Chapter 3: The Growth Mindset: Learning to Fail Well

Diagram 1: Book One Lesson Design at a Glance:

*The Girl Who Never Made Mistakes*

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| The Secret of Failing Well: *The Girl Who Never Made Mistakes* Inquiry | | | | |
| **Compelling Question** | Are mistakes good or bad? | | | |
| **Common Core Standards** | **Common Core Standards**   * Anchor Standards: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher- led) with diverse partners on *grade 5 topics and texts*, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly. * Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.   **NCSS Theme**   * The study of individual development and identity will help students to describe factors important to the development of personal identity.   **NCSS Inquiry Arc**   * (4) Communicating conclusions and taking informed action. | | | |
| **Staging the Question** | Watch video and discuss why the girl is afraid to answer a math question in class. | | | |
| **Supporting Questions 1**  **(Before reading)** | | **Supporting Questions 2**  **(During reading)** | | **Supporting Questions 3**  **(After reading)** |
| Are mistakes good or bad? What was it like when you first learned to ride a bike, write your name or do long division? Why was the student in the You Tube video afraid to answer the math question? | | Why does Beatrice have reporters outside her door? Who seems happier, Beatrice or her brother? Where did Beatrice get the idea that she should not make mistakes? Why does Beatrice not skate with her friends? Why is Beatrice nervous after her almost mistake? Is Beatrice happy? | | Did Beatrice fail well? How might have Beatrice have if she had failed badly? Was Beatrice happier as the girl who made mistakes or the girl who never made mistakes? How do you know? Did you ever feel like Beatrice in any way? Do you know anyone like Beatrice? |
| **Formative Performance Task** | | **Formative Performance Task** | | **Formative Performance Task** |
| Teacher presents students with questions to elicit where students are in regard to their views on failure. Students will view a video on a student afraid to answer a question in class. | | Students respond to the above questions at key points in the text. | | Students will sort the qualities of failing well from the diagram as presented in the Diagram 2 in a format chosen by the teacher. |
| **Featured Sources** | | **Featured Sources** | | **Featured Sources** |
| Famous Failure Video  <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNAMrZr9OWY> | | *The Girl Who Never Made Mistakes*  By Mark Pett, Gary Rubinstein | | Materials in Are Used in Diagram 2. *Failing Well* |
| **Summative Performance Task** | **Argument** | | Students will arrange the failing well qualities under the *Failing Well* or *Failing Badly* title. Students will answer the compelling question in a Common Core opinion essay. | |
|  | **Extension** | | Students will retell the story to their parents and elicit from their parents on a time their parents failed well.  Students will draw a picture or share a story of their parents failing well with the class. | |
| **Taking Informed Action**  **(Enrichment)** | Students will share the story of their parents failing well and will create a school bulletin board or a twitter site to inform the community. | | | |

**Who Cares and So What: Connections to Positive Psychology Research**

The suggestions for teaching the book and the activities and questions that follow will need to be adjusted or modified based on the developmental level of the students, but the basic understandings on mindset are consistent at all grade levels. The goal in answering the compelling question is to have students uncover one of the building blocks of positive psychology, the growth mindset, built on a foundation of understanding that failure is often the first step in learning.  Carol Dweck, in her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, proposes that students need a growth mindset if they are to be successful in school, and more importantly, in life. What follows here is a snapshot of the research and minimal groundwork needed to teach the lesson, but I assure you that materials, posters, worksheets and ideas for teaching growth mindset abound and can be found instantaneously on Twitter on a daily, *or hourly basis* (ie. #Growthmindset).

A growth mindset is a view of learning as a process that is driven by effort and involves constant growth through trial and error. It is a mindset that believes that failure may be a necessary building block for success and failing can teach us lessons that can often be learned in no other way. Students, with a growth mindset, may come to view failures as signal that more effort is needed, rather than a measure that the student lacks innate ability or capacity.

Growth mindset truly lives up to its to name, viewing learning as a continuing process of growth. Learners increase their abilities through greater and greater effort. Failure is viewed as a necessary and natural part of that growth. This mindset enables students, and their parents, to see the increasing complexity of school as a challenge and to handle increasing errors as part of the process of learning rather than a judgment on their innate talent abilities7.

