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## Help Wanted: Seven Year Old Boy Fears Failure In Reading; Won't Try. Apply: Anywhere School

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**HELP WANTED:**  
**Seven Year Old Boy Fears Failure**  
**In Reading; Won't Try.**  
**Apply: Anywhere School.**

*Joan Claire Gordon*  
AURORA, OHIO

Seven-year-old Troy kept his distance from me as we walked from his classroom to the testing room. His feet shuffled on the tile floor, his hands were deep in his corduroy pockets, and his face was hidden by his dull, disarrayed hair.

"I'm Mrs. Gordon, Troy. Do you remember when we looked at the pictures together and you made up a story for each one?"

"Yeah. You gave me an eraser."

Troy was finally looking at me. He pushed away his hair. His narrow, dark eyes reflected distrust. The eraser visit was not enough to make us friends and several weeks had passed.

At that time, I visited all seven- and eight-year-old Salt Lake City boys who were reading 1.0 to 2.0 years below grade level and who fell within the normal I.Q. range. An individual test was administered to measure fear of failure. Each of the 58 boys viewed four pictures of school scenes. Included were two neutral pictures depicting neither success nor failure, one success picture, and one failure picture. The pictures and test instructions are reproduced in Gordon (1971). Responses of each boy to the set of pictures were scored according to two keys: the Birney, et al. (1969) Hostile Press Key and the Moulton (1958) Fear of Failure Key. The scoring procedure and both keys are in Gordon (1971).

Troy and several other boys had unusually high fear of failure scores. Let's look at Troy's responses to the pictures. One would expect a failure story for the failure picture and he produced just that: "He's sittin' down at school. The teacher made him. He was a bad boy. He was fighting. Somebody punched him in the eye. He's gonna beat the kid up when he gets his hands on him. He's real mad. He'll run away to a kidnapper's home. He's gonna beat up the kid and the kidnapper cuz the kidnapper is mean."

In addition to the foregoing failure imagery, Troy told about failure when he viewed the success picture: "A kid is raisin' up his

hand. He wanted to paint so he raised his hand. He's glad cuz he wants to paint. He won't get to paint."

According to the Moulton scale, he also included fear of failure imagery when he saw one of the neutral pictures. He portrayed the arithmetic students as mentally fleeing from the task at hand: "They're readin' a book. They're sittin' down. They were doing arithmetic. They're thinkin' about somethin' dumb like bein' a kidnapper when they grow up cuz that's what I'm gonna be. They'll go out for recess."

Troy's teacher supported his high fear of failure score on the picture test by rating him 10 on a 1-10 scale of low to high fear of failure in reading.

The reader may be quick to comment that most of us fear failure. Yet clearly there are some people, like Troy, who fear failure so greatly that they will go to great lengths to avoid situations where they might fail. They may elect to stop the task at hand if they are failing, or simply not begin if they suspect failure.

Let's accept Troy's high fear of failure as given, without worrying at this point about the factors contributing to his fear. The immediate problem for Troy's teacher is to manipulate the conditions around him when he is reading so that he will persist with his reading job and learn something. The teacher can select what seems to be exactly the right method to teach Troy to read; but if he gives up easily, his progress will be painfully slow.

The most obvious tactic is to eliminate failure for Troy, a la Glasser (7). But remember, Troy is seven and has experienced the gloom of failure in reading for over a year. He already has a flight mechanism operating to escape failure; he prefers to avoid failure rather than to try to achieve success at a reading task.

Are there classroom conditions which could be changed immediately during Troy's reading which would promote his persistence, his sticking to the reading job at hand?

What about the audience factor? The audience present when the boy is reading may have a significant effect on his persistence. If he is reading aloud, is just the teacher listening, or are children listening also? (See Birney, Burdick & Teevan, 1969, for discussion of social factors in fear of failure.)

What does the teacher tell the boy, before he starts reading, about the difficulty of the task? Is the teacher inclined to say, "Oh, Troy, this is so easy, you can do it with no trouble." Or is the teacher prone to remark, "Don't worry, Troy, if you can't do it; this passage is very difficult." Or possibly the teacher makes no comment at all about the

difficulty of the ensuing task and the boy's probable success. (For studies in which the probability of success (Ps) factor was manipulated in relation to persistence and fear of failure see Birney & Rolf, 1965; Feather, 1961; 1963; Heckhausen, 1966; and Raphaelson & Moulton, 1958.)

