

The Failure Allergy

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Introduction: Defining the Problem

As Shrewsbury's Deputy Head (Academic) it is my responsibility to manage the studies of every pupil who attends the School and ensure that the approaches we take as an institution are effective and appropriate both to the pupils themselves and to the qualifications they wish to attain. But my role in determining the course of this aspect of the education your children receive has another, and perhaps more critical function.

Educators are people who 'draw' things out, but as teachers we are also responsible for 'drawing pupils out' into the wider world. As a school we have a vital responsibility to make certain that, as we take charge of your children, we equip them with the skills they need to just to survive the perils of the life beyond, but to thrive in them and to truly make a difference.

So as parents you must be finding it somewhat perturbing that one of the key figures responsible for the future success of your children is advocating failure. But I hope that when I have finished explaining it, you will understand exactly why it is that we believe failure to be inextricably interwoven not only with success, but with the ability to live life to the full and to approach testing times with resilience and the capacity to move forward.

Failure is an uncomfortable word. We don't like to talk about failure with pupils; it's uncomfortable and it feels as if we are pre-supposing a negative outcome at an early stage in their educational experience.

However, in this age in which 'education' has been so often confused with 'qualification', we have lost sight of an important point: failure is not the same as non-achievement. Let me explain:

The pupil who hands in an exercise book with four of ten questions left blank because they were too scared to attempt them has not 'achieved'. The pupil who hands in ten completed questions, all of them answered incorrectly, has 'failed'. In the case of the former, the teacher's hands are tied. There is nothing to go on. It's like a doctor treating a patient with both arms tied behind their back, a blindfold

around their eyes and the Shrewsbury School Symphony Orchestra blaring in their ears. We can make guesses of course; we can estimate where the problem lies, but it is hard to target a response.

In the case of the incorrect responses, the teacher can see exactly where the problem lies, they can praise the pupil for the bits that went well and explain to them precisely how they can remedy the more catastrophic aspects of their work. The pupil who has failed can move on and will ultimately triumph; his fellow must often, sadly, fester in his self-created rut of non-achievement.

We saw the fruit of a failure-free approach this summer in the IGCSE English Language paper, in which a particularly odd parrot-based passage managed to fox pupils on a national level. It was an unusual passage and very different from what the pupils had previously encountered. Interestingly, instead of throwing themselves into it and giving it all they had in hope, many pupils – and I mean this nationally, not just at Shrewsbury – simply waved the white flag of surrender and could not bring themselves to engage with it at all – fearing that what they would write non-achieving responses; terrified of the sudden requirement for versatility.

But it's not just basic classroom practice or single examinations that give cause for concern. At the national level, the last ten years have seen a worrying deterioration in the numbers of pupils taking arts or language A Levels and GCSEs. Pupils studying Chemistry or Biology or Maths or even Latin can sit for two years in the classroom quietly, listening, taking notes and ultimately go on to get a very good grade in the examination. There will be very few moments at which they will be personally exposed, at which they will have to go out on a limb over an issue.

The same cannot be said of the languages and arts. Here pupils very much have to put their money where their mouth is. A practical performance in music, the creation of an artefact in design or the delivery of an oral presentation in a language requires pupils to expose their weaknesses and take personal responsibility for their performance.

Now we are fortunate at Shrewsbury to have such exciting and inspirational teaching in these faculties that we can smugly point out that our numbers in these areas are strong; but the tide is turning. The numbers will not stay strong forever and the 'disease' is spreading. Subjects that require a degree of subjectivity are also vulnerable – English Literature and History to name but two – areas in which pupils must posit their own opinion and justify it from the evidence. Teachers cannot do that for them – but the process and the concept and the fear of failure, are rendering these (on a national scale) less attractive than subjects in which empirical, unchanging data can be regurgitated.

The knock on effect of all this, is then – an even greater increase in the pressure placed on your children. Trapped by the slightly bizarre and examination focused system we operate in this country, these young people are forced into high-stakes assessment at the most vulnerable phases in their lives. They put pressure on themselves, they feel the pressure from the school and, indeed, from you their

parents to ensure that, at the end of the day, they achieve the best possible results. In doing this, are we surprised that they want to do it by the easiest possible means?

I can hear you thinking in your minds that this is all wonderful educational philosophy and very abstract; but what does it mean in practice? It's true that, just as any independent school, Shrewsbury exists in an awkward tension between espousing a liberal and wide-ranging educational philosophy and the need to deliver top-class examination results at the end of the day. There is an abstract utopia and, let's be pragmatic, a commercial reality.