As opposed to growth mindset, the fixed mindset views learning as measure of the capacity or innate abilities of the learner. Accomplishment with a fixed mindset results more from the innate ability of the learner than from effort. In fact, if great effort is needed, it might be viewed as an indictment of the capacity of the learner. Students might often be heard to say that he or she does well, *but they study a lot*. The *study a lot* part is not meant to be viewed as a compliment, but is seen as proof that they are not all that smart. The implication is that if students need to study a lot, they are lacking in natural talent.

The fixed mindset can view failure as a condemnation of the overall intelligence or ability of the child. When students do exceptionally well early in life, parents, or teachers and coaches, often beam with pride at early success and proclaim that these children are *naturals* as scholars, athletes, geniuses or artists. What is implied is that these capacities are inborn. Failure is an assault on these labels and can viewed with hostility by both children and their parents. This mindset can result in children shying away from greater challenges that might threaten their capacity and being jealous of the success of other children, as threatening to their assumed capacities. Dweck’s research indicates that as school becomes more complex and challenging, fixed mindset students tend to plateau and peak while growth mindset children continue to grow and achieve at higher levels of complexity. Dweck’s research about the plateauing effect of a fixed mindset holds for every level, even advanced graduate school levels including medical school.

Nothing in life can threaten our own beliefs about ourselves as much as failure. Failures at all levels and in all contexts can devastate us. The current passion in the parent rebellion in regard the Common Core Standards may be more a result of parents’ fears about scores below the college readiness levels than the tests themselves. Thousands of parents across the nation may have come to view these tests as detrimental to their children for a host of reasons, but without becoming too political, a good deal of the resistance may originate from the fact that potential scores might judge their children as below the level needed for college or career readiness.

A fixed mindset would view Common Core testing scores, below the cut levels, as failing scores and indictments of their children’s *or teacher’s* abilities. A growth mindset would view the same scores as calls for greater efforts on the part of all. Without getting mired in the political divide about the nature of the tests, what is needed in a culture where one in three children will leave college without a diploma is a view that sees failing as a condition that can be remedied with greater effort. Positive psychologists have labeled this ability to view failure as stepping-stone to success as *Failing Well*.

Although the descriptions of *Failing Well* could cover pages and images and templates abound on Twitter, for the purposes of this snapshot, the three descriptions provided have been used with kindergarten classes. Firstly, failing well is learning from your mistakes so that you learn what not to do on the way to learning what to do. Of course, failing badly is not learning from your mistakes and making the same mistake again and again. Failing badly can in its most extreme state results in quitting altogether.

What is needed if you are to learn from your mistakes is a mindset in which you accept responsibility for the mistake rather than blame others, the teacher, the coach, your parents, or even how you were feeling on that day. As can be seen, failing badly, involves making excuses and blaming others or the conditions, including the test itself. Finally, if accepting responsibility is to flourish, the student must not have a negative view on failure itself. If the student views failure through a fixed mindset lens, as a condemnation of their ability, there is little likelihood that they will accept responsibility and learn from their mistake. If students view failure with a negative mindset, as something that will always happen to them or should never happen to them, they will only view future failures as further proof of their lack of ability.

What is needed if one is to *Fail Well* is a view on failure, not as an indictment of the individual, but as an opportunity for growth and learning. Despite the temporary pain involved in failure, student must learn to view the setback as a potentially positive experience. Without this attitude as a foundation, there is little likelihood that children will fail well. There is a good deal of positive psychology research embedded in this simplified snapshot of the research, but the beauty of this approach is that students can begin to internalize this research through magic of this real aloud book lesson and the activities that follow.

**Staging the Lesson**

The lesson can begin simply enough with the compelling question as the starting point. *Are mistakes good or bad?* This simple question can be understood at the kindergarten level and equally wrestled with by graduate students. The key to your questioning is to build on each answer by posing the opposite point of view in a follow up question that stretches student understanding.

If the majority of students present the sophisticated view that mistakes are natural and healthy, students can be easily stretched to see the opposite point of view by suggesting to students that they might want to make a lot of mistakes on their next test or their admission to college testing. Students will immediately understand that the question is more complex than it seems and become open to a new mindset. With directed questioning by the teacher, students tend to eventually move towards the view that mistakes can lead to greater success if they are taken in the right way. The opening discussion should be a chance for the teacher to take the pulse of the class on the question and set the stage for the book.

