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## Foreward from *Failure before Success: Teachers Describe What They Learned from Mistakes*

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# Failure before Success

## Teachers Describe What They Learned from Mistakes

Edited by  
Julie Warner

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD  
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# Foreword

This welcome book seamlessly, and with engaging honesty, pursues two related themes. The first speaks to how mistakes and failure are inevitable, natural, even necessary, in becoming a seasoned and savvy educator. The contributors' individual stories elucidate the challenges of teaching and how confronting mistakes and failure are part and parcel of dedicated, enlightened, and effective teaching.

The personal experiences shared are also a reminder that seeking error-free or failure-proof practice is not the essence of successful teaching. A teacher who thinks otherwise is likely to be unhappy, unfulfilled, and demoralized—or delusional. Constantly worrying about mistakes and failure and seeking a safe haven insulated from them, or, maybe worse, assuming that perfection is objectively achievable, may actually lead to an unhealthy complacency and stagnation. It may also subvert attention to the larger and inherently messier dimensions of education in the realms of civic, moral, and personal development.

Such tendencies are particularly insidious at the outset of a teaching career when teachers are typically the most insecure and vulnerable, but also when there is the greatest need to learn from missteps. It is not a coincidence that several of the contributors recount mistakes and failures early in their teaching careers. Nor is it a coincidence that they report having sought advice from more experienced colleagues. This book vicariously provides such advice with experienced and thoughtful teachers sharing stories that may edify and inspire those with less experience, while modeling the struggles inherent to teaching.

For both novice or experienced teachers, this collection of chapters counters the notion that perpetually seeking guaranteed or unmitigated success is a formula for good teaching. As is in most fields, such a perspective is

inconsistent with the arc of continuous growth and maturity as a practitioner. There can be no innovative, creative, nor contextually adaptive, teaching without some risk of making mistakes and a willingness to tolerate failure, accompanied by a commitment to learn from them in a career-long quest for greater competence.

But, more is needed than an awareness and acceptance of mistakes and failures. As well-illustrated in these chapters, there needs to be analytical reflection about them and systematic attention to mitigating their negative effects. As several of the contributors note, time for such reflection is too often sacrificed to the unrelenting daily demands of teaching, that is, until things go unpleasantly wrong and demand attention. Thus, mistakes and failures are fertile inflexion points for professional insight and growth.

The second, but related, theme is the challenge teachers face in accommodating the multidimensional diversity of their students, which is arguably among the most fundamental challenges of all classroom teaching. How can an appropriate balance be achieved between teaching groups of students while attending to their individual needs? Diversity manifests itself even in classrooms that may on the surface seem homogeneous, with students sharing a common sociocultural background, although such classrooms are becoming increasingly rare in American schools. Differences in ability, personality, motivation, interests, social skills, and so forth can vary considerably in any classroom and always interact with achieving academic goals.

Teachers must look for ways to explicitly accommodate those differences, sometimes overtly (e.g., grouping for instruction) and sometimes less so (e.g., seating arrangements). But, there is also an imperative to take a sincere interest in students' backgrounds and interests beyond their academic acumen. Doing so may be as simple as asking a student who is a baseball fan to explain to classmates how a math lesson on statistics can be applied in that sport. Or, a teacher may give an article about the poetry of rap music to a student who is passionate about that musical form. Several chapters illustrate how such simple, seemingly incidental moves, in classrooms can have cascading positive effects, just as a cutting or insensitive remark can have the opposite effect. Such small things can stick with students for a lifetime.

The challenges of diversity increase exponentially when it includes, as it often does today, sociocultural and linguistic differences. Again, several chapters provide vivid examples. Accommodating such diversity can have

practical pedagogical implications such as teaching phonics to students who speak a nonstandard dialect or a language other than English at home.

But, there are also broader implications. Gaining understanding of and acknowledging students' cultural backgrounds can affect motivation and involvement and promote students' sense of personal validation and inclusion. For example, students need both to see themselves in the literary works they read and to vicariously experience a common humanity in characters who live much different lives than their own. It also means a heightened awareness of how pedagogical content may interact with students' sensitivities, sometimes including troubling circumstances and traumatic experiences. Several chapters also address the implications of teachers being outsiders to the communities in which they teach—a situation that amplifies the challenge of dealing with diversity, as well as the need for serious reflection about unfounded assumptions and personal biases.

Those chapters, in particular, invoked a personal experience that took place 50 years ago. As a white, middle-class preservice teacher with a social consciousness, I requested a student teaching assignment at an elementary school in inner-city Chicago. My fifth-grade students were all African American. Before the end of my first day, I realized how far out of my element I was personally, culturally, and professionally, well beyond the normal pedagogical clumsiness of a student-teacher. A string of debilitating (at least to my ego) failures during my first few days led me to try something different.

To satisfy a student-teaching requirement in social studies, I planned a unit on local community. However, the unit was designed to place me in the role of learner and my students as teachers. I challenged the students to teach me, the outsider, about their community. I asked honest questions for clarification and a few that challenged them to extend their own understanding of the role that local community and culture play in everyone's life.

They responded with great enthusiasm and animation. For example, I asked them about what it meant to talk "jive." A boy and girl volunteered immediately to illustrate. They launched spontaneously into an amazing performance that, if I hadn't known otherwise, would have guessed was scripted. That event opened up discussions on a variety of topics including registers of language and their role in connecting speakers with a community—an advanced topic made accessible to fifth-grade students in this instance,

Nonetheless, the unit wasn't by any means a complete success. It never is. But, I learned how I could do it better next time. And, beyond the inherent

richness of this multi-cultural experience, I learned several principles that have stuck with me during my entire career, including in my university teaching. Among other things, I always consider ways students can teach me something, how to use them as resources, and how to give them some measure of responsibility for their own learning.

Several contributors point out that their preservice teacher education programs did not adequately prepare them for mistakes, failure, and dealing with the many realities and contextual complexities of practice. Certainly, such programs cannot be expected to prepare future teachers for every possible context and contingency. But, this book suggests that they might do better, impressing on preservice teachers the inevitability of mistakes and failures and how they might deal with them. They might put more emphasis on the importance of reflection, analysis, strategic adjustments, and ways of coping. The personal anecdotes in this book might open doors to fruitful discussion and activities along those lines.

Refreshingly, this book takes a personal, not technical, approach. There is no armchair academic theorizing, nor long lists of scholarly citations. Each chapter reads like an entry in a teacher's reflective journal. But they are also useful gateways to further reading and exploration facilitated by relevant resources listed at the end of chapters.

This more personal approach may also attract readers who are not teachers. In that regard, this book may be palliative to readers outside of education, including policymakers, who too often suffer from the misconception that teaching is primarily a soulless technical skill judged only by test scores.

Finally, this book stands as testimony to a realization that the rewards of teaching—and there are many—do not come automatically, easily, or without at least occasional turmoil, internal and external. In that sense, it is also a reminder that we, as teachers, are in a service-oriented profession, not one entered into mainly for the sake of our personal gratification, or self-actualization. Those rewards are there, but they are by-products, not objects, of our service. Teaching is hard, sometimes gut-wrenching, work. This book helps remind us of that reality.

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