'Letting them fall' – promoting resilience through innovative practices

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The child psychologist, Michael Carr-Gregg, recently in the *Sydney Morning Herald* agreed that society's desire to shield children from risk may be doing more harm than good.[1]

"Children might have fewer accidents because they're not playing outside but I worry about the effect on their mental health". Carr-Gregg went onto say that *"children need to fall out of trees or come off their bikes or simply endure disappointment to build resilience."*

I wonder how as educators we give our students an opportunity in their learning to *"fall out of trees"* and *"come off their bikes"* in a safe learning environment?

The challenge reminds me of Bruce Wilson's reflections on failure:

"We have turned away from the notion of failure, but this has not made failure disappear. If children are to be given the chance to gain the most powerful possible learning, we must be able to expose them to the risk of failure, help them understand failure and success, and support them in trying again at something which has so far defeated them".[2]

Experience tells me the notion of failure and disappointment is somewhat unpalatable and unfashionable in an adolescent's journey through high school. Arguably, parents at times act as 'helicopter parents' and in trying to protect their children from feeling disappointment they have unintentionally added to, and become part of, the problem.

King Suddhodana raised his son in great luxury and shielded him from knowledge of human suffering. The Prince reached the age of 29 with little experience of the world outside the walls of his luxurious palace. It was only once the young Prince, through his curiosity, left the Palace that he realised the realities of old age, disease, and death. It was in this letting go that the journey of enlightenment had begun.

Our students, like the young Buddha, need to leave 'their Palaces' so they can 'come off their bikes' and feel disappointment and pain in their learning. This wisdom will serve them well as they become global citizens in the 21st Century. As educators we too need let go of some our thinking and practices for this to happen.

"And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined" – Matthew 9:17[3]

For too long we have trained our students to be afraid of crossing out answers for fear of getting them wrong; or trained them to wait for us to arrive to class before learning can begin or continue. For too long our students have found the easy way out by giving up or getting mum to ring up and complain to the school because of a poor exam result; or our students have expected their teachers to do the thinking for them because it was too hard or they felt they couldn't try.

Psychologist have even coined a phrase for this: 'self-worth protection' where students are saying they can't do things even before they try them.

The lack of resilience for students in schools, and especially for girls, is on the rise.

A recent study in Norway, defined resilience as *"firstly, a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence; secondly, a belief in one's own self-efficacy and an ability to deal with change and adaptation; thirdly, a repertoire of problem solving approaches"*.[4]

Arguably, there has been an over emphasis by parents into their child's happiness and self-esteem in order to protect them from adversity. This protection paradoxically leads to the erosion, rather than the enhancement, of resilience. Carol Craig, Chief Executive for Confidence and Wellbeing,[5] in Glasgow Scotland sums this up well when she says *"how can we grow as individuals if we reject responsibility for our errors and don't learn from them?"*[6]

In this paper I will argue that innovative practices, will provide a foundation for our students to successfully problem solve, adapt and develop self-efficacy and thereby become more resilient in their learning and well-being. This will require from both teachers and students a shift from spoon-feeding to independent, creative and critical thinking; from consuming knowledge to co-creating and constructing it; and from pessimism to adopting a positive narrative.

So how do we let our students 'endure disappointment to build resilience'?

In the WIDE World, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Visible Thinking course teachers are asked to explore how can they activate students' thinking to build understanding?[7]

And how can they help students to think more critically and creatively at the same time?

Regular use and documentation of thinking through The Routines[8] and Artful Thinking Palette[9] build an innovative culture of thinking in our learning spaces where the class, as well

Thinking Routines Matrix
from the upcoming book *Making Thinking Visible* by Ritchhart, Morrison & Church (Spring 2011)