Younger children generally tend to overwhelmingly support the hypothesis that mistakes are inherently bad. Older students will be more conflicted by the question knowing that they are politically supposed to answer that mistakes are good, but having been scarred by the idea that mistakes are painful and often barriers to entry in life. This opening discussion should cause some dissonance in students as although they began be less certain about their views. The discussion should introduce the idea that more thought should be given to how we view mistakes.

On the early elementary level, the discussion should begin with reminding questions about failures that ended in positive outcomes that they are already be familiar with. Questions might ask students to recall the experience of riding a bike. Strangely enough, most kindergarteners seem to recall positive experiences in learning to ride a bike, forgetting the bumps, bruises and falls. Nearly all kindergarten students will recall recent trauma of writing their name and testify that this process involves a good amount of trial and a great deal of painful *error*. The first level of questioning should involve a framing that seeks out experiences where the students experienced failure on the way to success. Older students can often provide failures that taught life lessons with more elaborate recall and stories.

There are a great many You Tube videos on failing well, including *Famous Failures,* that can be easily obtained from a Google search to set the stage for the book that follows, but great take off video is a fifty five second clip by Gostrengths online on *Fixed vs. Growth Mindsets* in children (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNAMrZr9OWY>).

This clip depicts the story of a young girl in class who is afraid to answer because she might be wrong. This clip provides a perfect take off for the book and the idea of fixed mindset. After the video, it will be easy to elicit responses on why the girl will not answer a simple math question, while her friend gives it a shot. This clip sets up clear pathways to the idea of growth mindset, introducing the big idea at the heart of the book.

With this brief mental framing in place, children are ready and excited for the read aloud to begin. The lead in to introduce the book might be presented to students suggesting that this is a story, unlike the girl afraid to be wrong in the You Tube clip, about a girl who is never wrong. *This book is about a girl who never made mistakes*.

Supporting Questions

The book begins by introducing us to Beatrice, a seemingly very happy little girl, who in the beginning of the story appears to do everything perfectly. From tying her shoes, to feeding her hamster, and making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for her brother, Carl, we are told that Beatrice is a girl who never makes mistakes.

The story takes a unexpected twist when Beatrice goes to the door to greet her fans and the media. When asked about making her bed and doing math homework, Beatrice answers the reporter’s questions that she accomplishes these tasks without fault or mistake. There is a slight preview of events to come, when reporters ask about tonight’s talent show, but Beatrice assures all she is ready for the talent show.

As a girl who has won the talent show three years in a row with a juggling act, Beatrice appears quite confident. At this point, it is wise to ask children questions about why Beatrice has fans outside her door and why there are reporters there at breakfast. More probing questions might ask if there are students like Beatrice that they know or if they are at all like Beatrice in some ways themselves. A more metacognitive reaching question might ask students if they think that they would be happy being a student who never made mistakes.

The story now reveals that most of the people in town do not even know Beatrice’s name, but call her “The Girl Who Never Makes Mistakes.” What is powerful about stories is that they can make us feel as if were are living the story and not just hearing about it. It is now revealed that Beatrice’s brother, unlike Beatrice, makes loads of mistakes. He eats his crayons and draws with his green beans, plays the piano with his toes and dances with his hands.

At school on this day, Beatrice almost makes a mistake as she slips when making giant rhubarb muffins, and catches the four eggs that go flying in a dramatic fashion. As she lands on her back, one egg is caught on her foot, two in her hands, and the final egg in her mouth. However, it is clear that Beatrice is shook by her *Almost Mistake*.

Beatrice cannot stop thinking about her *Almost Mistake* and passes on a chance to ice skate with her friends who are slipping and sliding on the ice pond. At supper, her father seeks to find out what is wrong as Beatrice confesses to worrying about messing up at tonight’s talent show with everyone watching. Assuring Beatrice that she has nothing to worry about, as she never makes mistakes, but her dad can see that Beatrice is no longer smiling.

Here the questions are pivotal to developing the ideas of *Failing Well* and the ideas of fixed versus growth mindset. The first questions might seek to ask about Carl and whether he seems happy, even though he appears to do everything in quite unusual and incorrect ways. Deeper insights might be sought out by asking who seems happier, Carl or Beatrice, asking for evidence from the story.