In the concept of failure, however, we find a useful crossing place – a point at which it is possible for us to do both. In engaging with what I like to think of as a 'failure allergy' among our pupils we can stand up strong for what we believe in and also create a better path to ultimate success for the boys and girls in our care.

Part One: Understanding the Causes

To make the subject digestible, I'm going to divide it into two key sections. Firstly I'll take you through some of the key root-causes of the Failure Allergy so that we can try to get into the mind-set of a contemporary teenager and understand why it is that they are so resistant to the process of failing. Then I'll turn my attention to the good news – what we can start to do about it, how we can start to shift that emphasis and reintroduce failure as an intrinsic part of academic development.

Let's turn our attention first to one of the most controversial issues of the day – social media. I don't want to get into the ins and outs of what social media is; whether it is a good or a bad thing, it is here and it is likely to stay. We can restrict and we can filter, but ultimately, as I am sure you already know, the bloody-minded and determined teenager is likely to find a way to do precisely what they want to do anyway.

According to research carried out on behalf of the government in January of this year, over five million teens aged between thirteen and nineteen were actively using Facebook *and* Twitter during 2016. Given that even in sleepy Shropshire, most pupils view these as outdated and clunky platforms that their parents and grandparents use, the general picture of social media usage can be assumed to be significantly – perhaps even exponentially higher.

It is also, perhaps, wrong to describe them as users. You or I might, perhaps, log in to Facebook once or twice during the day just like a customer going into a shop; but our teenage charges have a totally different relationship with an always-on, constantly updating social media scene.

There are so many varied platforms out there – with so many different uses and applications – that I have almost got lost with what is happening from one week to the next. The fact of the matter, however, is that every one of these applications has a common factor – it is based on the principle of people posting ideas, experiences and images from their life and actively sharing them with others.

What's wrong with that? The answer is, of course, nothing. We're a nosy species. If we hadn't been a nosy species we'd have stopped evolving somewhere around the 'grunt and club' era. We love to know what's going on in other people's lives – it's voyeuristic and slightly exciting. We love to be the first to be able to report a bit of news; we love to be able to change someone else's perspective on an image or event, by adding in our own comments. It's addictive to be a part of developing their meta-narrative.

As a species – and particularly here as teenagers – we also seek validation and approval. The best bit about completing a bit of project work at school when we were kids was taking it home to show mum and dad – letting them bathe you with ridiculously hyperbolic compliments: “Oh, what a lovely terracotta head!” “Oh I'm sure your macaroni sculpture of Tutankhamun will look just lovely next to the Spode on the dresser!” Or for me, on one memorable occasion during my youth “I wouldn't eat that if you paid me.”

We look for appreciation and social media gives us that fix – why else do people post pictures of the lunch they've just made, the wall they've just painted, the lawn they've just mown and then express disappointment when the number of likes or shares is low. It's a human facet and our children are doing nothing unnatural by pursuing it. But there is a more worrying side.

When you scroll through the lists of posts, the brain tends not to process everything that's happening as the preserve of the posting individual. Instead, the mind – and particularly the teenage mind – constructs for itself a utopian amalgam – pooling together all the best bits of the various different posters and stitching them into the shadowy form of a perfect individual.

On the basis that people, as a rule, don't tend to post images of the truly mundane, of the ugly or of the unpleasant; this fictitious pastiche person is essentially flawless. Of course this person does not exist; but the impact on the teenage mind is a profound one. The conglomerate image that they have in their mind is the sensation that everyone else is, largely, getting it right all the time.

When I was a pupil at school, lacking in any sort of social grace or skill, I made it my business to hang around with the pupils who were even more dysfunctional than I was. To use a terrible analogy, I established 'canaries' for myself – on the principle of schadenfreude I reasoned that I could get by as long as there was someone else out there more dysfunctional and pathetic than I was. A terrible and selfish mentality – but I think that it's vitally important to recognise our pupils do not have this facility – certainly not in the online world. In an era where children will spend ten to fifteen minutes attempting

to achieve 'the perfect selfie', they find themselves damned to floating in an ocean of false perfection where one slip can cost them permanently.

But it's wrong of us to blame technology exclusively for the failure allergy when one of the key root-causes is actually very much closer to home. It's slightly embarrassing, actually, to discover that one of the reasons our pupils seem so incapable of failure is that the education system tells them not to.