A study was designed to test the hypothesis that there is reason for teachers to be concerned with the interrelation of audience conditions, the probability of success (Ps) factor, and the degree of fear of failure as they influence reading persistence in the young boy.

The 58 boys were arranged in a distribution from low to high total fear of failure score. From this distribution, which was stratified into low, medium, and high fear of failure, three proportionate stratified random samples were drawn. Each sample was composed of a proportionate number of low, medium, and high fear of failure boys.

Two experimental conditions were imposed on the members of each sample. First, consider the Ps condition. Members of Sample 1 (N = 18) were told that the ensuing task was easy (Ps = .70). Sample 2 (N = 19) was not told anything about the difficulty of the task, i.e., no Ps announcement (Ps = .50). Sample 3 (N = 21) was told that the reading task was hard (Ps = .10). In reality, all samples viewed the same reading videotapes under the same two audience settings.

The second experimental condition was audience setting. Members of each sample were tested twice for persistence. The first videotape was shown with the experimenter (E) only present (E audience). The second videotape was shown with five friends and E present (Peer-E audience).

Thus, the design of the study, as depicted in Figure 1, was a three factor experiment with repeated measures on one factor, i.e. audience.

Each boy was visited a second time for administration of the appropriate experimental conditions according to sample membership. On each of the two videotapes, E acted as the teacher and conducted a 13-minute reading session with the viewer. The scripts and visuals used for each tape may be found in Gordon (1971).

Each videotape included 10 trials. The boy was told he could stop any time he wished. E rang a bell each time the boy did not respond correctly or did not respond at all to the questions asked by the videotape teacher. Thus, persistence was measured in terms of the number of failure bells endured before quitting the reading task.

Half of Sample 1 viewed Tape I with Peer-E audience present.

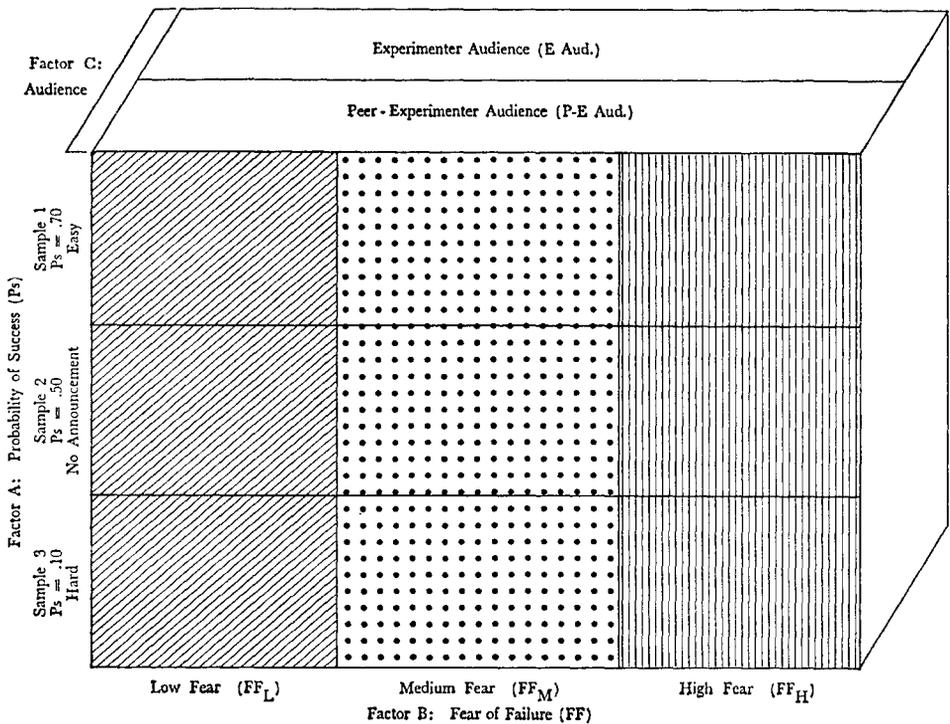


Figure 1. Design: A Three Factor Experiment with Repeated Measures on One Factor (C)

Peers were five friends whom the boy selected from his own class. They also viewed Tape II with E audience present. The other half of Sample 1 viewed Tape I with E audience and Tape II with Peer-E audience. Within each half, the order of the tapes was also switched to cancel order effect. Before viewing each tape, all members of Sample 1 were told that their probability of success was high ( $P_s = .70$  or easy task).

