How To Recognize and Prevent the Development of the Fear of Failure While Building A
Student’s Self-Efficacy

Eric Ramer
School of Education, California State University, Chico
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the variables that might influence students to become more susceptible to the development of the fear of failure. This problem aims to address the fear of failure in the classroom and the damaging effects it can have the student’s self-efficacy. Through research, this study will attempt to address the research question: How can teachers and parents recognize and prevent the development of the fear of failure in the classroom? The objective of this research is to make sure that teachers and parents know ways to address and prevent the development of the fear of failure among their student’s. This problem impacts the mental health of all students and teachers as well as their families.

Keywords: fear of failure, research, mental health, self-efficacy
Every educator across the country would agree in saying that they want their students to be successful and confident learners, students who have learned new skill sets, information, and knowledge in all subjects by the end of the school year. However, this process is much easier said than done. The fear of failure has been a prevalent problem dating back to the early 1980s when researchers first started to look into what was causing students to have the development of the fear of failure, which also resulted in a drop in their self-efficacy. This is a prevalent problem in the education community on the basis that if left untreated, could affect them well into their adult life. Students from elementary school ages going all the way into college, are all victims of this debilitating fear. As well as negative parental practices being one of the frontmost reasons of why students develop the fear of failure in the first place, i.e. negative reactions to bad test grades, poor performances, not showing excitement for the students successes, these can also lead to low levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and even self-worth which is why it is so incredibly important for educators and parents alike, to be aware of these research findings in order to create students who are confident learners who are not afraid of failure.

Statement of Problem

This problem aims to address the students’ fear of failure in the classroom and the damaging effects it can have on their self-efficacy. Through research, this study will try to address the research following question: How can teachers and parents recognize and prevent the development of the fear of failure in the classroom? The objective of this research is to make sure that teachers and parents know ways to prevent the development of the fear of failure among their students. When not taught how to handle fear at a young age, the fear a failure can prove to have damaging affects on a person (Sagar, 2010). This problem has the ability to impact the mental health of all students and teachers, as well as their families too.
Justification of the Study

My focus and problem area in the prevention of the fear of failure is to recognize the behaviors and attributes that relate to the fear of failure from an early age, and intervene as soon as possible with the aid of the students’ parents as well as the educator. In many cases, the Fear of Failure has been found to be related to a student’s desire to protect their self-esteem should their performance not reach expectations as well as negative parental socialization and parent-child relations playing a pivotal role in the development of the fear of failure (Crocker, 2003). If gone unchecked, this condition can lead to a very difficult educational journey.

Positionality

My positionality in regards to addressing the fear of failure on a personal level would be that I have been involved in competitive cheerleading for over 10 years. Similar to gymnastics coined term: “the twisties” in cheerleading we call it a mental block. This is when an athlete one day could be throwing an elite tumbling pass and then the next day be so terrified and unable to throw even the simplest of skills. It is something the public very openly and harshly criticized USA gymnast Simone Biles for, competing a routine that had zero twist, because she had fell victim to getting the “twisties”. The skills she does are extremely dangerous and if done incorrectly can result in injury. Due to the lack of knowledge amongst the public about these types of mental blocks, she was unfairly criticized for something over which she has no control. I wanted to know why this happens and try to find the root of the problem in order to find a solution to help my athletes overcome this problem. As a professional, I want to create confident learners. I want my students to feel confident when they come to class, that even if they face a
challenge they know how to appropriately handle it and eventually overcome it because the values myself, as their educator, and their parents have instilled in them.

**Review of the Literature**

**Behaviors Associated with the Fear of Failure**

To understand the development of the fear of failure among students, we first have to look at the behaviors associated with fear of failure, and where the fear of failure can stem from. In the book *Building classroom success: Eliminating academic fear and failure*, Martin (2010) examines the varieties of failure-oriented behaviors. These behaviors include; self-handicapping, defensive pessimism, defensive optimism, over-striving and perfectionism, success avoidance, and learnt helplessness (Martin, 2010). Self-handicapping is a process where a person creates or chooses obstacles to behavior or a performance setting, for the purpose of protecting self-esteem in an esteem-threatening situation. Defensive pessimism is a coping technique used by individuals who set low expectations for situations regardless of prior success. Defensive optimism is when students and parents have a tendency to believe that the situation is not as bad as others (realistically) present it. Students who focus on the fear of failure in order to succeed are called over strivers or perfectionists. When the fear of failure underpins’ a students’ motivation to avoid success, it is called success avoidance. This can occur due to students not wanting to do well and bring attention onto them, or stand out from the crowd. Lastly, learned helplessness is a condition in which a person suffers from a sense of powerlessness, arising from a traumatic event or persistent failure to succeed. Caraway (2003) dives into a different topic in relation self-efficacy and the Fear of Failure. They note that the lack of school engagement among adolescents in our country is a growing problem that can result in increased risk for school dropout, substance use, teenage pregnancy, and criminal activity (Caraway, 2003). The
results concluded that generalized fear of failure as measured by the General Fear of Failure Scale or GFFS, showed a significant negative correlation when controlling for social desirability with school engagement. This further demonstrates that more outside sources like parental practices and interpersonal teaching styles can play a big role in the development of the fear of failure as well as a decline in their self-efficacy.