The next set of questions should seek to discover if students can recognize the pressure always being right has placed on Beatrice. More metacognitive questioning might see if students can recognize where this pressure to always be right comes from. Simple questioning might ask if the pressure to be right comes from her father and expand to the student’s own experiences and the pressure to always be right in school and in life.

In the end, students may be able to see that the pressure to be right is a part of the expectations on them that arises from the competitiveness of our world. Other questions might seek out why Beatrice does not ice skate with her friends and expand to the idea that those who are pre-occupied with a fear of always being right might avoid challenges that they could fail in, even though they could grow from those challenges.

In the dramatic conclusion, as Beatrice feels the pressure of never making a mistake and the expectations of the crowd, a terrible calamity befalls her. In her juggling act, which involves her hamster, a shaker of salt and a water balloon, somehow, the saltshaker is actually filled with pepper. The hamster, affected by pepper, sneezes, and clings to the water balloon. The water balloon pops and Beatrice is drenched and stands before the crowd with water dripping from her as the items all tumble to the floor.

There is an intense and tension filled pause, as everyone is not sure how this will turn out. Beatrice, *Failing Well*, giggles at first, and then laughs out loud as the entire audience laughs with her. It is here that the questioning is vital to teaching about mindset and *Failing Well*. Students should be asked if they think Beatrice behaved well after the balloon popped. Students will immediately recognize that she failed well.

Direct questions should ask students to imagine another scenario in which Beatrice behaved badly. Questions asking students to imagine a different ending in which Beatrice behaved badly might elicit responses that suggest she could have cried, run from the stage in horror, blamed her mother or someone else for the pepper in the salt shaker, and a behaved in a number of ways which would have preserved her reputation by blaming others or the circumstances. Students can now through careful questioning and discussion come up with the basic building blocks of *Failing Well*, accepting responsibility, learning valuable lessons from failure and developing a positive attitude towards failure.

The story concludes with Beatrice sleeping more soundly than ever before and now being unafraid to take risks and try new things. Beatrice is shown to make a peanut butter sandwich with the peanut butter and jelly on the outside of the bread, wear two different socks, and join her friends in skating, laughing and falling on the ice pond. The story concludes with Beatrice no longer being called the “Girl Who Never Made Mistakes”, but now just being called, *Beatrice*.

Careful questioning will reveal the power of *Failing Well* and will provide insight into the idea of a growth mindset and a fixed mindset. Opening questions might ask what Beatrice learned and should quickly reveal that she learned it was ok to make mistakes. Deeper questions might lead students to the understanding that Beatrice developed her ideas about never making a mistake from the idea that she had this unusual capacity and ability.

This questioning should reveal to students that Beatrice felt tremendous pressure to always be without mistakes. This pressure caused her to avoid challenges in which she might make mistakes. Students might be asked again why she would not skate with friends at the outset of the story and how this might affect a student in a classroom who labeled a “genius”. Students should be asked if Beatrice was happier now as the girl, who makes mistakes or was she happier the girl who never made mistakes. Students might conclude the discussion at the metacognitive level by being asked if they ever feel like Beatrice and why they this feel way.

**Summative Performance Tasks**

In order to follow up on the lesson, it is important to have students move from the story to the theories behind the story. There are as many different approaches to achieving this goal, as there are teaching techniques. You have to make your own gravy in education and choose the ingredients and approach that best satisfies your style and preference.

The approaches can vary from making large oak tag posters on the concepts in diagram 1 below as class discussion pieces, using smart board technology to display the concepts or having students work in pairs to solve the mystery of *Failing Well* (Included in your teacher resources at the end of the chapter). In each case, students should take from the lesson through large class discussion, group work or individual reflection the keys to *Failing Well* listed below.

**Diagram 2**

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| **Failing Well** | **Failing Badly** |
| Taking Responsibility for Failure: Blaming No One | Blaming Others or Circumstances: Not Taking Responsibility for Failure: |
| Learning Valuable Lessons  From Failure | Not Learning Valuable Lessons  From Failure: Repeating the  Same Mistake Over and Over |
| Having a Positive Attitude on  Failure  (Growth Mindset) | Having a Negative Attitude on  Failure  (Fixed Mindset) |

Whatever approach is chosen, students should conclude the read aloud by correctly assembling the building blocks of *Failing Well* and *Failing Badly* (Diagram 1). This template can be called a mystery and cut up and placed in a envelope with teams of students discussing and then placing the cut up sheets of paper under the appropriate headings as a paired or individual activity. In other cases, you might label this as a mess and ask students to create a model by picking up large oak tag cut outs from the floor and placing the proper descriptions under the appropriate headings on the front board in a class discussion.

