rudy have healthy attitudes towards failure, and exhibit FNB, the same can not be said for all members of the profession. A teacher who does not understand the importance of FNB is ill-equipped to support students in need of it. Furthermore, a teacher who does not recognise FNB is vulnerable to internalising their own failures. These teachers will struggle with non-Academic streams because they will internalise the difficulties that their students will face, and lose motivation to seek success alongside their students. This will compromise the existence of ZPRs, and these
teachers will struggle with Locally Developed or Applied classes, because they can only see the sum of the students’ failures, rather than the potential in their deficits. I believe that it is vital that we as educators adopt FNB and foster ZPRs in our classrooms, because it is the only way that we can support students during this challenging transition. We must be advocates for their learning, and all of the steps that lead to it.

4.4 Conclusion

We require a systematic revaluation of failure. This chapter seeks to contribute to a new discourse that has been launched by the teachers, psychologists and theorists that precede it. My interviews with Rudy and Samantha have provided evidence and strategies that support learning through the failure experience. My analysis of these transcripts has produced three key themes that shape my own theories of learning through failure.

Our mindset towards intelligence and its capabilities determine the direction in which we are headed. Carol Dweck’s work reminds us that intelligence is alive, and malleable. By adopting a growth mindset, we remember that learning is a process with its own challenges. Overcoming these and moving beyond them is a natural part of the process. This task is made simpler through the development of what Angela Duckworth calls Grit. Grit is a combination of passion and perseverance for a singularly important goal. It allows individuals the strength and determination to push through the difficulties of failure, and to arrive at the ultimate goal of improvement. To do so requires the development of resiliency. Resilient individuals adopt growth mindsets and are undeterred by the failure experience. Yet building towards this requires an environment that fosters the right attitude.
It requires exposure to what I call Failure-Normative Behaviour (FNB). This type of exposure helps individuals who are failure-adverse by normalising the failure experience. It builds on resilience. It requires a space where resiliency is prominent. I call this space the Zone of Proximal Resilience (ZPR). It is a zone where learners can develop resilience through exposure and successful modeling. These two concepts should be present in every classroom to ensure that students are equipped with the tools required to learn from the experience of failing.

In the classroom, everything has a cost. If we invest in normalising experiences with failure, we invest in a learning environment that is non-threatening, and supports students who struggle with this inevitable consequence of trying. You must fail in order to succeed. It is a lesson that is worth teaching to every student in our care.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

As this study has shown, failure is an integral part of the learning experience. Yet I believe that today still, many Ontario classrooms undermine the failure experience by providing students with the opportunity to hide from failure. This study advises that teachers provide students with the opportunity to experience and foster Failure-Normative Behaviour (FNB) by creating Zones of Proximal Resilience (ZPR). This chapter concludes the study by revisiting some of the implications uncovered through the research. It will provide a brief summary of key findings presented in Chapter Four, and present practical recommendations based on this research and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

At the onset of this research project, I sought to answer three primary research questions:

4. What does failure mean to teachers?
5. How do these definitions translate to their students?
6. What are strategies that teachers can adopt to begin the process of destigmafying the failure experience for students?

After interviewing two experienced educators with diverse experiences, three key themes emerged:

1. Mindset
2. The development of grit and resiliency
3. Zones of Proximal Resilience / Failure-Normative Behaviour
The relationship between students and the failure experience is highly personal. The research has shown that healthy relationships rely on a positive attitude and a growth mindset towards the failure experience. Carol Dweck’s work on fixed and growth mindsets lend suitable language to discuss this challenge. “Growth mindset”, as she describes it, “fosters greater learning and achievement” (Rattan, Savani, Chugh, Dweck, 2015, pg. 722) by recognizing that intelligence is malleable and that there is a relationship between failure and future development. Both participants, Samantha and Rudy echoed this idea in their interviews. As they recalled their personal relationships with the failure experience, it became clear that dealing with failure is difficult by oneself. Both participants only realised the importance of the failure experience in their adult lives; it was overlooked in their childhood education. Thankfully, these relationships with failure have shifted. They now understand its vital importance to learning and development. Unlike Rudy and Samantha, our students have the opportunity to learn this lesson earlier in their lives. By introducing and destigmafying the failure experience, we can ensure that students of all ages develop healthy attitudes toward the inevitable challenges in their lives. We can do this by fostering and developing grit in our classrooms.