**The Effects of Negative Parental Practices**

McGregor and Elliot (2005) address the origin of the fear of failure and how it is rooted in parental socialization and parent-child relations. They look deeper into the fear of failure among students, and the basis of the motive, shame, itself to understand the reasons that individuals are fearful of. They claimed that shame is linked to the fear of failure because shame is the reciprocal of pride. It is demonstrated that children high in fear of failure have mothers who punish failure, but react neutrally to success. It also notes in a series of studies recently conducted by Elliot and Thrash (2004), that parent fear of failure was shown to be a positive predictor of child fear of failure. The study goes on to focus on 179 college students. Participants completed a fear of failure measure, took the midterm exam, received performance feedback, and then reported their emotional response immediately thereafter. It was found that both mother shaming and father shaming were positive predictors of fear failure. In this particular study, we see that fear is rooted in parental socialization and parent-child relations, which can relate to our other articles mentioned on the basis of lack of praise for successes. They also brought up that failure has implications beyond the achievement domain to outcomes such as overall psychological and physical well-being, as this brings up other factors having a high fear of failure can affect such as physical and psychological health.
The fear of failure can be developed both in school and at home. Outside factors such as negative parental practices can play a role in the development of the fear of failure in the home. (Sagar, 2010) study showed three categories of parental sport socialization practices that can contribute to young athletes’ fear of failure: punitive behavior, controlling behavior, and high expectations for achievement (Sagar, 2010). Three intact families of adolescent athletes (ages 13-14 years) participated in the study. Each mother, father and athlete were interviewed separately three times over a 3-to-4-week period. Interviews with parents ranged between 90 and 200 min and with the athletes between 60 and 106 min. The study investigated the developmental origins of fear of failure in adolescent athletes by examining how parental sport socialization practices in daily parent-child interaction contribute to the development of the fear of failure in the child-athlete. They concluded that parents’ negative responses to their child's failure can contribute to the child's fear of failure development, as the child sees these practices and responses to be the negative consequences of failure and, subsequently, fears failure itself (Sagar, 2010). In another research study conducted by professors at the University of Crete, Greece, 230 elementary school students were assessed on motivation, stress and affect prior to a “high stakes testing” situation. They noted that the quality of parent–child relationships has been associated with optimal socioemotional development and emotional regulation (Sideridis, 2008). This study ties into many of the previous articles mentioning the basis of the fear of failure being heavily reliant on the parent–child relationships. Within in their studies, they dive into specificalities of what types of fear in relation to failure (i.e., fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment, fear of devaluing one’s self-estimate, fear of having an uncertain future, and fear of important others losing interest).

Other Outside Sources that Can Affect the Development of the Fear of Failure
When looking into the different aspects that can affect a student’s self-efficacy, bullying victimization plays a large role in the development. Huang (2021) focuses on bullying victimization. The author states that school bullying has been recognized as one of the major threats to the mental health and subjective wellbeing of adolescents (Huang, 2021). They measured attributes such as self-efficacy based on adolescents’ general beliefs about their capability of performing tasks and reaching goals. Adolescents were asked to report the extent to which they agreed with five statements about themselves using the four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Results from the study concluded that bullying victimization was negatively associated with life satisfaction and positive feelings and was positively related to negative feelings, both self-efficacy and fear of failure significantly mediated the relationships between bullying victimization and life satisfaction, positive feelings, and negative feelings (Huang, 2021). Cox (2009) completes a research study by drawing on a semester long study of students and instructors in a community college English composition course and diving deeper into a student’s fear of failing college and how the fear of failure shapes that students’ behavior. The research incorporated sustained classroom observations, several in-depth interviews with the instructor of each course, and interviews with a sample of students from each classroom. Because nearly every student viewed a college degree as essential to their futures, they were embarking on high-stakes ventures which led them to get results that 80% of the students mentioned at least one of the forms of failure, and past failure provided objective evidence of academic inadequacy (Cox, 2009). This article helps tie into different forms of failure and where these fears can stem from. Their analysis was broken up into 3 parts; students’ aspirations and the accompanying anxieties, the defensive strategies students employed against their fears of failure, the potential for professors to assuage students’ fears (Cox, 2009).
Another outside source that can affect a student’s development of the fear of failure is a teacher’s interpersonal style (Hernández, 2020). In this research study 562 middle school and high school students in physical education classes participated in the study. Students completed questionnaires that assessed instructors’ autonomy supportive and controlling teaching styles and students’ own fear of failure. A person-centered analysis was used to test the hypotheses. This study highlighted the potential relationship between teachers’ interpersonal styles and fear of failure in physical education students. They conclude that autonomy-supportive behaviors on behalf of the teacher are one such strategy to reduce student fear of failure. They further explain that focusing on teaching your students the value of what they are learning/ find interesting, will help with reducing the fear of failure, because students are more motivated to learn since they understand the importance of what they are studying.

