CHAPTER 1

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IMPERATIVE

How Fear Affects Learning
Fear and the Global Pandemic
From Joyful Mistakes to Humiliation
Finding the Fearless Classroom

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HOW FEAR AFFECTS LEARNING

If you are lucky enough to visit the Franklin Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York, you will see FDR's hand-written speeches, with his personal emendations, with phrases that resonate with us decades later. On January 6, 1941, he articulated the four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear (FDR Library, n.d.). In the 21st century, our obligation as teachers and educational leaders remains to secure freedom from fear for our students and our colleagues. In this chapter we will explore fear in the context of the global pandemic.

We will contrast the joyful approach to mistakes that toddlers and even some kindergarten students make with the fear associated with mistakes in the later grades. And, thanks to amazing teachers, we will explore the characteristics of the fearless classroom.

FEAR AND THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC

In March of 2020, the vast majority of students around the world were sent home to face an uncertain future. As families struggled with the uncertainty of school closures, parents struggled to do their best. But many parents—especially those in essential jobs—working in hospitals, delivering packages, maintaining essential services—left children alone to supervise one another, with eight-year-olds watching five-year-olds changing the diapers of two-year-olds. This was not an ideal learning environment. As these students returned to school in 2021 and 2022, they had not only lost a year of learning, but a year of socialization. As I visited schools around the nation, I thought that students would return with joyful reunions with their friends. Instead, they returned glued to the screens to which they had been accustomed for the previous twelve to eighteen months. These kids were full of fear—fear of interpersonal contact with other children and especially of contact with adults. They were frustrated because they didn't know what was expected of them academically and behaviorally, and thus it was no surprise that academic performance was down and behavior challenges were off the charts.

Fortunately, there were exceptions that can guide us in the process of recovery from the global pandemic of 2020 and, perhaps inevitably, from the pandemics yet to come. Some schools invested time not merely in catching up academically, but also in building emotional connections among students and teachers. As we will see in forthcoming chapters, these successful schools displaced frantic coverage with focus, investing time on the most important parts of the curriculum and, most importantly, on rebuilding relationships among students and teachers.

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FROM JOYFUL MISTAKES TO HUMILIATION

Would you like to see who gets joyful learning right? Ask a toddler. She may not give you a lecture on the virtues of fearless learning, but with every bump into a wall, every fall, every pratfall, she does not offer an abject apology for her mistakes and an earnest promise to do better next time, but just gets up, however ungracefully, and tries again. If that interrogation doesn't reveal the answers that you want, the next best source is a Pre-K or Kindergarten teacher. They provide feedback with every breath and their work is exhausting. Imagine doing 100 deep knee-bends every day—that's the life of a Pre-K and Kindergarten teacher. Here is the return on that investment of energy: When four- and five-year-old students make a mistake, there is no shame or humiliation—they laugh and giggle, they support their classmates: "It's a C, not an S," they whisper. "The next number is seven," they say with conspiratorial glee. Mistakes are not a source of shame, but the path to learning.

Even older students find this joy in mistakes, especially in music and athletics. Watch the bright eyes of the middle school student who makes the cello sing for the first time, whose breath into the saxophone grows from a squeak to a tone. Watch the adolescent unsure of her body image, thanks to social media, begin to dance and gain confidence that she is beautiful. We know how to do this. We know how to make mistakes and make nervousness the glide path to learning and self-confidence. The question, therefore, is why we don't apply what we know in music, sports, and dance to every class and every subject and every grade?

Contrast this joyful learning with the classes in which students choose one of two paths. Some are defiantly indifferent. They would rather attract attention for their belligerence than for their inability to answer a question. Sending them to the office is a reward, not a punishment, and they gleefully walk down the hallway to the principal's office, relieved to not to have another moment of humiliation in the classroom. Other students sit, face down, pretending to look at their

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book or worksheet, praying that that someone else with a raised hand will engage the teacher's attention.

These indifferent students were able to make joyful mistakes just a few years earlier. What happened? Please do not blame hormones. Adolescents and pre-adolescents are as joyful as kindergartners in the school band, volleyball team, and drama club. Making a mistake in the middle school band is greeted, within seconds, with feedback that allows the student to leave a practice forty-five minutes later, confident that they are better than they were at the beginning of the class. By contrast, they leave many other classes certain that they are less competent than when they walked in. In later chapters we will address the "progress principle" pioneered by Harvard Professor Teresa Amabile (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). While teachers and many parents consider quarterly report cards the indicators of success, the time frame of students is much narrower. "Did I get better today, or am I more incompetent today?" That is the sort of all or nothing thinking the students consider.

Let us not sugarcoat the experience of children in the classroom. As Nancy Frey has wisely observed, we focus on the right answers, the children with their hands raised, and thus send the message that only the learning that occurred before the lesson began is of any value (Reeves, Frey, & Fisher, 2022). Visit classrooms in which the teacher uses equity sticks, with every student watching the teacher expectantly, knowing that they might the one to be called on. There is no fear, because the students know that they can "phone a friend," answer a question with a question, ask for a minute of think time, or give a partial answer. There is no shame or humiliation in this environment. But this environment is rare. If the answer is wrong, then we simply go to the next student who has the presumably right answer, leaving the previous student in the rubble of shame and humiliation. This is not learning. The student with the right answer already had the answer, so the teaching was irrelevant. The student with the wrong answer was denied the opportunities to be coached and supported into learning and was instead merely dismissed in the trash bin of wrong answers.