Our current system, in this country, whether we're looking at the independent of state sector, is predicated on what educationalists are prone to refer to as 'high-stakes testing' and what the rest of us think of as really nasty exams.

With common pre-tests coming in across a huge range of boarding schools, pupils as young as eleven can expect to sit an examination which will have profound ramifications for their future pathway; but let's track back from this. In order to prepare for the pre-test, pupils need to be in the right sets at school and in order to do this the school needs to test them. So pupils as young as six or seven can be sitting diagnostic tests which will affect their setting...which will affect their performance in the pre-test...which will affect their future educational pathway.

Are we really surprised that the NHS is concerned about incidences of mental health problems in children.

As educationalists we have been selling arms to the enemy.

It's not just the exams, either, it's the way we are in the classroom – the way we focus and structure our teaching and the terminology we use. How many teachers I wonder, would admit to having brought a daydreaming or distracted child back into line by saying: "I hope you're paying attention because this stuff will be on the exam." The corollary of this, of course, that anything else up to this point – or indeed anything that isn't on the exam is of no importance at all.

How many of us as parents – and I'll admit to having done it myself – have guided our children to make decisions about their path forward in education, or even about mundane tasks like prioritising homework and put undue emphasis on testing.

It's a natural response, of course it is. We want the best for our children at we want them to access an education that will open up the maximal number of opportunities for them and, so often, the gatekeeper is an examination.

But what we're teaching them, by putting so much emphasis on these things in our own dialogue with them, is not only that examinations are the focus and outcome of education but that making a mistake, even a small one, at any level, can cost you! We imply that the smallest of negative ripples at an early stage can significantly distort their progress towards success in the long-term.

Now that message isn't only coming from us. How long has it been since a minister for education has spoken about anything other than examinations or inspection? How long since a news story about a school was not fixated on rising or falling standards?

So it's little wonder these pupils don't want to fail, no wonder that they do equate failure with non-achievement. But the heavy irony is that in failing to fail in the classroom, pupils do far more damage to their prospects in those examinations!

There is another and slightly more complex underlying reason for the fear of failure – but it is a powerful one nonetheless and this too has much to do with the attitudes and ideas that have been presented to pupils by society as a whole and, it must be accepted, through educational institutions such as this one.

Since the mid-nineties, schools across the country have been encouraged to deliver an optimistic and well-intentioned message to pupils. That message is that 'they are special'. Assembly after assembly reinforces the key point that they are unique, that they are not just one in seven billion, that the doors of the future lie open to them, the world's their oyster.

Now of course, there's nothing wrong with that per se. There really isn't and don't for a moment think that I'm about to deliver an assembly to our third form in which I remind them that they are all more or less just a statistic and that cosmically they'll make about as much difference to the universe as the plastic chair they are sitting on. My point, however, is that this aspirational message is an incredibly dangerous one to deliver if we do not point out that those doors will only open with a significant amount of effort or that, indeed, sometimes the doors won't open at all for you no matter how hard you try.

It's informative here – and a bit of a breather for you in from the intensity – if we take a brief foray into the world of the fairy-tale. I am a keen believer in the importance of fairy-tales, not simply for their literary significance, but for the way they gather together prevailing social attitudes and throw them back at society reduced to their barebones.

Take Cinderella for example. Here is a girl to whom life has not been entirely fair. Her mother dies, her father re-marries injudiciously and the house is suddenly full of ugly women – or perhaps we should describe them as aesthetically challenged.

Cinderella, as we know, wants to go to the ball but is told she can't and is forced to undertake slave labour for her physically unusual family. Happily for her, a fairy godmother arrives and through a little bit of bippity-boppity-boo sends her off to the ball where a clearly extremely shallow, chauvinist prince falls in love with her based purely on physical appearance and is distraught when she lives at midnight to deal with a pumpkin crisis.

The rest of the story is well known, the prince takes an unhealthy interest in feet and slippers and rides around a kingdom that is presumably entering deep economic decline and political turbulence asking pretty girls to shove their foot into a slipper. It has often struck me that Cinderella must have had fairly unusually-sized feet. Perhaps they were deformed, who knows.

What's interesting is that this is only the modern Disney-style adaptation of the story which reflects modern attitudes. Life is not going well for you – don't worry, you don't need to do anything. If you're nice and you're attractive, no need to be proactive, good things will just happen to you...

