

Strategies for promoting self-efficacy in students



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'Teachers would be well served by paying as much attention to students' perceptions of competence as to actual competence, for it is the perceptions that may more accurately predict students' motivation and future academic choices.'

(Frank Pajares)¹

Why is self-efficacy important for students?

Beliefs are the strongest indicators of decisions individuals make over their lifetimes and early experiences powerfully influence them. Because building self-efficacy starts early in life, it is paramount for children to become competent and confident learners from a young age. This is possible through teachers' delivery and modelling of early and continuous positive learning experiences.

Self-efficacious students exert extra effort, persevere with difficult tasks longer and show resilience by bouncing back from difficult learning situations. Students with high self-efficacy regard problems as challenges, set goals and are committed to them, attribute failure to lack of effort or as yet unlearned skills or content, and increase their efforts in order to overcome failure. Self-efficacy, like many other aspects of socio-emotional learning, is both an enabler of success at school and an outcome of schooling. Studies have shown that interventions to build students' self-efficacy beliefs can improve outcomes on particular tasks as well as influencing later life outcomes. There are a number of strategies that teachers can employ to ensure that students have the necessary experiences to build and develop their self-efficacy.

Strategies for building self-efficacy in students

1. Promote task accomplishment and success

Mastery experience, or a student's experience of succeeding in tasks, is the most important source of self-efficacy beliefs. Once students experience an improvement in performance or an achievement, feelings of efficacy are enhanced, enabling them to tackle further learning challenges. Students learn that their efforts improve their performance, so it is important to **provide activities that students can accomplish with a reasonable amount of effort**. To ensure an optimal level of challenge, teacher support can include scaffolding, allowing plenty of time to complete a task, and deconstructing larger tasks into smaller steps. **Build concepts gradually and ensure success at each step**. Explain the concept or strategy thoroughly before asking students to use it, which creates a perception of moderate challenge but also balances the difficulty of tasks.

Value what you are teaching and express confidence that your students can learn it. Feeling that important learning has been achieved further enhances students' efficacy beliefs, so teachers should convey to students that what they are learning is important. **Foster a co-operative social environment, rather than a competitive atmosphere.** Allow students to work together, and encourage them to build on one another's responses and help each other. Use instructional practices based on class discussion and small group work.

2. Provide daily problem-solving opportunities

Another way to provide mastery experiences is through regular problem-solving activities. To foster competence and confidence, **make the problems appropriately challenging, but non-routine**. After a while, students will become comfortable and more confident, and feel able to move to more challenging problems. The impact of challenge on students' sense of self-efficacy depends on students' perceived autonomy and choice, their knowledge and skills, and the support they receive from their teacher and peers. **Use questions that foster thinking and that ask students to justify their thinking**. Help students learn how to explain why they are doing something and then ask them to explain to the class, or have pairs question each other: 'I see you did _____. How did you come up with that?'

3. Encourage peer modelling

Peers are the second most important influence on self-efficacy beliefs. Peer modelling can be more effective than teacher modelling, especially as some students may doubt that they can ever attain the teacher's level of competence. However, choose your models carefully. The best peer models are those that make errors at first and express doubt about their self-efficacy ('I'm not sure I can do this'). The teacher supports these peer models by giving prompts, and the model then successfully completes the task. He or she can be questioned about how they overcame failure and developed mastery. This kind of model, called a 'coping' model, is more effective than a 'mastery' model who performs the task correctly and verbalises high self-efficacy and ability ('I'm good at this' or 'That was easy'). Most students tend to see themselves as being more like the coping model than the mastery model. Try to **identify suitable coping models from within your class**, but be wary of influential students who offer themselves as mastery models. If your model does not make mistakes or experience difficulties, ensure that you **ask questions about how they worked out challenges in order to elicit coping strategies**. Alternatively, you might act as a coping model yourself, or make empathetic statements such as 'At this point, you might be getting confused', or 'You might believe you've gone wrong'.

4. Foster goal setting and provide meaningful feedback

Although involving students in setting their own goals can lead to greater satisfaction for the student, giving a student a goal you as a teacher wish them to achieve can have a larger impact on self-efficacy because it indicates your belief in the student's capabilities. **Encourage students to compare present performance against a goal and also against previous performance**. Convey tasks and activities as goals to be accomplished, then frame completion as success. Help students to identify any obstacles they foresee in accomplishing the goal, and help them brainstorm potential strategies they can use to overcome these. **Give specific instruction in goal setting** by starting with a general goal and discussing how to revise it so it is specific and realistic, as well as how to break it into a subset of smaller goals. For example, 'I want to have great study habits' might be transformed into 'I will learn a reading comprehension strategy', 'I will practise each part at a time', and 'I will monitor my performance after each comprehension test'. Have students write goals, then in pairs try to revise and improve them.

Make feedback frequent, detailed and positive. Offer feedback emphasising goal progress and highlighting personal capacities in order to increase students' self-efficacy. Feedback should refer to what students are learning rather than simply evaluating their answers as correct or incorrect. When students give an incorrect response, examine their thinking processes to ascertain why they misunderstood. Use this opportunity to re-teach or clarify, so as to further support the student's efficacy. **Focus on effort and strategies in attributing the reason for success**: for example, 'the effort you showed by restudying the words you missed paid off - look at the improvement you've made'. **Teach students to expect to make mistakes, and treat mistakes as opportunities to learn and gain useful feedback from others**. This can retrain students' interpretations of setbacks and build resiliency.

5. Use self-assessment

Have students write comments or questions in the last few minutes of class. Address these the next day. This encourages students to think about what they do/do not understand and helps them see how they are learning. Tell students every day how they are progressing and what they learned the day before. Some students need to be convinced that they can learn and are learning.

6. Affirm students' identities as learners

Students may be better able to accept difficulties if they have affirmed other aspects of self which strengthen their sense of self-efficacy. Have students write self-affirming statements consisting of brief reflections on their most important values, characteristics, relationships and goals. These affirmations of values and goals can boost students' sense of their resources to cope with challenges, and to view threatening events – such as negative feedback or making errors – as less powerful and less significant for their self-concept.

Trust survey for students

The following survey can help teachers determine students' perceptions of their teacher's ability to teach them and their confidence in their own ability to learn. As self-efficacy tends to be task or domain specific, it may be useful to use this survey in different subject areas.

1 - disagree 2 – mostly disagree 3 – mostly agree 4 – agree

STUDENT TRUST SURVEY		1	2	3	4
1	Teachers are always ready to help.				
2	Teachers are easy to talk to at this school.				
3	Students learn a lot from teachers in this school.				
4	Students at this school can depend on teachers for help.				
5	Teachers at this school do a terrific job.				
6	Teachers at this school really listen to students.				
7	Teachers always do what they are supposed to do.				
8	Students are well cared for at this school.				
9	Teachers at this school are good at teaching.				
10	Teachers at this school are always honest with me.				

Adapted from '[Students as Allies in Improving their Schools](#)'

References & Further Reading

Pajares, F. (2002). *Self-efficacy beliefs in academic contexts: An outline*. Retrieved from <https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/efftalk.html>

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Endnotes

¹ Pajares (2002), p. 29

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