

YOUTH'S RIGHT TO FAIL

By Rachel Katkar

When I was in sixth grade, I failed a science test. It was the first time I had failed anything, since I came from an elementary school that did not use grades to evaluate students. I quickly shoved the failed test into my backpack, terrified that my peers had witnessed my failure and the teacher was judging me. Only when I was by myself at home did I take the crumpled test out again and cry when I saw all of the red correction marks. The next day, my science teacher, a former camp counselor and youth worker, gathered a small group of us together to let us know we had all failed and he was there to help. I was relieved to learn that I wasn't the only one. He worked with us to learn the material in a new way. Then we were allowed to retake the test. I passed with a B grade the second time.

Without redirection from a caring adult, relearning the material in a new way and building positive relationships, my failure would remain today. Because of my experience, I learned that failure is only temporary and can be resolved through positive guidance and action. I carry this experience with me as I promote youth's right to fail in my classes and programs. "Don't you mean youth's right to succeed?" one youth worker asked me during an interview. "No," I responded, "I really mean youth's right to fail, and adults' role to support youth through failure." The idea of a youth's right to fail is not novel; in 1973, Dr. Gisela Konopka published a document of youth rights including the "right to make mistakes without unreasonable punishment" (p.3).

As a youth worker in Saint Paul Public Schools Community Education, my job is to create programs that "create unexpectedly awesome experiences, provide opportunities for genuine discovery and grow change makers" (Saint Paul Public Schools Community Education staff webpage, 2015). All of these programmatic lenses include the caveat that youth must be allowed to make mistakes and try again.

The unique position that I defend in this paper is exposing how adults promote youth failure. Unfortunately, youth failure is often dealt with through punishment, isolation and remediation dictated by adults in systems created by adults. Youth must have opportunities to practice with limited consequences if and when they fail. Adults play the role of guiding youth through failure. How do adults promote the right of youth to fail? Adults promote young people's right to risk failure and emerge more resilient through positive relationship building, hands-on learning experiences and restorative justice. Ideally, adults need to build healthy relationships, provide hands-on learning opportunities and when someone else's rights have been infringed, use restorative justice practices to resolve youth failure.

WHY YOUTH FAIL

FAILURE IN SCHOOL

John Holt (1982) identifies three reasons that youth fail in school: fear, anxiety and boredom.

Most children in school fail. Close to forty percent of those who begin high school drop out before they finish. For college, that figure is one in three....Why do they fail? They fail because they are afraid, bored, and confused. They are afraid, above all else, of failing, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and expectations for

them hang over their heads like a cloud. They are bored because the things they are given and told to do in school are so trivial, so dull, and make such limited and narrow demands on the wide spectrum of their intelligence, capabilities and talents. They are confused because most of the torrent of words that pours over them in school makes little or no sense. It often flatly contradicts other things they have been told, and hardly ever has any relation to what they really know – to the rough model of reality that they carry around in their minds. (Holt, 1982, pp. 5-6)

ADOLESCENT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

There are also biological reasons for why youth are prone to fail. Abigail Baird (2015) explains that teens need hands-on experiences to make mistakes that are safe and supported by adults. They need these opportunities to explore, practice and reflect in order to learn. The decision-making section of the brain, the frontal lobe, does not fully develop until after the age of 20. As a result, teens struggle in their understanding of the full implications and consequences of their actions. These consequences can and do include failure. It is the role of adults to act as an external frontal lobe for youth.

EDUCATIONAL FAILURE AND RESILIENCE

In his article “Failing at Failure,” Macalester College president Brian Rosenberg (2015) discusses the lack of structured opportunities for youth to fail in education. In his own upbringing, Rosenberg refused to take risks because of his fear of failure. He reiterated the importance of using failure to teach perseverance and resilience to youth:

We are so focused on assuring them that everything will be all right that we leave them ill prepared for moments when everything is not. Sometimes they will not achieve their goals; sometimes they will not measure up; sometimes they will be rejected. Then what? The interesting question is how best to build resilience in students without subjecting them to the needlessly painful, or to things, like poor grades, that could have lasting, negative consequences on their lives. In environments that so prioritize safety, support, and success, can we teach students what it feels like to be (metaphorically, of course), knocked down? If we take our jobs as educators seriously, this is a question with which we should wrestle. (para. 6)

It is our job as youth workers and educators to build opportunities to overcome failure in our youth programs and activities. By promoting failure, we help youth learn perseverance, how to ask for help, and resilience.

