

Teacher Efficacy: What Is It and Does It Matter?

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A teacher's sense of efficacy can lead to gains in the classroom.

Teacher efficacy—“teachers’ confidence in their ability to promote students’ learning” (Hoy, 2000)—was first discussed as a concept more than 30 years ago when these two items were included in studies conducted by researchers at the Rand Corp.:

- “When it comes right down to it, a teacher really can’t do much because most of a student’s motivation and performance depends on his or her home environment.”
- “If I try really hard, I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students” (Armor et al., 1976, in Henson, 2001).

Teachers were asked to express their degree of agreement or disagreement with each of the two statements and their responses initiated the concept of teacher efficacy. From the beginning, this “early work

IN BRIEF

Teachers’ level of confidence about ability to promote learning can depend on past experiences or on the school culture. Principals can help develop a sense of efficacy for individual teachers and for the entire school.



suggested powerful effects from the simple idea that a teacher's belief in his or her ability to positively impact student learning is critical to actual success or failure in a teacher's behavior" (Henson, 2001).

Some researchers suggest that the more precise term "teacher sense of efficacy" be used, as what is being discussed is a teacher's sense of competence—not some objective measure of actual competence. From a practical standpoint, there are two important questions related to this theoretical construct:

- How does a teacher's sense of efficacy affect his or her teaching?
- Can it, through its impact on teaching, affect student achievement?

Over the years, since the concept was first developed, researchers have helped to provide answers to both these questions. In his review of research, Jerald (2007) highlights some teacher behaviors found to be related to a teacher's sense of efficacy. Teachers with a stronger sense of efficacy:

- Tend to exhibit greater levels of planning and organization;
- Are more open to new ideas and are more willing to experiment with new methods to better meet the needs of their students;
- Are more persistent and resilient when things do not go smoothly;
- Are less critical of students when they make errors; and
- Are less inclined to refer a difficult student to special education.

Anita Woolfolk, a longtime researcher on the subject of teacher efficacy, summarizes practical implications of these findings:

Teachers who set high goals, who persist, who try another strategy when one approach is found wanting—in other words, teachers who have a high sense of efficacy and act on it—are more likely to have students who learn (Shaughnessy, 2004).

Researchers interested in the topic

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have worked to develop longer and more focused instruments to get at the beliefs the first two Rand items were intended to measure. Their work has also increased our understanding of the concept. It is now generally thought that two types of beliefs comprise the construct of efficacy. The first, *personal* teaching efficacy, relates to a teacher's own feeling of confidence in regard to teaching abilities. The second, often called *general* teaching efficacy, “appears to reflect a general belief about the power of teaching to reach difficult children” (Hoy, 2000). Researchers have also found that these two constructs are independent. Thus, a teacher may have faith generally in the ability of teachers to reach difficult children, while lacking confidence in his or her personal teaching ability.

How Do Teachers Develop a Sense of Efficacy?

An important factor in the determination of a teacher's sense of efficacy is, not surprisingly, experience, or what Bandura (1977), a leader in the development of self-efficacy theory, calls performance accomplishments. Has he or she been able to make a difference in student learning? Hoy (2000) suggests that “some of the most powerful influences on the development of teacher efficacy are mastery experiences during student teaching and the induction year.” Thus, “the first years of teaching could be critical to the long-term development of teacher efficacy.”

Building on the work of Bandura, Hoy (2000) discusses other factors that can impact a teacher's sense of efficacy:

- **Vicarious experiences.** For example, a teacher might observe another teacher using a particularly effective practice and thus feel more confident that, through its use, she could be more successful in reaching her students.
- **Social persuasion.** In a school setting, this could take the form of either pep talks or feedback that highlights effective teaching behaviors while providing constructive and specific suggestions for ways to improve. However, such “persuasion” is likely to lose its positive impact if subsequent teacher experiences are not positive.

Hoy (2000) views the school setting itself—especially the ways in which teachers new to the profession are socialized—as having a potentially powerful impact on a teacher's sense of efficacy. For example, is a new teacher encouraged to view asking for help as not only normal, but desirable? This can be an important way to ensure that such a new teacher does not experience a series of failures that in turn affect mastery experiences, the prime determinant of a sense of efficacy.

Collective Efficacy

Some researchers have taken the concept of teacher efficacy to another level and developed a complementary construct called collective teacher efficacy. Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000) define this as “the perceptions of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on students,” with the faculty in general agreeing that “teachers in this school can get through to the most difficult students.” In the view of these researchers, “teachers' shared beliefs shape the normative environment of schools ... [and] are an important aspect of the culture of the school.”