This same concept can be taught with a Smartboard. Whatever methodology is employed, students should be able to identify the key elements of *Failing Well* and *Failing Badly* at the end of the read aloud and follow up. The activity should leave them to ready to answer the compelling question with concrete evidence.

*Extension*

The real power of this lesson is that this extension activity is essential and involves a requirement that the lesson goes home and is shared with parents. There are numerous ways to share the story at home. One of the easiest way to have students and their parents Google the trailer for the book on the Internet, but a more powerful way is to have students or the class as a whole identify five key phrases and retell their parents the story at home.

The written part of the homework assignment is for students to then ask their parents to relate a story about a time when they, as parents, *Failed Well*. After hearing their parent’s story, the students are then to draw a picture of the time that their parents *Failed Well*, learning from failure (Instructions can be provided for parents on the concept of *Failing Well*).

These pictures can be shared the next day as each student reinforces the concept by sharing these stories. The power of stories is that there is good deal of brain research that tells this learning will more permanent as the brain will record the story as it were a movie, employing different areas of the brain to store the information.

Older students may wish to use Twitter to create their own Twitter page (#teachers name failing well stories) with collected as video posts of their parent’s stories made from phones. There is no limit to how this lesson can be shared at home with parents and made real and permanent to students. What is essential and under the radar is that parents are being educated alongside their children. These positive psychology building blocks that are forming a foundation in children are now also being cemented in the minds and hearts of parents.

*Argument*

In our age of Common Core accountability, it is necessary to have students consolidate their understanding of these concerns by answering the compelling question in writing. These writing pieces should be driven by the same standards and rubrics as are all Common Core opinion writing assignments (See Standards). Emphasis should be placed on asking students to bring forth evidence from the story, their own lives and the world that surrounds them to make an argument. Students should be encouraged to incorporate the tenets of *Failing Well* as part of their evidence or thesis. Arguments should be more than just how a student feels about the question but should include real world evidence to make their points.

Taking Informed Action

Perhaps the best way to make this learning permanent in children is to require that they take an action that brings their learning to a real world audience. Again the ways to do this are as numerous as there are stories of *Failing Well*, but a great place to begin is to ask students how they can keep alive and share the idea of *Failing Well* with classes that come after them or with other classes in the school. This might involve students creating a school bulletin board in which students (*and parents*) maintain an ongoing bulletin display that celebrate failures that involve learning valuable lessons and growing from those lessons.

Students might post this bulletin board outside their classrooms as an up to the minute living museum that keeps alive the understandings gleaned from this read aloud. Older students might create a Twitter or Facebook page that shares these stories with the outside world.

Still other efforts could seek to write a letter to incoming students in the next year about the idea of *Failing Well* that drives their class mindset. Finally, more creative students might want to create their own picture books on *Failing Well*. However a class decides to share these insights, the research is clear on the fact that the learning will be made more permanent by the students teaching these lessons to others and that the efforts that arise from producing work for a real world audience will be far greater than any efforts that they will provide for a grad

Teacher Resources

1. Why was the girl afraid to answer in math class?

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1. Was she right to be afraid? Would kids make fun of her

if she was wrong?

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1. Have you ever felt like the girl in the video?

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What should you tell yourself (self-talk) if you ever feel like the girl afraid to answer in class?

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***Dear\_\_\_\_ Grade Students,***

***Place the Pictures in your Envelope on under the heading,***

***Failing Well or Failing Badly.***

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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | **It’s not my fault** | **I am quitting**  **I can’t do this** | | **I’ll do**  **better next time** | **I need to work a lot harder!** | | **The test was unfair!** | **I just can’t do math, that’s all** | | **I learned what I need to work on from that test** | **It’s Not My Fault** | |  |

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| **Failing Well** | **Failing Badly** |

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Are Mistakes Good or Bad?

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