Routine	Key Thinking Moves	Notes
Routines for INTRODUCING & EXPLORING IDEAS		
See-Think-Wonder	Description, Interpretation & Wondering	Good with ambiguous or complex visual stimuli
Zoom In	Description, Inference, & Interpretation	Variation of STW involving using only portions of an image
Think-Puzzle-Explore	Activating prior knowledge, wondering, planning	Good at the beginning of a unit to direct personal or group inquiry and uncover current understandings as well as misconceptions
Chalk Talk	Uncovers prior knowledge and ideas, questioning	Open-ended discussion on paper. Ensures all voices are heard, gives thinking time.
321 Bridge	Activates prior knowledge, questioning, distilling, & connection making through metaphors	Works well when students have prior knowledge but instruction will move it in a new direction. Can be done over extended time like the course of a unit.
Compass Points	Decision making and planning, uncovers personal reactions	Solicits the group's ideas and reactions to a proposal, plan or possible decision.
Explanation Game	Observing details and building explanations	Variations of STW that focuses on identifying parts and explaining them in order to build up an understanding of the whole from its parts and their purposes
Routines for SYNTHESIZING & ORGANIZING IDEAS		
Headlines	Summarizing, Capturing the heart	Quick summaries of the big ideas or what stands out
CSI: Color, Symbol, Image	Capturing the heart through metaphors	Non-verbal routine that forces visual connections
Generate-Sort-Connect-Elaborate: Concept Maps	Uncovering and organizing prior knowledge to identify connections	Highlights the thinking steps of making an effective concept map that both organizes and reveals one's thinking
Connect-Extend-Challenge	Connection making, identify new ideas, raising questions	Key synthesis moves for dealing with new information in whatever form it might be presented: books, lecture, movie, etc.
The 4 C's	Connection making, identifying key concept, raising questions, and considering implications	A text-based routine that helps identifies key points of complex text for discussion. Demands a rich text or book.
Micro Lab	A protocol for focused discussion	Can be combined with other routines and used to prompt reflection and discussion
I used to think	Reflection and metacognition	Used to help learners reflect on how their thinking has shifted and changed over time.
Routines for DIGGING DEEPER INTO IDEAS		
What makes you say that?	Reasoning with evidence	A question that teachers can weave into discussion to push students to give evidence for their assertions.
Circle Viewpoints	Perspective taking	Identification of perspectives around an issue or problem.
Step Inside	Perspective taking	Stepping into a position and talking or writing from that perspective to gain a deeper understanding of it.
Red Light, Yellow Light	Monitoring, identification of bias, raising questions	Used to identify possible errors in reasoning, over reaching by authors, or areas that need to be questioned.
Claim Support Question	Identifying generalizations and theories, reasoning with evidence, counter arguments	Can be used with text or as a basic structure for mathematical and scientific thinking.
Tug of War	Perspective taking, reasoning, identifying complexities	Identifying and building both sides of an argument or tension/dilemma
Word-Phrase-Sentence	Summarizing and distilling	Text-based protocol aimed at eliciting what a reader found important or worthwhile. Used with discussion to look at themes and implications.

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as the individual's, thinking is valued, visible and actively promoted. The routines challenge students to adopt a working hypothesis in their learning by taking risks, being curious, using play, and being confident to say "I don't know" or "I'm not sure?" and "let's see how I can found out so I can understand".

Visible Thinking used strategically in a culture that values risk taking in safety exposes students and teachers to the risk of failure, helps them understand failure and success, and supports students in trying again at something which has so far puzzled or defeated them.

Vygotsky (1978) brilliantly captured this idea of classroom cultural forces when he wrote: *"Children grow into the intellectual life around them."* When innovation reflected through risk taking, flexibility, play, problem solving, and learner agency become the norm then resilience and independence will flourish.[10]

"Teachers demonstrate that they are learners too" is one of the UK Harris Student Commission's '12 early ideas about learning'.[11] When teachers become learners and reflect on their success and failings in their teaching then this will lead to a learning which the Hungarian Czikszentmihalyi describes as *"flow"* where students are so absorbed in their learning that they are in the moment and immersed in the present: resilient; independent; and engaged.[12]

The work of Martin Seligman, a founding father of Positive Psychology, and more recently a solution focused approach to wellbeing and learning grounded in Positive Education is an effective framework for dealing with students' lack of resilience.

A meta-analysis conducted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning and Loyola University Chicago[13] showed that:

"Social and emotional learning programs yielded significant positive effects on targeted social-emotional competencies and attitudes about self, others, and school…and improved academic performance on achievement tests and grades."

The Solution-focused questions can help students identify what their preferred learning and results will look like when they have overcome their problems or challenges. They help the students notice things in their learning that are going well or parts of their goals that are already happening.

I have used the solution focused questions for scaling with students after they have 'fallen out of a tree'[14] and become distraught with their poor test results by asking them to tell me on a scale of 1 to 10, where they are now in relation to the test. 10 is where they have fully achieved their goal and 0 is that have not achieved anything.
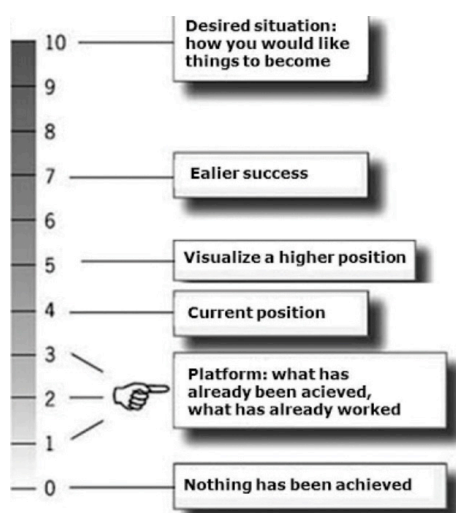
I then ask a series of questions:

"What shows you at the number and not lower?"
"Where were you on the scale at the beginning of the year?"

If they went up I would ask them:
"What tells you that you are higher?"

Left: Seligman's solution focused approach to well being; Year 9 Camp activity.

Students will meet in half blocks in a flexible learning space that will support a diversity of visible learning

"What is happening now that was not happening at your previous number?"
"How have you been able to achieve that?"
"What did you do that helped you to move up the scale?"