Veteran educators have likely experienced some of the effects of a strong

positive—or negative—sense of collective efficacy. Teachers in a school characterized by a can-do, “together we can make a difference” attitude are typically more likely to accept challenging goals and be less likely to give up easily. In contrast, teachers in a school characterized by a low level of collective efficacy are less likely to accept responsibility for students’ low performance and more likely to point to student risk factors, such as poverty and limited knowledge of English, as causes.

Finally, as with an individual teacher’s sense of efficacy, there is a positive relationship between collective efficacy and student achievement. For example, a study conducted by Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) found that collective efficacy “was more important in explaining school achievement than socioeconomic status” and highlighted the finding’s practical significance “because it is easier to change the collective efficacy of a school than it is to

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influence the socioeconomic status of the school.”

In their summary of research on collective efficacy, Brinson and Steiner (2007) suggest that a school’s strong sense of collective efficacy also can have a positive impact on parent-teacher relationships since “a staff that is confi-

dent in their own abilities and in their effectiveness ... is more likely to welcome parental participation.” Finally, it can help to build teacher commitment to the school with individual teachers more likely to “share what they know with others.”

What Can Principals Do to Build a Sense of Efficacy?

Although much of teachers’ sense of individual and collective efficacy can be linked to their past levels of success or failure in teaching children, researchers point out that this factor is not the whole story. For example, Goddard and Skrla (2006) looked at school characteristics reported by 1,981 teachers and correlated them with teachers’ reported levels of efficacy. Less than half the difference in efficacy could be accounted for by factors such as the school’s socioeconomic status level, students’ achievement level, and faculty experience. Based on this, they suggest

that principals have the opportunity to build collective efficacy through the experiences they provide for teachers.


Hipp's (1996) study of the influence of principal leadership behaviors identified some behaviors as significantly related to efficacy. Principals of teachers reporting high levels of efficacy modeled behaviors such as risk-taking and cooperation. In addition, their principals were seen as inspiring group purpose. They contributed to the development of a "shared vision which centered on creating a student-centered atmosphere."

Building on such findings, Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000) suggest that one way for school administrators to improve student achievement is by working to raise the collective efficacy beliefs of their faculties. Pointing to the impact of past teaching experiences on the development of a teacher's sense of efficacy, Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) suggest that school leaders "need to lead in ways that promote mastery experiences for teachers."

While Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000) agree, they also recognize that "Although mastery experiences are the most powerful efficacy changing forces, they may be the most difficult to deliver to a faculty with a low collective efficacy." They continue this argument by writing that this situation can be remedied if school administrators "provide efficacy-building mastery experiences" through "thoughtfully designed staff development activities and action research projects."

Pfaff (2000) studied a group of elementary school teachers who participated in a study group that discussed issues related to instruction. Survey data found the participating teachers felt themselves to be more effective after the experience and that they had implemented "subtle but powerful" changes in their teaching styles and use of instructional strategies. The participating teachers were also significantly more likely than nonparticipants in the same school to maintain a high level of general teaching efficacy—the belief that teachers can make a difference

regardless of a student's background—throughout the year.

In this time of high standards for all children, the concept of teacher efficacy—from the standpoint of individual teachers and of the faculty as a whole—is critically important. Teachers who believe they can teach all children in ways that enable them to meet these high standards are more likely to exhibit teaching behaviors that support this goal. Thus, principals must intentionally help teachers develop a sense of efficacy because, as Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000) remind us, "It is not enough to hire and retain the brightest teachers—they must also believe they can successfully meet the challenges of the task at hand." 

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WEB RESOURCES

"Believing and Achieving," an *Issue Brief* posted by The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, integrates an overview of research on teacher efficacy with a discussion of educators' responsibility for student learning.
www.centerforsri.org/files/CenterIssueBriefJan07.pdf

This Web site maintained by Anita Woolfolk Hoy, a researcher with interest in teacher efficacy, includes links to several surveys intended to measure a teacher's sense of efficacy.
www.coe.ohio-state.edu/ahoy/researchinstruments.htm

In "Building Collective Efficacy: How Leaders Inspire Teachers to Achieve," authors Brinson and Steiner describe ways to encourage a sense of collective efficacy.
www.centerforsri.org/files/CenterIssueBriefOct07.pdf