Evidence Based Strategies for Reducing Fear of Failure

Now that we know the behaviors associated with fear of failure, and from where the fear of failure can stem, we switch our focus to evidence-based strategies that can help reduce the development of the fear of failure. (Segal, 2014) in his research introduces a book we will be focusing on chapter 11, “Strategic Thinking and the Fear of Failure” written by Martin V. Covington from the University of California, Berkeley. In this chapter Covington (2000) explored the various causes of a student’s anxiety, indifference to learning and motivational deficits and how schools can combat these self-defeating achievement patterns (Segal, 2014). Segal explains that the self-worth theory of achievement motivation, when a student believes that their personal value depends on their ability to achieve, and that if they cannot succeed, they will be unworthy of the approval of others (Segal, 2014). However, it’s important to note, that it is a slippery slope when anchoring one’s sense of worth in ability. They explain different failure
avoiding tactics used by students, as well as improper learning conditions and the absence of self-management skills necessary for independent achievement being the root of negative self-attitudes and feelings of failure. They address that any strategy we choose to use must contain two elements: a provision for sufficient classroom rewards so that individuals are no longer forced to avoid failure, but can also pursue the rewards of success, and a fostering of the skills and attitudes that allow for personal acceptance of the newly abundant rewards as caused by the student’s own efforts. When we celebrate our student’s victories, no matter how small or large, we are rewarding their effort teaching them their sense of worth is not related to their ability.

Martin (2003) discusses that theories and data suggest that fear of failure can be separated into two camps: over striving and self-protection. In this research of the fear of failure is examined from a need achievement perspective and in the context of research amongst high school and university students. They go on to examine the question whether fear is a friend or foe, which results in them concluding with the two groups: an over striver who tends to avoid failure by succeeding, and the self-protector who does not aim so much to avoid failure but to avoid the implications of failure through strategically maneuvering in ways to protect their self-worth. As a result of their findings, They conclude that the four factors: self-belief, learning focus, value of school, and control, are each important means by which success orientation is nurtured in students' lives. This article addresses a student’s motivation by using a need achievement model of motivation, and that students can be characterized in terms of three typologies: those that are success oriented, those that are failure avoidant, and those that are failure accepting. Focusing on building a student’s motivation by focusing on the factors of self-belief, learning focus, value of school, and control will build up a student’s motivation for success (Martin, 2003).
Methodology

The next section will examine the methodology behind the research as well as the theoretical framework that has guided me throughout my research of the fear of failure. This section will also share my findings when going out into the community and interviewing a high school math teacher on her thoughts and experiences with her own students and the fear of failure.

Theoretical Framework

For my theoretical framework, I think it is important to focus on the parent-child and teacher-student relationships and practices as a direct result of the development of the fear of failure in a student. Over the years, failure has received a stigma that if you fail all hope is lost on achieving that specific goal, when in reality failure is a common occurrence and a part of everyday life. I chose to have this as a specific focus in my research because parents play such a pivotal role in their child’s life, so many learned behaviors and beliefs come from the authoritative role in their lives, that I believe parents sometimes forget just how powerful their words are for their children. This research directly ties into the Self-Worth Theory of Achievement Motivation. This theory focuses on self-esteem and self-worth being closely linked, parents have a lot of control of how their child sees themselves, which is why this theory will be the backing of this research and theoretical framework.

Community Partner Interview

I had the pleasure of meeting with Sara (pseudonym to protect partner confidentiality), she works as a math teacher at a local high school in San Diego! She has been a teacher for 10+ years, and was named teacher of the year for her school district in 2020! I had the pleasure of
being a student when she was student teaching back in 2011 and she immediately came to mind when trying to find a community partner. What sets Sara apart from others, is her dedication to her students, she takes time out of the class day to just have normal conversations with them. She explained that it could be about anything, it wasn’t just about math. “When you take the time to get to know your students, and showing them that you truly care about them as an individual, they want to work so much harder for you.” She said she hardly ever had issues with her students, and if she noticed someone struggling, she would always set up a meeting with them and try to assist them in any way they need.

