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A brief introduction to self-efficacy

School resources

Self-efficacy is a set of beliefs that influence the decisions individuals make and the subsequent actions they choose to carry out. Researchers have argued that how people behave and what they will achieve can often be better predicted by the beliefs they hold about their own capabilities than by what they are actually capable of accomplishing. This resource provides a brief overview of the concept of self-efficacy and its importance for teachers and students.

What is self-efficacy and why is it important?

In the 1970s, psychologist Albert Bandura developed the framework of self-efficacy, and it has been widely used in the field of education over the past three decades. Bandura defined self-efficacy as the 'belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to attain designated types of performances'. He argued that people with high self-efficacy will apply effort, persevere and demonstrate resilience when faced with challenging tasks, while those with low self-efficacy tend to hold back during difficult tasks, expect mediocre results, and give up easily.

Self-efficacy judgements affect which activities individuals choose or avoid, how much effort they put in, how much resilience they have, and how long they persist with a task. People with high self-efficacy enjoy challenges and respond proactively to failure. They set higher goals and expend more effort towards their achievement. They are more self-regulating, persist longer and use more cognitive and metacognitive strategies (higher-level thinking), showing an understanding of what is involved to carry out a task successfully. People with low self-efficacy are more likely to avoid difficult tasks and have low commitment to goals.

What does the evidence say?

The concept of self-efficacy is well established in education research, and researchers are relatively consistent in the way they interpret and use the term. However, there is ongoing debate in the international research community regarding the best methodology to use for collecting evidence of self-efficacy. Research has found that self-efficacy beliefs have an effect on academic outcomes, and moreover that self-efficacy is not a fixed construct but can be developed and improved over time. Self-efficacy also tends to vary according to the nature, familiarity and magnitude of a task, and is usually domain-specific.

What do teachers need to know about self-efficacy?

Self-efficacy is important for both teachers and students. There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates both the impact of self-efficacy beliefs on academic outcomes and the success of interventions around self-efficacy in improving a range of outcomes. Self-efficacy beliefs have been shown to be malleable rather than fixed, and classroom climate and conditions have a powerful influence on self-efficacy.

One of the reasons that high self-efficacy beliefs have a positive impact on outcomes is that they influence the level of effort, persistence and perseverance that people bring to tasks and activities. Self-efficacy beliefs are correlated with the use of effective learning strategies such as self-regulation and metacognitive strategies, and lead to specific behaviours that promote success, such as:

- regarding problems as challenges and setting goals to meet them, rather than avoiding them
- demonstrating a high level of goal-orientation or commitment to achieving goals
- focusing on tasks and what is required to accomplish them, rather than on the perceived abilities of the individual
- attributing failure to a lack of effort or a knowledge gap rather than a lack of ability to succeed
- responding to failure with perseverance and increased effort rather than giving up

Self-efficacy tends to be **domain (learning area)** and often **task-and-situation specific**. This means that a student might display high levels of self-efficacy in mathematics but considerably lower levels of self-efficacy in drama. As a result, researchers believe that it is important to consider and measure self-efficacy beliefs in relation to particular learning areas and tasks rather than seeing an individual's level of self-efficacy as consistent across all subjects and situations. Self-efficacy also tends to be **future-focussed**, which means that it based on what an individual expects to achieve rather than their actual competence or success in fulfilling a task or activity.

- Researchers have found that self-efficacy beliefs can be developed and improved, particularly by considering the following sources of and influences on self-efficacy:
- **Mastery experience** – this develops from repeated successful performances at a particular task or in a particular area. It's important to note that this does not mean that individuals do not experience setbacks or failure along the way, but rather that they persist until they succeed. Genuine successful experiences raise people's sense of competence and confidence.
- **Vicarious experience** – this refers to the knowledge and skills gained through observing, hearing, or reading about peers and colleague who have achieved success in a particular task or activity. Sometimes vicarious experience occurs when we compare ourselves with a similar peer, and sometimes it may happen through modelling by similar but more proficient peers who possess the necessary skills, knowledge or strategies to achieve the task or activity.
- **Social persuasion** – this involves genuine positive messages from comments, feedback and positive reinforcement received from peers or teachers. It is important to note that it is easier to weaken self-efficacy beliefs through negative feedback than to strengthen self-efficacy beliefs through positive encouragement, so it is important to be mindful of the nature of feedback that peers and teachers provide.
- **Physiological and emotional states** – this refers to information interpreted through the senses as an individual anticipates or engages in complex tasks. Feeling excited at the prospect of undertaking a challenge can strengthen self-efficacy, while a feeling of anxiety or stress in the face of a daunting task will weaken self-efficacy.

Research has demonstrated that successful interventions that develop and improve self-efficacy beliefs lead to improved academic outcomes and well as future benefits for students in their lives and careers. There are a number of strategies based on these sources of and influences on self-efficacy that can be used in schools and classrooms to promote the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers and students.

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