THE MANY FACES OF FAILURE

Since there are so many types of failure, I want to take a moment to outline the broad categories of failure and illustrate specific examples from youth with whom I’ve worked. Bintliff (2001) outlined the different types of youth failure:

- Giving up
- Feeling alienated
- Failing to pass an exam/grade/graduation
- Disengagement
- Violence
- Substance abuse
- Criminal activities
- Truancy

I surveyed 50 youth and adults I worked with to collect their stories about how they dealt with youth failure. The survey (see Appendix) was conducted on Google Forms to protect the identity of the storytellers. In addition to the survey, five youth workers were interviewed for a more in-depth conversation regarding youth failure and youth worker's role in the failure.

STORIES FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

This first story is from one of the youth surveyed. It illustrates how sometimes our failures open the door to other avenues of learning and new adventures.

When I was five, I loved to watch my older brother draw. The process of him thinking of what to draw and then putting it on paper amazed me. I wanted to put my imagination on paper like him. My first attempt was as expected, terrible. So was the second, third, fourth, fifth, and fiftieth attempt. I became frustrated and gave up. Angry, I went into my room and turned on the TV. Too busy thinking of my failure, I hadn't realized that I had sat on the remote and turned on the Spanish subtitles. After a while, I gazed up at the screen and the unfamiliar words caught my gaze. What did it say? I became curious and asked my brother; he said it was Spanish and that I could take it at school. When I started kindergarten, I took Spanish and have been taking it ever since. I study it and hope to be fluent enough in it so as to travel to Central America and teach English. (Young person, personal communication, 2015)

Learning to draw was not going the way this youth wanted and in frustration, the youth learned about the Spanish language instead. Penicillin was similarly invented, not on purpose but by accident when a Petri dish with bacteria was left out over the weekend and mold happened to grow and inhibit the bacterial growth. What is truly remarkable is that the individual recognized the worth of the unexpected outcome.

In this next story, the student, despite a setback, became involved in a different capacity because a caring teacher provided an alternative where the youth took on a helper role instead of a participatory role.:

My sixth grade year, my accelerated math teacher asked me if I wanted to participate in the math tournament. I was overjoyed and couldn't wait to do it the following week. The day of the tournament I set my alarm early, but when it went off I was so tired I just thought I could sleep for a few more minutes. I soon woke up and found it was 8:00, when the tournament started at 7:45. I was so upset with myself, but I was determined to go anyways. Luckily when I got there, a friend of mine was able to take my place. Although I didn't participate in the tournament and I let down my teacher, she still allowed me to stay at the tournament and help out. (Young person, personal communication, 2015)

After all stories were collected and reviewed, three common themes emerged from the data that illustrated some ways that an adult can promote youth failure: building relationships, providing hands-on learning experiences and negotiating through restorative justice.

THREE THEMES TO PROMOTE YOUTH'S RIGHT TO FAIL

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Youth workers tend to be excellent mentors of youth, particularly when it comes to redefining failure. Relationships are often built over several years in a coaching, mentoring or supervising capacity. The following is an example of a youth worker making an important impact on a youth through persistence, determination and authenticity:

One of my students didn't graduate from high school. I worked with his graduating class for 2 years and was very involved in most of the emotional/mental wellness for around 50 of them. In September, we agreed he would go to night school. He didn't. In January, I got him set up with online school. Didn't follow through with that either. When June came and his class walked and he didn't, he kept his distance from me for two months. No response to phone calls, no usual meetings for food, or anything. In August he met up with me and a few others before they went to college. He apologized for avoiding me and said that it was worse facing me than anyone else because no one else cared if he graduated or not. I told him that I cared that he graduated, not on a certain date, not from a certain school, or with certain people. The important thing was that he finish his diploma. I explained the emotion that goes into this kind of youth work and that sometimes the people I work with don't consider how I might feel when they let me down, because our relationship is mostly based on their own feelings. But hey, I'm a person in all this too! It was as if his mind was blown:) He did manage to get his diploma and has kept in good contact with me since then. (Youth worker, personal communication, 2015)