We then dove into the topic of my problem of practice, “The Fear of Failure: How to recognize and prevent the development of the Fear of Failure, while building a student’s self-efficacy.” She was really excited to get into this topic and share her beliefs. She began with “Listen, I in no way shape or form, am I saying one way is right and one way works, because it doesn’t. You have to see each student as a case-by-case basis, each student has different forms of motivation and different tactics to shield themselves from embarrassment.” She really focused on creating a positive bond with each student, for some kids, we are the only cheerleaders they have, and how in order to get our students to believe in themselves, we first have to show them that we believe in them. I asked her what were some tactics she used to get her students to see that she believes in them, “If a student did poorly on a test, or didn’t get a good grade on a homework assignment, I never assumed they are lazy or ill prepared, I meet with them and ask if everything is okay. I would explain that I have seen much stronger work from them and it seems like this isn’t the best portrayal of all their hard work. I then give them the opportunity to take it home and redo it for a better grade.” She goes on to explain that because of this, they see she really wants them to do well and actually comprehend the topic they are learning about and that
it's okay to make mistakes. Sara said this is something her students really appreciate and they have even told her how much they appreciate it. I asked her if she was worried about cheating and she said yes and no, she explained that if she just gave them the bad grade and not the opportunity to make it up, that would be the end of it. Whereas, when they take it home, they are at least researching the problem and seeing it again. When talking about the Fear of Failure in the classroom, I asked her if there were any examples of behaviors, she has noticed that are attributed to the Fear of Failure. “ A lot of the time, especially in math, I see a lot of students try to crack jokes or deflect from the questions/answers if they don’t know.” She explained that especially in high school, it’s a really important time in a student’s life, academically as well as socially. People are trying to find out who they are, they are just starting to blossom into young adulthood, grades now play a big factor in student’s options for secondary education after high school-basically, it’s a can be a very stressful time for a student and for teachers we have to be ready to help reduce those stresses and the development of the fear of failure. She was one of the people who introduced me to the quote “The fastest way to success, is through failure”, she explained that especially in math she has to really nail that saying into the board with some of her students. I asked her if she had any particular type of student that seemed more susceptible to developing a Fear of Failure, she responded that it was never really one type of student, but what surprised her when she first started teaching was the students who were more focused on college and being in the top of her class would definitely have a higher stress level, but when she would talk to them privately, a lot of the students said they had pressure from outside sources like sports, parents, etc. This was a really cool moment in the interview because I was able to talk about my findings in peer reviewed articles about negative parental practices.

**Findings and Discussion**
Fear of Failure

After completing my research on the fear of failure, reviewing the articles, as well as going out into my city to undergo a community partner interview, my findings within these articles lead us to believe that students who lack motivation, drive, have parents who are overly involved, and the students who do not receive enough praise for their efforts tend to develop the fear of failure at a much faster rate. We see throughout almost every article that how a student sees themselves as well as their parents see them is a large indicator of their development, or lack thereof, of the fear of failure. My community partner interview only further solidified these findings. She spoke often about how some students might not get that support at home and as a teacher we must be that support system for them at times. Many students lack motivation to succeed because their self-efficacy is lacking due to not having positive parental encounters. We discussed the importance of normalizing failure as a part of the educational journey, teaching our students that failing at something does not mean they are a failure. However, teaching them to learn from their mistakes in order to build their self-efficacy as well as their self-esteem in the process.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the literature review, many factors can play a part in the development of the fear of failure among students that can negatively affect their self-efficacy. From negative parental practices, interpersonal teaching styles, and the levels of motivation, are all contributing factors that can lead to the development of the fear of failure. Further findings within these articles of research lead us to believe that students who lack motivation, and do not receive enough praise for their efforts tend to develop the fear of failure at a much faster rate. Furthermore, we conclude that students can be characterized in terms of three typologies: those who are success oriented, those that are failure avoidant, and those that are failure accepting. As
discussed in earlier articles, that from a need achievement perspective students vary in terms of their motive to avoid failure and approach success. Focusing on our theoretical framework of the Self-Worth theory of achievement motivation, we can diminish the fear of failure by rewarding our student efforts and not their successes, providing learning materials that are exciting and engaging, as parents, creating a home environment that is supportive and less of an authoritative environment.

**Implications and Recommendations**

The implications of this study give us insight on how to better aide and assist our students when they meet a challenge or face adversity. The fear of failure is an ever-changing problem, so how we address it as teachers and professionals must also change to match our students’ needs year after year. It is my firm belief that parents have the power to be an ally in the process, or be a hindering obstacle for their child to have to overcome. Teaching them the importance and power of their words in relation to their child and how much influence their reaction to failure as well as success can have on the child’s self-worth is extremely important. Teachers should put effort in creating a classroom culture that includes failure as a central piece of focus in the learning process. When educators and parents focus on what students have learned from such failures or short-comings and work together to collaborate on way to avoid failure, they learn so much more about the process of success and the journey it takes to get there.
References