Grit is the stuff of champions. It is the “ferocious determination… [and the] combination of passion and perseverance” (Duckworth, 2016, pg. 8) that pushes us to try and try again. By developing grit in our students, we will encourage them to persevere through the failure experience. A gritty student is one who is resilient in the face of failure, and capable of gleaning the valuable lessons to be learned from the process. To understand and develop grit in the classroom, we must provide our students with opportunities to fail.

I call this exposure failure-normative behaviour (FNB). It is behaviour that normalizes the failure experience and it must be present in every classroom. When presented to students, failure-
normative behaviour transforms a classroom into something I call a Zone of Proximal Resilience (ZPR). In this space, students are close enough to FNB that they can begin to imagine themselves as gritty individuals. ZPRs allow students to witness their peers experiencing and overcoming failure, and realise that they too are capable.

5.2 Implications

The implications of this study are important not only in Ontario, but in schools and workplaces across the world. In a 2016 special report published in The Economist, experts speculate that automation and the rise of artificial intelligence will eliminate employment opportunities across multiple sectors. Simply put, we can no longer prepare students for specific careers and jobs. As technological innovations rapidly change the shape of our economic and employment landscape, educators can only hope to create well-rounded, critically-thinking and failure-normative learners who are versatile members of society. The students in our schools today will face many challenges when they leave our establishments of learning. They will encounter failure repeatedly and indiscriminately. Whether they are the victims or successors of this experience will depend in large part to the preparation that we provide them.

I believe that eventually, most people come to understand the importance of the failure experience. For some however, this revelation comes too late. It comes long after the chances and opportunities to take meaningful risks in life, and in the choices they face. Hockey legend, Wayne Gretzky once said, “you miss one hundred percent of the shots you don’t take.” Without understanding the importance of the failure experience, people are not even getting on the ice, let alone swinging a stick.
5.2.1 The Educational Community. The significance of demystifying the failure experience is made more important when one considers the structure of Ontario’s high schools. Although classroom streaming provides some benefit for differentiated education, it ultimately fosters a classroom environment that encourages failure-adverse behaviour. Furthermore, it closes significant pathways if students spend their four years in applied or college level streams. These credits do not allow students to apply for universities, and without that opportunity, the pathway to certain careers becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible. I should be clear, I do not think that every student needs to pursue a university degree, nor do I believe that one is necessary for success. However, without a healthy relationship with failure, a student does not choose college or the workplace over university; their fear of failure simply makes those the only options left.

What if every student and every classroom normalized failure? For one, classroom participation would go up. Students would be more willing to take risks. Teachers themselves might find new joy in their careers. By fostering FNB in their classrooms, and creating ZPRs for students to grow, teachers might find themselves in classrooms that are focused on learning, because they are no longer held back by the fear of mistake-making and failure. We would send students out into workforces, colleges and universities who are prepared to take measured, and well-informed risks. The most significant advances are never discovered by playing it safe, or from hiding from failure. They are achieved by the people who are willing to face failure head-on. By educating students on the importance of failure, we can flood the world with young people who are bold and gritty, people who are unafraid of a challenge.

5.2.2 My Professional Identity and Practice. I have spent the past eighteen months consumed by this research. I hit my first failure experience three months in, when I changed my
topic of focus, and staggered back to rewrite everything I had done up until that point. As it tends to be, that failure was ultimately for the best and has resulted in the work that I have been lucky enough to dedicate myself to. My research is informed by my life and my experiences. I am the son of two teachers, whose combined classroom experience sums over seventy-five years. Through them, I have developed a deep love of learning, and am determined to make a difference in the lives of those who learn in my classroom.

From this experience, I have ultimately strengthened my resolve in understanding and loving the experience of failure. The most substantial parts of who I am as a person, and as an educator are the results of tireless reworking, retinkering, and fine tuning. My understanding of the failure experience helps me to be compassionate when a student is struggling in my classroom. It provides a framework for success, that relies on the most common outcome of trying. I speak regularly about failure with my students. I acknowledge that sometimes, the work will be difficult. There will be challenges that seem insurmountable. I tell my students that in order to overcome these challenges, we need to face failure directly. One of my participants, Rudy said, “it is done through modelling.” When working with students, I am transparent in my practice. I laugh at, and freely share my mistakes and experiences with my learners because I know that being the expert in the classroom means sharing that even experts fail.

