

Success through failure

EIF (Exploring Identities & Futures)

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Laura had a unique class of high-achieving school leaders in a peer support program: Year 10 students supporting a group of Year 7 students transitioning to a new school environment.

Students were selected for this program for their motivation and engagement, so she felt secure that they would perform well.

What surprised her the most was the power that the Exploring Identities and Futures (EIF) enabled and the extraordinary things these students designed to do with their learning. The genuine voices, authenticity of ideas and discovery of themselves and their community stood out.

A particularly significant change was the emphasis on self-reflection and self-regulation that the class experienced. Structuring reflection into each lesson led to authentic check-ins and a focus on failure as an important source of feedback. For this group of high-performing students, success through failure was a difficult idea but one which led to rich discussions and growth.

At the end of each week, students were challenged to share something that went well, a success from the week and a “fake failure”, something that led to feedback that they could learn from.

Letting go of power and encouraging self-reflection greatly impacted the students. After the initial self-exploration and identity tasks, they were challenged to ‘improve something in the community or in yourself’. With seven weeks for this task, students began by identifying what their Year 7 group needed, were lacking or missing from their homegroup.

One particular group identified that their Year 7s lacked empathy towards themselves and others. This launched The Empathy Project, which resulted in a partnership with the Stocklands Retirement Village in Somerton Park.

Students arranged their own excursion to spend time listening to the residents, collect stories and produce a picture book that could be shared in the community, all in the middle of significant COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions.

The students took control, undertaking risk assessments, ensuring vaccinations were up-to-date, meeting with leaders and completing paperwork. The stories and photographs were used to produce the book, and students involved were interviewed by ABC radio about their project.

In their reflections, the students described the experience as humbling; it helped them build confidence and push past insecurities and the activity provided insight, perspective and gratitude. The residents were happy, and the Year 7s glowed with achievement.

Laura believes that being able to shape those tasks to reflect that cohort and have clear links between themselves and their first task was all about internal reflection and goal setting. The second task focused on making connections, and then students built on all of that into their last tasks, where they applied the skills learnt. Every single one of them improved something in themselves or in their community.