Boosting Students’ Can-Do Attitude
Among teachers’ most daunting challenges is the task of ensuring all students are engaged in and motivated by learning. Obviously, skilled teachers look to instructional strategies such as differentiation and hands-on learning as ways to increase student engagement. But what about reluctant learners, students who have the potential to do well but who seem satisfied with just getting by? Such students often avoid challenges or don’t complete tasks. Although they sit quietly and pose no discipline problem, they are also shortchanging their own ability to learn.

While there are a variety of reasons for such behavior, one possibility is a student’s lack of confidence in his or her own ability to learn—referred to as low self-efficacy. Siegle (2000) characterizes self-efficacy as a student’s “‘I can’ or ‘I cannot’ belief.”

This belief about personal capability to accomplish meaningful tasks can directly affect a student’s motivation to learn. Students with high self-efficacy willingly approach learning activities, expend effort to achieve goals, persist in the face of challenge, and use strategies effectively, while learners with low self-efficacy more typically avoid challenge, expend little effort and give up, and believe they are not in control of their learning (DiCintio & Gee, 1999; Lucking & Manning, 1996). Margolis and McCabe (2006) explain that “Low self-efficacy beliefs, unfortunately, impede academic achievement and, in the long run, create self-fulfilling prophecies of failure and learned helplessness.”

**An Air of Confidence and Control**

Ornstein (1994) describes two characteristics of highly engaged learners that highlight the possibly strong connection between self-efficacy and engagement.

**Confidence.** Highly engaged learners have gained a positive perception of their own efficacy through repeated experiences of success. Those who believe they can achieve will try harder and concentrate on difficult tasks longer than those who believe they cannot.

**Control.** Highly engaged learners believe that outcomes are related to their own actions. People are more likely to work hard when they believe that they, rather than outside forces, control the results.

Looking at one of these factors—confidence—from a common sense point of view makes it clear the impact it can have on a student’s belief in his or her own ability. A confident student is more likely to “anticipate successful outcomes ... [while] those who lack confidence in their academic skills envision a low grade” (Pajares, 2005) even before beginning an assignment. The less confident student might avoid a sense of failure by simply avoiding the task. In essence, “If I haven’t tried, I haven’t failed.”

From an educator’s point of view, it is also important to understand that a student who seems generally self-confident might still feel less than capable in a school setting. Researchers call this subset “academic
Self-efficacy and Engagement

Self-efficacy and Engagement

Tweaking Instruction

Pajares (2005) stresses that self-efficacy is a learned trait. It is “not so much about learning how to succeed as it is about learning how to persevere when one does not succeed.” Bandura (1998), a researcher with a long-time interest in self-efficacy, points to three “sources of influence” that affect the characteristic:

- **Mastery Experiences.** This is the most effective way of creating a strong sense of efficacy. Successes build a robust belief in one’s personal efficacy, while failures undermine it, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established.

- **Vicarious Experiences Provided by Social Models.** Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers’ beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities required to succeed.

- **Social Persuasion.** People who are persuaded verbally that they possess the capabilities to master given activities are likely to mobilize greater effort and sustain it than if they harbor self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when problems arise.

Since prior experiences have a significant impact on the development of a sense of self-efficacy, it is clear that teachers can make a difference through the ways they provide instruction to students. Knowing about ways to impact self-efficacy can also provide a roadmap for teachers who want to build confidence and a sense of control in a student whose low assessment of his or her own ability is creating a barrier to that student’s learning.

First, empty praise for doing well on easy tasks is not the answer. Instead, the key linkage is between an authentic mastery experience and the student’s understanding that his or her competence, engagement, and persistence led to that mastery (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). So for a student with a misplaced understanding of this linkage, high-quality teacher feedback focused on the role of student effort in success is critical. While working to repair a student’s sense of self-efficacy that might be impairing effort, it is especially important to provide feedback that is frequent, focused, and task-specific (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). “Praise and encouragement should be delivered honestly and in their proper measure when they are deserved,” Pajares (2005) explains. In contrast, “knee-jerk praise sends the quite peculiar message that putting forth minimal effort is praiseworthy.” In addition, “adults who provide such [knee-jerk] praise soon lose credibility” (Pajares, 2005).