Sample 2 was treated exactly as Sample 1 with regard to tape number and audience setting and order of tapes. For Sample 2, no  $P_s$  announcement was made before either tape ( $P_s = .50$ ).

Sample 3 was treated as Samples 1 and 2 with regard to tape number, audience setting, and order of tapes. Prior to each tape, Sample 3 members were told that their probability of success was low

(Ps = .10 or hard task). Details of experimental procedures and exact instructions given to the boys are in Gordon (1971).

Troy's hands gripped the sides of the chair; his feet swished back and forth.

"Troy, you are going to watch a television program about reading. The teacher on the program will ask you some questions. Your job is to answer the questions. It's all right to guess the answer. She will also say, 'Do you want to stop now?' You answer her, either 'yes' or 'no'. You may stop any time."

Troy was a member of the sample to which no additional instructions regarding probability of success were given.

As the program began, Troy glanced at me frequently. To the teaching questions at the beginning of the tape, Troy gave only *one* correct response out of eight possible chances. At the end of the teaching portion, he elected to stop. He did not even begin the 10 trial sequence.

"Thank you for helping me, Troy. Now let's go to your room and you may pick five friends to come back here with us for another program."

Troy showed some interest in my remarks. His eyes questioned me. His thin, colorless lips smiled.

As we walked, I asked, "What do you like to do best at home, Troy?"

"Watch TV. I watched a program last night and it had a mean kid in it. He was shootin' up all the time."

"Did he hurt anybody?"

"Nah. I mean he was shootin' up. You know. Junk!"

Troy selected five boys.

"Are we going to the nurse?" one boy queried as we walked back to the testing room.

"Nah. We're gonna watch TV," Troy announced.

He still shuffled, his hands were in his pockets, but his head was up and he watched his friends as we walked.

Troy sat in the same chair in front of the TV receiver. The five boys sat behind him in a position to view the program.

Troy was given the same instructions that preceded the first tape. Then, the audience was advised:

"You children are the audience. Your job is to listen. Do not give the answers. That's Troy's job."

I started the tape. Troy was highly conscious of the boys behind him. He turned around many times and smiled at them. To the teach-

ing questions, Troy gave *no* correct responses out of eight possible chances. At the end of the teaching portion, he elected to do trial 1. Then he stopped.

The audience was thanked for participating and sent back to their class. Troy seemed to want to stay. We talked for a few moments and then I gave him a school notebook with his name on it.

“Thanks for helping out, Troy. I enjoyed meeting you.”

I offered my hand. He accepted it. His eyes met mine and I thought there was some trust reflected.

At the end of the morning, after I had tested several boys, Troy’s teacher came in. She talked about Troy’s difficult behavior in class, his home problems, and late television viewing (“often to midnight”). But primarily she dwelled on his hatred for reading.

The most significant and interesting results of this study involved Troy’s sample. Troy, Kirk, Victor, Joseph, Jesse, LeRoy, and Michael were the high fear of failure boys in the No Announcement sample. They exhibited minimum persistence with only myself present. They turned about and persisted the longest of any group when their peers were in the room. Some possible reasons for their behavior are suggested in Table 1, Cells 3 and 4.

Troy and other boys like him may be ready to damn reading along with Gibson and Hall (1969). However, since it seems unlikely that the ability to read will very soon be unnecessary, teachers must help children like Troy persist at the reading task.

The purpose of this article is to suggest that teachers can identify the high fear of failure boy who is having reading problems by using personal observations.

1. Does he retreat from achievement situations without even trying?
  2. If he tries, does he stop rapidly when failure ensues?
- Teachers may also wish to use the testing device employed in Gordon (1971).

For the boy who seems to have inordinate fear of failure, the teacher can try having him work in a group of friends with the teacher present, avoiding any reference to the ease or difficulty of his task. (See Table 1, Cell 3).

