

## **EFFECTS OF SELF-EFFICACY ON STUDENTS' BEHAVIOUR**

Self-efficacy may sound like a uniformly desirable quality, but research, as well as teachers, experience suggests that its effects are a bit more complicated than they first appear. Self-efficacy has three main effects, each of which has both a “dark” or undesirable side and a positive or desirable side.

### **Choice of Tasks**

The first effect is that self-efficacy makes students more willing to choose tasks where they already feel confident of succeeding. This effect is almost inevitable, given the definition of the concept of self-efficacy, it has also been supported by research on self-efficacy beliefs (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). For teachers, the effect on choice can be either welcome or not, depending on circumstances. If a student believes that he or she can solve mathematical problems, then the student is more likely to attempt the mathematics homework that the teacher assigns. Unfortunately, the converse is also true. If a student believes that he or she is *incapable* of math, then the student is less likely to attempt the math homework (perhaps telling himself, “What’s the use of trying?”), regardless of the student’s actual ability in math.

Since self-efficacy is self-constructed, furthermore, it is also possible for students to miscalculate or misperceive their true skill, and the misperceptions themselves can have complex effects on students’ motivations. From a teacher’s point of view, all is well even if students overestimate their capacity but actually do succeed at a relevant task anyway, or if they underestimate their capacity, yet discover that they *can* succeed and raise their self-efficacy beliefs as a result. All may not be well, though, if students do not believe that they can succeed and therefore do not even try, or if students overestimate their capacity by a wide margin, but are disappointed unexpectedly by failure and lower their self-efficacy beliefs.

### **Persistence at Tasks**

A second effect of high self-efficacy is to increase persistence at relevant tasks. If you believe that you can solve crossword puzzles, but encounter one that takes longer than usual, then you are more likely to work longer at the puzzle until you (hopefully) really do solve it. This is probably a desirable behavior in many situations unless the persistence happens to interfere with other, more important tasks (what if you should be doing homework instead of working on crossword puzzles?). If you happen to have low self-efficacy for crosswords, on the other hand, then you are more likely to give up early on a difficult puzzle. Giving up early may often be undesirable because it deprives you of a chance to improve

your skill by persisting. Then again (on the third hand?), the consequent lack of success because of giving up may provide a useful incentive to improve your crossword skills. And again, misperceptions of capacity make a difference. Overestimating your capacity by a lot (excessively high self-efficacy) might lead you not to prepare for or focus on a task properly, and thereby impair your performance. So as with choosing tasks, the effects of self-efficacy vary from one individual to another and one situation to another. The teacher's task is therefore two-fold: first, to discern the variations, and second, to encourage the positive self-efficacy beliefs.

### **Response to Failure**

High self-efficacy for a task not only increases a person's persistence at the task but also improves their ability to cope with stressful conditions and to recover their motivation following outright failures. Suppose that you have two assignments—an essay and a science lab report—due on the same day, and this circumstance promises to make your life hectic as you approach the deadline. You will cope better with the stress of multiple assignments if you already believe yourself capable of doing both of the tasks, than if you believe yourself capable of doing just one of them or (especially) of doing neither. You will also recover better in the unfortunate event that you end up with a poor grade on one or even both of the tasks.

That is the good news. The bad news, at least from a teacher's point of view, is that the same resilience can sometimes also serve non-academic and non-school purposes. How so? Suppose, instead of two school assignments due on the same day, a student has only one school assignment due but also holds a part-time evening job as a server in a local restaurant. Suppose, further, that the student has high self-efficacy for both of these tasks; he believes, in other words, that he is capable of completing the assignment as well as continuing to work at the job. The result of such resilient beliefs can easily be a student who devotes less attention to school work than ideal, and who even ends up with a lower grade on the assignment than he or she is capable of.

### **Learned Helplessness and Self-Efficacy**

If a person's sense of self-efficacy is very low, he or she can develop learned helplessness, a perception of complete lack of control in mastering a task. The attitude is similar to depression, a pervasive feeling of apathy, and a belief that effort makes no difference and does not lead to success. Learned helplessness was

originally studied from the behaviorist perspective of classical and operant conditioning by the psychologist Martin Seligman (1995). The studies used a somewhat “gloomy” experimental procedure in which an animal, such as a rat or a dog, was repeatedly shocked in a cage in a way that prevented the animal from escaping the shocks. In a later phase of the procedure, conditions were changed so that the animal could avoid the shocks by merely moving from one side of the cage to the other. Yet frequently they did not bother to do so! Seligman called this behaviour learned helplessness.

In people, learned helplessness leads to characteristic ways of dealing with problems. They tend to attribute the source of a problem to themselves, to generalize the problem to many aspects of life, and to see the problem as lasting or permanent. More optimistic individuals, in contrast, are more likely to attribute a problem to outside sources, to see it as specific to a particular situation or activity, and to see it as temporary or time-limited. Consider, for example, two students who each fail a test. The one with a lot of learned helplessness is more likely to explain the failure by saying something like: “I’m stupid; I never perform well on any schoolwork, and I never will perform well at it.” The other, more optimistic student is more likely to say something like: “The teacher made the test too hard this time, so the test doesn’t prove anything about how I will do next time or in other subjects.”

What is noteworthy about these differences in perception is how much the more optimistic of these perspectives resembles high self-efficacy and how much learned helplessness seems to contradict or differ from it. As already noted, high self-efficacy is a strong belief in one’s capacity to carry out a specific task successfully. By definition, therefore, self-efficacy focuses attention on a temporary or time-limited activity (the task), even though the cause of successful completion (oneself) is “internal.” Teachers can minimize learned helplessness in students, therefore, by encouraging their self-efficacy beliefs.