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Bandura (1998) provides a second overarching theme for strategies teachers can use to support the development of a strong sense of self-efficacy: “Successful efficacy builders do more than convey positive appraisals. In addition to raising people’s beliefs in their capabilities, they structure situations for them in ways that bring success and avoid placing people in situations prematurely where they are likely to fail often.”

Pajares (2005) simplifies this relationship, explaining that “success raises self-efficacy; failure lowers it.” Margolis and McCabe (2006) discuss strategies that help to build the potential for success. They include careful attention to matching instructional task to a student’s skills and prior knowledge. A moderate challenge should be the goal. Another approach is to intentionally offer choices in how a student might fulfill an assignment. A higher level of interest can encourage more engagement and, thus, also the likelihood of success.

Helping students, especially those who seem to be inefficient learners, to develop more productive learning strategies and to learn how to generalize these across tasks can also help them to experience success. The strategy can be something as simple as learning how to set stepping stone goals for a large project so that the task seems more manageable and also so completion of each element can be checked off as a success. When a student correctly applies a strategy, teachers should use the opportunity for the type of reinforcement described above. If incorrect use of a strategy is the problem, verbalizing that helps students understand that “failure is not due to permanent limitations” is important (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). Margolis and McCabe provide an example: “Kelly, you did not outline the essay before writing it. That is why you did poorly ... Let us do an outline together.”

Of course, the teacher in the above example must take care not to provide too much support since this can contribute to learned helplessness—an easy trap into which students with a low sense of self-efficacy can fall. The assistance provided should help the student develop a capacity for independently applying knowledge and skills as well as a more accurate appreciation of these.

Helping students to become more self-aware of how their sense of self-efficacy is affecting their performance is another strategy that teachers can employ. Pajares (2005) discusses two approaches aligned with this: challenge underconfidence by providing concrete examples of a student’s inaccurate perceptions of his or her own abilities, and help students develop a more adaptive sense of self-efficacy, for example, by helping them to more...
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WEB RESOURCES

In “Self-Efficacy,” Albert Bandura provides a comprehensive review of research on the topic.

www.des.emory.edu/mfp/BanEncy.html

A brief overview of related research, as well as links to additional resources, is found in “Self-Efficacy: Helping Students Believe in Themselves.”

http://serc.carleton.edu/NagtWorkshops/affective/efficacy.html

Frank Pajares discusses “Schooling in America: Myths, Mixed Messages, and Good Intentions,” in a lecture delivered as part of Emory University’s Great Teachers Lecture Series.

www.des.emory.edu/mfp/pajaresgtl.html

A chapter from the book Perception written by Frank Pajares and Dale Schunk—“Self-Beliefs and School Success: Self-Efficacy, Self-Concept, and School Achievement”—is posted on this Web site.

www.des.emory.edu/mfp/PajaresSchunk2001.html

accurately assess their own capabilities regarding specific tasks.

Teachers can also help individual students by maximizing the collective efficacy of the classroom as a whole (Pajares, 2005). Projecting a can-do attitude that signals belief in both the teacher’s and the class’s abilities to take on challenges sets the stage for focusing on effort, not lack of ability.

A final category of teacher strategies focuses on teaching students that all mistakes are not failures. Instead, sometimes taking the wrong path is a natural part of learning. Pajares (2005) suggests that teachers help students understand this by modeling appropriate behaviors. Adults who “good-naturedly admit their errors when they are pointed out (‘Oops, I was a little careless. Thanks for pointing that out.’) help youngsters to understand that missteps are inevitable, that they can be overcome, and that even authority figures can make them.”

By taking students’ sense of self-efficacy into account, schools can impact student engagement, effort, and perseverance—and ultimately student learning. These efforts are especially important for struggling students whose past experiences with failure sometimes act as significant barriers to their future success. In addition, helping students gain a sense of confidence and control can provide them with a life skill that goes far beyond the classroom.

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References


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