5.3 Recommendations

The principal recommendation of this study is for the eager incorporation of failure-normative behavior and the development of zones of proximal resilience in every classroom. The fastest way to enact change is to be the change that you want to see. Every teacher must reflect deeply on their own experiences and understandings of failure. Many teachers have already come
to the same conclusions that I have, that failure is a normal and necessary part of the learning process. Yet, without becoming role models of FNB, we are not fostering this understanding in our students.

I do not believe that we are far from achieving these goals. In many schools and in many classrooms, teachers are already using strategies that introduce failure-normative behaviour, and create zones of proximal resilience. Such strategies include sharing your own mistakes, verbally reminding students not to give up, and providing authentic positivity in the face of student failure. Also, incorporating real stories of people overcoming failure can help to develop ZPRs in the classroom. However, without naming and defining these practices as failure-normative, it is easy for teachers and students alike to lose sight of how significant they are. We need to make it so that ‘failure’ is not a dirty word.

Beyond classroom practices, I do think there is more that we can do to foster healthier attitudes towards the failure experience. As informed by my research, my recommendations are as follow:

1. **Create a Fundamentals of Learning class that teaches students learning strategies, while normalizing the failure experience.**

   It can be in their early childhood education, or even in Grade Nine, but students should be given the opportunity to learn about learning. In my interview, Samantha shared that “[she doesn’t] think [she] understood the process of learning until [she] had to teach.” I expanded on this in 4.2.2, arguing that students do not think of the learning process in the same ways that teachers do. We have been provided a formal education on the matter. As such, I think it would be a step in the right direction to provide a semblance of this education to the students themselves. Furthermore, this would address equity issues, whereby some students learn these
skills through support at home, which is not available to every learner. A half-year course could be an adequate length of study for something like this.

2. *Embrace mixed-ability grouping in the classroom*

I believe that mixed-ability grouping creates a ZPR, but only when students are aware of its existence. In a mixed-ability group, weaker students are allowed the opportunity to learn from their more adept peers. Stronger students should be empowered to mentor and guide their weaker peers. They must be coached to be patient and supportive as their peers encounter and cope with the failure experience. This is a lesson that can be taught in a Fundamentals of Learning class.

3. *Consider destreaming classrooms through the lens of FNB and ZPR*

There are already a number of destreaming initiatives in Ontario. However, most of the criticisms around streaming focus on the way that the practice perpetuates cycles of inequity, and the lack of preparation that students have in Grade 8 to make such significant decisions about their courses. In my discussion of zones of proximal resilience, I argue that students are more capable of embracing FNB if they are allowed the opportunity to see grit and resilience in their peers. As it currently stands, I believe that the academic and university streams create contained ecosystems of FNB to which students in the applied and college streams are never permitted access. Destreamed classrooms remove this barrier, and although it might pose difficulties for teachers initially, I believe that adapted classroom strategies and possibly smaller class sizes might accommodate this shift.

4. *Increase teacher funding to shrink class sizes*

I acknowledge the challenge of a destreamed classroom and mixed-ability grouping. However, I think that if teachers were supported with smaller class sizes, it would be easier to
facilitate mixed-ability grouping and ultimately foster failure-normative behaviour. This is one of the more challenging recommendations, but might ultimately have the most significant effect.

5. **Consider reinstating Grade 13/The Ontario Academic Credit (OAC), with an optional fast-track at the end of Grade 12**

In lieu of destreaming, or in addition to, I would propose that Ontario schools reinstate Grade 13/OAC. In the current system, students are expected to graduate at the end of Grade 12, but are allowed the option to do a ‘victory lap’ and return for a fifth year. I would recommend that we reverse that, making five years the expectation, with the option to graduate at the end of Grade 12, provided that students prove their capabilities. With an additional year of education, students are given more opportunities to fail without significant consequences to their pathways. With the removal of OAC, schools increased the stakes of failure, as students now have less time to accomplish the work they need to graduate.