Interestingly, older versions of the story – the oldest being, actually, a Greek fable purported to have come originally from Egypt, have Cinderella as someone who rises through differing positions through extreme hard work. She earns her way to her happy ending. We have to wonder, don't we, whether the modern incarnation of Cinderella is ideally suited to be queen consort? What experience does she have? What makes her suited to running a kingdom? Do she and the prince actually have anything in common?

In later versions of the story, moving through the sixteenth and seventeenth century, we find Cinderella becoming a little more lethargic, although she attends several balls and there is no fairy godmother – she makes her own dress. I have, it must be said, a little more sympathy for the ugly sisters in these versions. Confronted by the problem of the glass slipper and possessing, it would seem, unduly large feet, they actually go to the effort of cutting off bits of their heels and toes in order to squeeze them in – now, the motives may not be great but it's at least an A for effort. It's only in the last fifty years that Cinderella herself has become almost entirely inert, a passenger in her own narrative.

So what's my point?

Well I guess it's that inculcating what I like to think of as the 'Cinderella mentality' in our pupils has proven extremely dangerous. Life, as we all know, is not fair. Things do not work out by themselves and Shrewsbury School is not a fairy godmother with a magic wand designed to guarantee progress and success at the upper level.

It takes time, it takes patience and above all it takes effort – and if pupils really are serious about achieving things at the top level, then it takes perseverance and resilience. That ability to know that just because you didn't understand something first time around does not mean that it's not the right path for you.

It is slightly alarming that the Michaelmas term is, for me, dominated by a slow and mournful procession of sixth form pupils coming to my office to tell me that they've done two weeks of this subject or that

subject and it's all a bit tough and they'd like to give it up. The tolerance level for discomfort, for feeling that you can't just pick something up and do it straight away, is exceptionally low.

So I suppose I've outlined the key aspects of the problem and some of its causes; but what we are really here to discuss is what on earth we can do about it.

Part Two: Beginning the Treatment

Now it would be the easiest thing in the world to lay responsibility for this at the feet of the pupils – we should just tell them they need to fail more. I had a diabolical teacher of German when I was at school who, when we had the temerity to suggest we didn't really understand what the case system was, told us that we simply needed to 'understand it better'. When I gently suggested that perhaps he might explain it to us, he told me not to 'be pedantic' and put me in detention.

As I've pointed out before failure is not in the ideological vocabulary of the vast majority of our pupils. It does not come naturally and if we are expecting it to feature as a part of their learning landscape then we really need to scaffold this approach.

Failure week is a great start of course – and it's been a real pleasure to work with Peter on any number of projects across the course of the week to raise awareness; but it cannot stop here. We need to start hard-wiring into the pupil mentality as a part of the way we work. Part of that process will come from us – we'll be leading the charge; but we also need your help.

So what can we do as a school?

Well first of all we're going to stop selling arms to our enemies; we're going to look closely at the terminology we're using in the classroom and ensure that while all pupils are making excellent progress relative to their examination specifications, we aren't constantly prioritising examinations. We will build in open questioning more into the classroom context and cause pupils to take a far more active role in their learning. We have already introduced the 'Shrewsbury Fiver' in the Third Form – an opportunity for them to make brief presentations at the start of some of their lessons, building in the idea that they need to take responsibility for their learning journey and not simply sit there, relying on a magical programme of osmosis.

We are also expanding our welfare provision. As many of you will know, we have recently appointed a Director of Welfare and one of his key tasks will be to look at the sorts of issues pertaining to social media that I have already mentioned this evening. It's a vital and increasingly complex area and it's important that all teaching staff are fully on-board with the latest developments

Another area we have been putting forward as a key area for focus among the staff body is our approach to assessment. At the moment, when pupils complete written work in class or in Top Schools, they tend to see it as a single, isolated task to complete. If it goes well they feel a glow of satisfaction. If it goes badly they file it where they can't find it and try not to think about it. We need to help our pupils, from the junior level onwards, to understand that the courses they follow are a linear process and that each piece of work leads on to the next; that the comments made by teachers in marking can be pulled forward into the next piece of work.

To this end, a number of our teachers have been trialling bridging exercises with their pupils – using a form to get them to link one piece of work to the next and to forcibly ask them to reflect on the way they have responded to minor failures in the preceding.

But as parents we also need your help.

A recent survey showed that parents modelling failure is vital to child development. They need to see us getting things wrong from time to time. Not getting big things wrong like causing a market crash or being implicated in fraud, but little things – daily things.

If we can show them that sometimes things don't quite go the way we expect and that we have to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down and respond, then we stand a very good chance of preparing them to lead more successful, more resilient and more fulfilled futures.

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