The youth worker met with the young person, discussed the impact of the failure and worked together to find a solution. By building a long-term relationship with this youth, the youth worker served as a caring adult when others had given up. “When adolescents feel cared for by people at their school and feel like a part of their school, they... report higher levels of emotional well-being” (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum 2002, p.138). It is alarming that adolescents’ feelings of being cared about by adults drop significantly from 52% males and 60% females in middle school to 35% males and 34% females in high school (Minnesota Department of Education, 2013, p.18). Youth workers step in to provide a caring adult relationship at an emotionally tumultuous time of a youth’s development.

HANDS-ON LEARNING

Learning is defined as a transformational change in perspective. According to Mezirow and Taylor (2009), there are ten steps to learning:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition of a connection between one’s discontent and the process of transformation
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
6. Planning a new course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. Reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspectives (pp. 168-169).

When learning is hands-on, youth gain practical skills that relate to lessons they want to learn. These “hands-on activities have lasting effects on motivation and comprehension” (Guthrie et al., 2006, p. 234). In addition, adults become learners by asking relevant questions. Adults “work with learners and try to find out about their lives and experiences even as learners may be questioning their values. When this happens, students become co-teachers, and knowledge is created collaboratively” (Cranton, 2006, p. 128).

One example of hands-on learning is told below from the survey data:

When I was working as a crew manager, one of my responsibilities was to hire high school-aged youth to work on a crew. I called back one young man to make him a job offer after a successful interview. Someone else answered the phone and called him to pick up the phone. When he got to the phone his greeting was, "Yo what's up big pimpin'?"! This professional communication failure was hilarious but it also could cost someone his/her job offer. Acknowledging that this was this young man's opportunity to learn from a mistake, I initially ignored what he said as though it were a normal greeting. I offered him the position, which he happily accepted. Then, before hanging up, I brought up the way he greeted me. I explained that if you are waiting to hear back from someone about news related to work, it's probably most appropriate to answer the phone in a more formal manner - just in case. I took the opportunity to have this be a teachable/learnable moment. As a hiring manager, I needed to have restraint and look beyond the surface interaction we had. As a young person and future employee, the young man needed to have an opportunity to learn from his mistakes and receive open and honest feedback. (Youth worker, personal communication, 2015)

The youth worker taught the new high school employee about the importance of professionalism in a hands-on learning approach. Since the job had already been offered and accepted, the lesson was taught in a low-stakes way that still impacted the youth’s future.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Restorative justice is a way for all parties affected by a failure to address grievances as equals, create an action plan together and reflect on progress over time. The “downside” of restorative justice is that it takes time; however, additional time is required if a failure continues or worsens. Restorative justice is a highly effective practice that involves youth and adults working together to build community. The circle facilitation method in restorative justice “acknowledges that we are all in need of community and help from others and in turn that we all have something to offer other human beings. The fact that participants sit in a circle form symbolizes shared leadership, equity, connection and inclusion” (Kay, 2005, p.11).

The following stories come from adult youth workers interviewed on this project. On a series of Outward Bound expeditionary trips across the country, Hmong boys and Native American girls most “at-risk” of truancy radically changed their trajectory (Bintliff, 2001). They shared personal stories and reflections during restorative justice circle time. Also, they fully participated in learning activities and increased their interest in social justice. After the trip, five of the youth attended post-secondary education, two dropped out, one got a high school equivalency diploma and the rest graduated and now have jobs. The restorative justice-immersive trip was an incredible transformation for these youth.

Another example of successful restorative justice is with students recommended for school expulsion in the Twin Cities. Youth, families and educators were brought together to address grievances. After the restorative justice program, youth showed significant increases in making good choices about behavior even when

upset. They recognized someone at school whom they could ask for help. Also, they talked to their families about problems and were more satisfied with their school environment (Legal Rights Center, 2015). School attendance increased, suspensions decreased and family members talked with their children about school more.