Admittedly, the foregoing suggestion is based on the results of a small study. There may be other successful ways to manipulate the environment to increase persistence, all the while reducing the number of failure experiences and searching for the proper reading method for the boy in trouble. But the fact remains that persistence at a reading

Table 1

## High Fear of Failure Behavior

	P-E Audience		E Audience
Easy Ps = .70	<p>1. MINIMUM PERSISTENCE</p> <p>Prime fear is showing ignorance to others (W-K) Fear loss of social approval (B-B-T). Ascribe failure to lack of ability (W-K) Great shame in failing at an easy task (W-K). Resultant inertial motive is to avoid (W). E viewed as source of punishment or withholder of reward; limits persist under these conditions (B-B-T) (K-B) (G).</p> <p>All correct</p>		<p>2. MINIMUM PERSISTENCE</p> <p>(B-B-T) predicted low persist. after failure at easy task. <i>Correct for both P-E, E.</i> (H) predicted less persist. after failure at easy task than FFL. <i>Correct for both P-E, E.</i> (At-F) predicted decreasing persist. after failure at easy task because S approaches Ps .50 or point of min. persist. <i>Correct for E aud. only.</i></p>
No Announcement Ps = .50	<p>3. MAXIMUM PERSISTENCE</p> <p>Motivated by fear of being a quitter before peers, takes precedence over showing ignorance to others (G). Motivated by view of E as source of punishment or withholder of reward (B-B-T) (K-B). Hope task will get easier (G). Persistence here probably socially motivated (B-B-T). Persistence predicted by (B-B-T) (B-R) (R-M) <i>Correct for this P-E aud. only.</i> (W-K) predicted failure leading to info. about person would deter persist. <i>Not correct for this P-E aud.</i> (W) inertial motive of avoidance <i>not operating.</i></p> <p>All correct</p>		<p>4. MINIMUM PERSISTENCE</p> <p>Prime fear is showing ignorance to others (W-K) Fear loss of social approval (B-B-T). Failure under these conditions yields info. about person, not task (W-K). Resultant inertial motive is avoid. (W). E viewed as source of punishment or withholder of reward (B-B-T) (K-B) Limits persist. under "no" condition when E only present (G). (B-B-T) (B-R) (R-M) predicted FFH preference for .50 condition. <i>Not correct for E aud.</i> (At-F) predicted least persist. for .50 condition. <i>Correct for E aud. only.</i></p> <p>All correct</p>
Hard Ps = .10	<p>5. BELOW AVERAGE PERSISTENCE</p> <p>Motivated by fear of being a quitter before peers takes precedence over showing ignorance to others (G). Persistence here probably socially motivated (B-B-T). Motivated by view of E as source of punishment or withholder of reward (B-B-T) (K-B). Shame of quitting decreases after moderate effort (G). (W) inertial motive to avoid does not operate until moderate effort expended (G).</p> <p>All correct</p>		<p>6. ABOVE AVERAGE PERSISTENCE</p> <p>(B-B-T) predict FFH prefer hard task to easy task. <i>Correct for both auds.</i> (At-F) predicted increasing persistence on hard task because moving away from .50. <i>Correct for E aud. only.</i> (W-K) predicted low persist. on hard task because ascribe failure to lack of ability. <i>Not correct for either aud.</i></p>

\*All changes in behavior between cells are significant changes with the exception of the changes between Cells 1-2, 2-4. These cells represent similar behavior. (Figure IV.7, c)

## Abbreviations:

- W-K: Weiner-Kukla (1970)  
 B-B-T: Birney, Burdick, Teevan (1969)  
 W: Weiner (1970)  
 K-B: Kates-Barry (1970)  
 H: Heckhausen (1966)  
 B-R: Birney-Rolf (1965)  
 At-F: Atkinson (1957) and Feather (1961)  
 R-M: Raphaelson-Moulton (1958)  
 G: Gordon (present work)

task was affected in this study by the interaction of the boys' conceptual system and their degree of fear of failure, their perception of the difficulty of the task; and the environment in which the task was performed.

To those who feel that matters of self-concept such as fear of failure are of little consequence in learning to read, and that "right" method is the king of keys to success, I dedicate this article. For you may have the most proper method you can find; yet, if the high fear of failure boy will not persist at his reading lessons, he will not learn to read. It is that simple. Thus, problems of self-concept may indeed be as crucial as method in learning.

Troy, Kirk, Victor, Joseph, Jesse, LeRoy, Michael, and other boys like them are all failing in reading for the second or third year. I'm anxious to get back to the classroom so that I can try to help them. Won't you help, too?

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