

How Can Teachers Bounce Back From Failure?

When a lesson falls flat, it can be tough to recover and move on. Teachers say they'd like training on how to accept and learn from their mistakes

By **Madeline Will**

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Every teacher can relate to the feeling of what happens when a lesson doesn't go as planned. The blank looks from students, the sinking realization that carefully made plans are falling apart—it's a familiar, yet almost always difficult scenario.

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Experts say that teachers may have a particularly fraught relationship with making mistakes on the job.

"Teachers have a really difficult time not personalizing failure because our jobs are personal," said Alison Smith, a former 4th grade teacher who now offers life coaching to teachers through her website, **A Teacher's Best Friend**. "We care a lot about our kids, our students, and we don't want to fail them—that is our deepest fear as a teacher."

Yet even though failing in the classroom is a source of stress, anxiety, and even shame for many teachers, educators say it's rare to have professional development that centers around bouncing back from a bad lesson or "failing forward," using the experience as an opportunity for growth.

But learning those strategies could be useful, many teachers say. And experts say doing so is important to bolster teachers' social-emotional competencies, which include resiliency and learning from mistakes.

"Teachers are high-capacity people. ... They have a lot of responsibility and a lot of accountability and they take the responsibility very seriously," Smith said. "When a ball gets dropped, and they feel like they haven't done something up to their own standards, then that feels very hard for them. It feels very lonely."

Reflecting With Others

Several years ago, Sarah Brown Wessling was teaching a high

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school English lesson with camera crews from the Teaching Channel in tow. Her lesson on a literary analysis of reputation in *The Crucible* fell short, leaving Wessling five minutes to figure out what went wrong and make changes for the next class period—and the cameras captured it all.

The resulting video, "[When a Lesson Goes Wrong](#)," shows Wessling struggling to keep her students on task as they complain that they're overwhelmed with the volume of provided sources, many of which included complex and unfamiliar language. "Well, that sucked," Wessling says in the video after the class ends. "I didn't teach them anything."

She makes a few key changes to her lesson plan before the next group of students comes in, and the second attempt goes much better. Afterward, Wessling, the 2010 National Teacher of the Year, debriefs with another teacher.

According to the Teaching Channel, that video was a huge hit with educators when it was released in 2013. It has accumulated at least 140,000 plays over the years.

"I think this one really resonates with teachers," said Wessling in an interview. "There's just an authenticity to it and a kind of camaraderie that we have about making mistakes—it's a shared experience. ... We all know what it feels like to have a wonderful vision in your mind and have it unravel."

Wessling said she had never received any training on making mistakes in the classroom but had learned how to course correct through experience. Now, she delivers professional development that incorporates the idea of failing forward to teachers in her Iowa district and across the country.

"It's inevitable that mistakes are going to happen," she said. "The more we deny that mistakes happen in teaching, the further away we get from the learning."

But mistakes are messy, Wessling said, and oftentimes, professional development leans more toward cut-and-dried exercises. Showing teachers how to create a pacing guide, for instance, is more efficient than taking the time to unpack a bad lesson.

And while reflecting on failure is important, she said, it requires a great deal of mental bandwidth that teachers don't always have.

"Teachers get weighed down with so much minutiae that it is hard to take the time to do the reflection about making mistakes rather than keep forging ahead," Wessling said.

Indeed, when teachers are feeling stressed, it's even more difficult for them to exercise self-compassion, said Smith, the teacher-turned-life-coach. That's why a school culture where it's OK for teachers to talk to a peer or a coach about things that go wrong is so important, she said.

"When we're taking failure personally, that can quickly become shame, and shame can't live when it's spoken out loud," she said. "When we share our failure with someone else, it can't fester in the way it did before."

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When Smith delivers professional development, she opens up space for teachers to share examples of a classroom failure. And she makes sure that she shares examples of her own mistakes, too.

Pirates 'Don't Curse the Wind'

After all, once teachers can accept their mistake and move on, they can begin to learn from it, experts say.

Dave Burgess, a professional-development provider and the author of the popular book *Teach Like a Pirate*, said he views failure in the classroom as a "real-time gift of feedback."

"Pirates don't yell at the wind, they don't curse the wind—they read the wind and they shift their sails and go," he said. "The wind of our classroom is that student feedback and response."

Burgess' mantra is that if a teacher hasn't failed in the classroom lately, he or she isn't pushing the envelope far enough.

"Safe lessons are a recipe for mediocrity," he said. "You never know where those edges are until you fall off them. And when you do fall off, it's not a big deal because they come back the next day, and you make it right."

That's the philosophy of Jason Jowers, the principal of Eno Valley Elementary School in Durham, N.C.

"I don't want teachers to be afraid of risk," he said. "I want you to try new things, I want you to be innovative. If it doesn't work, don't worry about it. ... I don't want you to become stagnant."

Eno Valley has been marked by the state as a low-performing school, and Jowers said it's critical that teachers evolve their instruction to better reach students. "It can't be business as usual in the classroom," he said.

This is his first year at Eno Valley, and Jowers said teachers were initially uncomfortable with the fail-forward approach that he promoted in professional development. But over time, they warmed to the idea, especially as he highlighted teachers who are doing innovative work in the classroom. And he reassured them that he wouldn't give a "slap on the wrist" if the experiments fall short.

"I'm almost up for anything, as long as it's legal, ethical, and in the best interest of kids," Jowers said.

That kind of administrative support is critical for teachers who are experimenting in the classroom, Burgess said.

"It's very popular right now to say you believe in risk-taking and believe in innovation, but we don't really know if you believe in risk-taking and innovation until we see how someone responds when someone fails," he said. "Do you come in with judgmental and evaluative attitudes? If you do, you'll see less risk-taking and innovation in your school system."

A More Enjoyable Classroom

When Burgess delivers his professional development, he said teachers are generally excited. It's freeing, he said, to be given license to take risks, even if it results in failure.

"I can't imagine teaching without trying new things, without trying to experiment and have this kind of mentality myself," he said. "Who wants to go into the classroom and do the same thing

every day?"

Connie Schmidt, a 7th and 8th grade math teacher in Carey, Ohio, read *Teach Like a Pirate* two years ago as part of a schoolwide professional development. It inspired her to completely transform her instruction.

"I always tried to think outside the box, especially being a math teacher, but I was always afraid to fail, to have that bad lesson," she said. "But now, it's OK if that lesson doesn't go as planned. ... That's how you really challenge yourself as an educator to try new things."

She used to teach from a textbook and assign homework every day. Now, she doesn't do either—her classroom is more student-centered, and she has taken a backseat role.

Her classroom is so much more enjoyable now, Schmidt said: "Since I'm not in front of the classroom, ... I get to talk to my students and I get to develop a deeper relationship."

But there has been a learning curve. Now that she's creating her own materials to use in the classroom instead of relying on the textbook, there have been times when students were completely lost.

When that happens, Schmidt said, she comes back the next day and tells her students they're going to start over. It's a good opportunity to model resiliency for them.

"I tell them, 'I'm human, too. I'm going to make mistakes along the way, and that's how I grow,'" she said.