Another adult interviewee responded, “Failure is part of the journey towards learning. Success is perseverance.” The adult discussed that being a first-generation American meant navigating multiple world views. He viewed failure not as a negative but more as a stepping-stone to learning. In addition, he remarked, “so often, failure is about personal responsibility versus a collective consciousness in education.” The failure persists when the disconnect between the personal and the collective remains.

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH FAILURE

In all of the conversations and surveys of youth workers and youth failure, three themes emerged:

1. Restorative justice is highly effective because all voices, including youths’, are equal in addressing grievances and creating an action plan.
2. Hands-on learning provides authentic experiences for youth to make mistakes and co-learn with adults.
3. Positive relationship building fosters an emotional connectedness that correlates with motivation.

Youth workers utilize restorative justice, hands-on learning and relationship building to support youth through failure. As Brian Rosenberg said, it is important to teach youth that failure is a part of the journey. Sometimes things do not go according to plan and the important outcome is resilience and persistence. Only through relevant, authentic and supportive experiences can youth succeed. Remember, a youth’s frontal lobe, the area responsible for judgment, is underdeveloped. Like failure, knowing what to do in an uncomfortable, alienating situation requires practice and guidance.

An important note is how much time is invested in helping youth through failure. Restorative justice requires finding time when everyone can meet face-to-face, in a space conducive to circle facilitation with follow-up from participants. Hands-on learning necessitates planning ahead with materials. Additionally, adults need to be flexible to accommodate changing needs and interests. Lastly, relationship-building means team-building, one-on-one mentoring or otherwise sharing in a bonding experience. The staff time, materials, food costs and long-term investment often rely on organizational budgets already earmarked for other ventures.

As a youth worker, I constantly search for ways to support youth through failure. I can recall my own failures as a youth and how they shamed me, frustrated me and eventually helped me grow. It takes a great deal of patience, persistence and perseverance to help another through such low points. As Thomas Edison, inventor of the light bulb, phonograph and motion picture camera said, “Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.”

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APPENDIX

YOUTH WORKER SURVEY

Please describe a time during your profession when a youth you were working with "failed." It could be when they failed to pass something, forgot to do something important, did something wrong, got blamed for doing something wrong they didn't do, got stuck and didn't know how to get out of the situation, hurt someone else, etc. What was your role in this situation? How did the situation resolve or not resolve?

To give you an example, here is one of my youth work stories:

*I was working with a middle school youth who was driving me crazy. Every day, she came to program and started arguments with other youth, did everything except the tasks I asked her to do, and generally had a belligerent attitude. Finally one day, she showed up to program so angry that I asked if she wanted to talk about it in the hallway. She nodded yes and as soon as we got out to the hallway, she burst into tears. She told me, "I just talked to my school counselor and tried to sign up for my classes for next semester like you were helping me to do. I told the counselor what I wanted to take but she told me I don't get a say because I'm trouble. I told her I wasn't trouble, I just have a hard time sometimes. But she just made me so mad and she threatened to call my mom and the thing is... *sob*... the thing is that I get into trouble because it's the only way my mom pays attention to me. If I do everything right, I just disappear. But when I get in trouble, she finally pays attention to me." We talked for a long time in the hallway about it and decided to follow up with her mother and her counselor. She told her mother how she felt. Her mother apologized to her about not paying enough attention to her and promised to listen in the future. Her counselor helped her register for the classes she wanted to register for, although they still had some tension in the discussion. In my class, this same middle school youth who drove me crazy initially became the leader of the program. She volunteered to hand out materials, get the group's attention, lead discussions and help officiate conflicts.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RACHEL KATKAR has a Master of Arts in Education degree and specializes in music, science and youth leadership programs. Since 2006, Rachel has worked with youth at the Science Museum of Minnesota, YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities and Saint Paul Public Schools Community Education. Her favorite projects include hiring youth to translate science instructions into Spanish, Somali and Hmong, taking photographs using cameras attached to kites and displaying youth aerial photos in a local art gallery, and planting native Minnesota plants along the river to reduce pollution and attract wildlife back to the area.