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FINDING THE FEARLESS CLASSROOM

The late Harvard Professor Richard Elmore said, "Look down, not up." By that he meant that when we visit classrooms, we should look not at the teacher's splendid presentations but rather at the students. Dick's admonition was precisely correct. Rather than the suits sitting in the back of the classroom judging the quality of the teacher's presentation, we must be sitting next to the students and learning from them. I sit next to a student and just ask two questions: "What are we doing?" and "What comes next?" The answer to the first question reveals the degree to which students understand the learning objectives and, ideally, what they need to do in order to succeed. The answer to the second question reveals the extent to which students and teachers understand how to make use of every moment of class time.

The gold standard response to "What are we doing?" came from a third-grade student who explained, as he was rewriting an essay, "I only got a two, but if I fix these things, I can get a three!" The rubric, in student accessible language, was laminated and taped to his desk. Without needing direction from the teacher, he knew precisely what to do to get to the next level. Interestingly, that is precisely the language that students use when playing video games—they know, without calling customer support, how to get to the next level on the next game.

This degree of student self-direction is not only a huge cognitive advantage for students, but it also relieves the teacher of the all-too-common role of factory manager. The worker submits the product, but only the factory manager is able to judge it. I have used the three-column rubric to place the burden of initial assessment where it belongs—on the student. The first column is a clear statement of the requirements of the assignment. The second column is the student's self-assessment. The third column is only where I disagree with the student's self-assessment. I have used this with students ranging from primary grades to graduate students. This breaks the mold from "submit and hope for the best and wait for the judgment of the teacher" to building the self-confidence that students need. This also cut my time

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spent grading papers by more than half. Expect some complaints if you try this—students have been conditioned to expect that the only person in the room who can assess their work is the teacher. But if you can withstand those complaints, the rewards are extraordinary—more confident and competent students, and greater focus for the teacher's feedback where it is most necessary.

The second question is "What comes next?" Unfortunately, the most common response is, "The teacher will tell me." While the most common complaint of teachers is "I don't have the time," there is an enormous amount of time wasted every day as students wait for the teacher to tell students what to do, as the students wait minute after minute for instructions from the teacher. Nevertheless, there are wonderful exceptions to this common observation. In these marvelous classrooms students have a clear sequence of actions that follow the completion of every task. Here are some examples, as students have explained them to me:

"As soon as I'm done with this math problem, I get to draw a picture showing what the problem means – like what it means when the temperature goes down and water turns to ice!"

"When I finish this paragraph, I check my work, and then I work with my partner to see what her paragraph is like. Maybe she had details that were different from mine, and we'll work together to rewrite our paragraphs."

"When I'm done with weighing the rocks, I'll check with my partner to see if he got the same results. Then we'll put the rocks in order from lowest to highest. It's tricky, because sometimes bigger rocks weigh less than smaller rocks, so you have to be really careful in how you weigh them. Then we have to be ready to explain how that happened."

"As soon as I finish this article for the newspaper, I have to show it to the editor, who will help me make it better."

In these classrooms, there is not a second of wasted time while students wait to be told what to do. These are highly engaging classrooms in which students help one another and the teacher is the coach rather than the micro-manager. A billion-dollar grant will not buy

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a 25-hour day. In fearless classrooms, we make use of every moment available, and there are vast differences between the classrooms in which every moment counts and those in which hours of instructional time are frittered away. In music classes, the instruments are tuned as the students walk in the door, not after the bell rings. Teachers collect homework at the door, not wasting five minutes after the students are seated. Attendance is taken immediately as students walk in, not after students are seated. Students have clear routines that make use of every minute of time and not a second is wasted on waiting for instructions from the teacher.

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In this chapter, we have considered how fear affects learning. Students and teachers in the fearless classroom greet mistakes as the central component of learning, not as a source of shame or embarrassment. We then reflected on fear in the aftermath of the global pandemic. It is not surprising that students, teachers, and parents were fearful with the daily threat of illness and death, and that they remain so today. It is not helpful to suggest that they "get over it;" rather, it is our responsibility as educators and leaders to acknowledge the pervasive fear that remains with many of our students and colleagues.

The good news is that we can learn much from our colleagues, especially in the Pre-K and Kindergarten classes, where mistakes result in giggles rather than shame. Like toddlers learning to walk, these students know that mistakes are the path to learning. Our challenge is to extend that joyful path of learning from mistakes to success throughout the rest of the lives of the students we serve. Similarly, adults need to be freed from the humiliation so often associated with mistakes and proceed to the psychological safety associated with the success that follows error. Finally, we must conduct treasure hunts, seeking the fearless classrooms in our own schools. Asking two simple questions—"What are we doing?" and "What comes next?" —will reveal outstanding professional practices in the classroom down the hall.

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In the next chapter, we will explore the neuroscience of fearless classrooms, why one of the most powerful chemicals in our body – oxytocin – can be used to stimulate learning and joy, and how fear diminishes this essential ingredient of learning.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. Where have you seen, either inside or outside of school, a fearless environment? What made children and adults fearless?
2. Where have you seen a fearful environment, either inside or outside of school? What do you think was the underlying cause of that fearfulness?
3. Reflect on your own best learning experiences. What made you a fearless learner?
4. Consider how you have received feedback on failure that was not humiliating but instructive. What did that parent, teacher, coach, or other leader do to make your failure a source of learning rather than embarrassment?

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