### 5.4 Areas for Further Research

Given the small scale of this research project, I think the most immediate area for further research would be concerning failure-normative behaviour, in hopes of providing a stronger ground to build from. I acknowledge the limitations of qualitative research, especially with an interview pool limited to two educators. Further quantitative and qualitative research can investigate student perceptions of failure directly, instead of through the lens of a teacher’s experience. How do students perceive failure? Are there groups of students who cope with failure better than others? What strategies have they adopted? What supports were they provided during their education that fostered this understanding? These research questions can shed light on the many elements that can change the way that educators discuss and teach failure.
5.5 Conclusion

I think there are few things in the world as certain as failure. It is an experience that will touch the lives of countless individuals, and for many, the significance of this encounter will be tremendous. This research study investigates teacher perceptions of the failure experience and the implications they have on their students. I drew upon a literature review of existing research on the failure experience, and interview data from two diverse and experienced educators. I believe that failure-adverse behaviour hinders personal growth. In the classroom, this behaviour poses a threat to students’ ability to learn and succeed. By demystifying the failure experience, we as teachers are positioned to support and propel our students towards success. Failure-normative behaviour is the backbone to healthy attitude towards failure. If we can make these practices commonplace in every classroom, I am certain that we are growing success in our schools.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date:

Dear __________________________,

My Name is Vincent De Freitas and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on the effects of failure on student motivation, and the systematic obstacles that prevent students from achieving success through the process of failing. I am interested in interviewing teachers who provide a diverse collection of experiences with students and with student failure. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60-minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Arlo Kempf. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Vincent De Freitas
Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Arlo Kempf
Contact Info:

Consent Form
I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Vincent De Freitas and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) ______________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study will take a critical look at the effects of failure on student motivation, and the systematic obstacles that prevent students from achieving success through the process of failing. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your experiences with student failure and the resulting effects it has had on student performance and motivation. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section A: Background Information

1. How many years have you been teaching? Are you currently teaching?
   a. When did you start teaching?
2. What schools have you taught at?
   a. What is your current relationship with students?
   b. Describe the nature of your previous relationships with students.
3. What grades and subjects do you currently teach? Which have you previously taught?
4. How is proficiency/success measured in the schools that you have worked at?
   a. How do you measure student proficiency/success?
5. How would you describe demographics of your students?

Section B: Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs

1. What does success mean to you?
2. What does failure mean to you?
3. What does student success mean to you?
4. What does student failure mean to you?
5. How would you describe the level of student proficiency/success in the schools you have worked in?
6. Has the way schools handle student success/failure changed over the years? If so, how?
   a. What trends do you notice, if any?
   b. Has this affected the way you approach the way you teach?
7. What trends, if any, do you notice in the way different segments of students handle failure?
   a. By grade, by gender, by racial background, by family structure, and any others that occur to you?
8. Do you think students are afraid of failure? If so, where do you think this fear comes from?
9. How did you deal with failure as a student?
   a. How do you deal with failure as an adult?
   b. Have the methods changed? If so, what contributed to this change?
10. Are there any specific examples of student successful/unsuccessful student failure that you think are relevant to this discussion?

Section C: Teacher Practices
1. Do you design all of your lessons, yourself?
2. What is your biggest priority when working with students, in regard to their success?
3. How have you addressed failure in your classrooms?
   a. How often do you share your own failures with your students?
      i. How often do you own/celebrate your failures in front of your students?
   b. What happens immediately after a student encounters failure in your classroom?
   c. Is this in line with your Board’s expectations? If not, why do you deviate in the way you do?
4. How is failure address and accommodated for by the administration?
5. How do you incentivize student participation in your classroom? Is this strategy inclusive and/or celebratory of student failure?
6. How do you measure success in your classroom/teaching space?
7. What steps do you take to help students reach success in your classroom?
   a. Is failure involved in these steps? Could it be?
8. Do you design your lessons to factor student failure into the learning equation? Why or why not?

9. Do you take into account the previously discussed demographic factors when helping students reach success?
   a. If so, in what way does this change your practice?

10. How do you discuss student performance with parents?
    a. Is failure included in this dialogue? How is it treated?

Section D: Supports and Challenges

1. What are some challenges you have faced discussing failure or teaching with failure in mind?

2. What challenges prevent students from leaning into failure?

3. Do you think the current curriculum is designed to support learning through failure?

4. Does your administration support education around failure?
   a. In your opinion, why or why not?

Section E: Next Steps

1. If you don’t currently teach through the lens of learning through failure, would you consider adopting strategies, if Board-recommended, that facilitate this style of instruction?
   a. Why or why not?

2. What suggestions, if any would you make to policy-makers to better accommodate learning through failure into our schools?

3. If you could make any change to Growing Success, what would you change?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.