If they have gone down the scale I would ask them:

"How have you prevented from going all the way down to 0?"
"What will be the first sign that things are heading back up the scale"

This relationship centred approach is innovative as the questions are future orientated, not focusing on the past; operating from an achievement and not a deficit model; and from an optimistic not a pessimistic outlook. It embraces the premise of Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset model,[15] [as opposed to a fixed mindset] where:

"People believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work – brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment."[16]

Being aware of this narrative first as teachers in our relationships with each other and then with our students will help equip them with the tools to deal with the bumps and bruises that inevitably come from '*coming off their bikes*'. Unsurprisingly, research commissioned by the UK Government, found *"facilitating a safe space for dialogue and positive interaction"* is one of key ingredients for resilience-building teaching activities.[17]

Valerie Hannon, Director of the UK Innovation Unit, in a white paper '*Developing an Innovation Ecosystem for Education*' encourages blue sky thinking:

"While school improvement must continue to be pursued, simultaneously a 'learning ecosystem' should be created. Such a mutually supportive system would engage a much wider range of partners and players, and would locate learning in a new variety of spaces and places. The conditions needed to create such a system are suggested from the evidence of highly innovative sectors."[18]

In was in this spirit that our College became involved, through an invitation from AITSIL, in their LearningFrontiers initiative which brings together clusters of schools and other interested parties in 'design hubs' to explore professional practices that increase student engagement in learning.[19]

The College, led by the MY Bennies Innovation Leader, has developed a Year 7 Integrated Project for next year with seven 54-minute periods allocated in a fortnight with classes divided into 21 students. Students will meet in half blocks in a flexible learning space that will support a diversity of visible learning.

There are three units for the year:

- Unit One: *What Does it Mean to be a Bennies Girl*? – Term 1–2;
- Unit Two: *Going Global* – Term 2–3;
- Unit Three: *MYBennies Choice project: What am I passionate about? What am I interested in learning more about? How can I make a difference?* – Term 3–4.

The aim of the project, based on the AITSIL design principle of Integration, is for "Integrated learning [to] use assessment… [in] a variety of forms, to inform and respond to the learning experience. Students undertake high quality projects that facilitate learning across subjects and offer choice as well as obligation."[20]

It is hoped that the concepts and spirit of this project can be scaled both within the hub and to the broader education community. We hope that the project is a vehicle through which our parent community can also develop meaning and a sense of purpose for their daughter's learning [which resonates with the fourth component of the PERMA model][21] so they

FOUR DESIGN PRINCIPLES:

Engaging learning is CO-CREATED

Engaging learning is CONNECTED

Engaging learning is INTEGRATED

Engaging learning is PERSONAL

Engaging learning is

CO-CREATED

It draws on both adults and students as a powerful resource for the co-creation of community, the design of learning and the success of all students.

Engaging learning is

PERSONAL

It builds from student's passions and capabilities, and helps them to personalise their learning and assessment in order to foster their individual talents.

Engaging learning is

CONNECTED

It connects with and uses real-world contexts and contemporary issues, and is permeable to the rich resources available in the community and the wider world.

Engaging learning is

INTEGRATED

It emphasises the integration of subjects, of students and of learning contexts.

The four high-level design principles at the heart of Learning Frontiers are informed by complementary sources:

- The OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI)'s 2010 The Nature of Learning: using research to inspire practice. This was an exhaustive international review of evidence from research and practice, which identified the key features consistently found in effective learning environments.

- The Global Education Leaders' Program (GELP)'s 2013 Redesigning Education: shaping learning systems around the world, which builds on the findings of The Nature of Learning combined with work with system leaders in thirteen jurisdictions transforming their education systems to make them fit for learning in the 21st century. Redesigning Education sets out some design principles teachers, school and system leaders can use for creating engaging learning.

This short film explains in more detail the relationship between these sources (and others) and the Learning Frontiers program.

The four principles for designing a program

"accept that adversities are a natural part of life and so encourage, rather than retard, resilience".[22]

Through implementing programs like the resilience doughnut,[23] we aim to support the parents, especially those who, as Dr Wendy Mogel the author of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* and *The Blessing of a B Minus*, describes, "choose a different path to overprotection and can sometimes feel as though they are neglecting their children because they are 'salmon swimming against the tide' in society."[24]

Failure in this endeavour may have far reaching consequences, as Dr Mogel continues:

"Unless you do it, what happens is the kids are not prepared to go off to college or university because the parents have been at their side, the combination of a Sherpa, a butler, a concierge, the secret police, an ATM and a talent agent."[25]

Through the innovative practices of the Harvard Visible Thinking Routines; A Solution Focused approach to wellbeing and learning; and the Year 7 Integrated Project I have shown how students and teachers are able to come out of 'their Palaces' so we can *expose students to the risk of failure, and support them in trying again at something which has so far defeated them'*.

At the recent Year 12 Academic Award ceremony our Principal in her address quoted Winston Churchill: "*Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts.*" Perhaps as educators, we need to have the courage to let go a little of our teacher-centred classrooms, and take risks in implementing innovative practices, role modelling to our students that we do not know everything and that we too can learn from our failures.

Often it is building on the fruits of these failures and not our successes that we inspire in our students the courage to overcome, to dust themselves off and begin again. Just like they did when they first learned to crawl before they could walk and when their journey towards enlightenment began.

Readers are invited to make a comment by dropping an email to: jmuskovits@msben.nsw.edu.au

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