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The Power of Collective Efficacy

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When teams of educators believe they have the ability to make a difference, exciting things can happen in a school.

In the 1970s, Albert Bandura, a psychologist at Stanford University, uncovered an interesting pattern in working-group dynamics. He observed (1977) that a group's confidence in its abilities seemed to be associated with greater success. In other words, the assurance a person places in his or her team affects the team's overall performance. Researchers have since found this to be true across many domains. When a team of individuals share the belief that through their unified efforts they can overcome challenges and produce intended results, groups *are* more effective. For example, in communities where neighbors share the belief that they can band together to overcome crime, there is significantly less violence (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). In companies, when team members hold positive beliefs about the team's capabilities, there is greater creativity and productivity (Kim & Shin, 2015). And in schools, when educators believe in their combined ability to influence student outcomes, there are significantly higher levels of academic achievement (Bandura, 1993).

Bandura named this interesting pattern in human behavior "collective efficacy," which he defined as "a group's shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (Bandura, 1997, p. 477). There have been many studies investigating collective efficacy in schools—this is not a new topic. By the turn of the century, collective teacher efficacy had been operationalized, and instruments had been developed to measure it (Goddard, 2002). Models for collective efficacy in schools have been tested and refined, with researchers finding that as successes and support strengthen teachers' confidence in their teams, student achievement increases as well (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004; Adams & Forsyth, 2006).

Rachel Eells's (2011) meta-analysis of studies related to collective efficacy and achievement in education demonstrated that the beliefs teachers hold about the ability of the school as a whole are "strongly and positively associated with student achievement across subject areas and in multiple locations" (p. 110). On the basis of Eells's research, John Hattie positioned collective efficacy at the top of the list of factors

that influence student achievement (Hattie, 2016). According to his Visible Learning research, based on a synthesis of more than 1,500 meta-analyses, collective teacher efficacy is greater than three times more powerful and predictive of student achievement than socioeconomic status. It is more than double the effect of prior achievement and more than triple the effect of home environment and parental involvement. It is also greater than three times more predictive of student achievement than student motivation and concentration, persistence, and engagement (see fig. 1).

Figure 1. Factors Influencing Student Achievement

Influence	Effect Size
Collective Teacher Efficacy	1.57
Prior achievement	0.65
Socioeconomic status	0.52
Home environment	0.52
Parental involvement	0.49
Motivation	0.48
Concentration/persistence/engagement	0.48
Homework	0.29
Note: Effect sizes are based on Cohen's d. The average effect size is d=0.40. This average summarizes the typical effect of all possible influences on education.	

Source: John Hattie

Cultural Beliefs

Since collective efficacy influences how educators feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave (Bandura, 1993), it is a major contributor to the tenor of a school's culture. When educators share a sense of collective efficacy, school cultures tend to be characterized by beliefs that reflect high expectations for student success. A shared language that represents a focus on student *learning* as opposed to *instructional compliance* often emerges. The perceptions that influence the actions of educators include "We are evaluators," "We are change agents," and "We collaborate." Teachers and leaders believe that it is their fundamental task to evaluate the effect of their practice on students' progress and achievement. They also believe that success and failure in student learning is more about what they did or did not do, and they place value in solving problems of practice together (Hattie & Zierer, 2018).

When efficacy is present in a school culture, educators' efforts are enhanced—especially when they are faced with difficult challenges. Since expectations for success are high, teachers and leaders approach their work with an intensified persistence and strong resolve.

In addition, collective efficacy influences student achievement indirectly through productive patterns of teaching behavior. Such behaviors include implementing high-yield strategies—for example, integrating literacy instruction in content-area classrooms (Cantrell & Callaway, 2008), soliciting parental involvement (Kirby & DiPaola, 2011), and finding productive ways to deal with problem behavior (Gibbs & Powell, 2011). Clearly, collective efficacy has a large ripple effect.

Conversely, if educators' perceptions are filtered through the belief that there is very little they can do to influence student achievement, negative beliefs pervade the school culture. When educators lack a sense of collective efficacy, they do not pursue certain courses of action because they feel they or their students lack the capabilities to achieve positive outcomes. The culture reflects a solemn satisfaction with the status quo. School communities experience an inclination to stop trying, decreased expectations, and lower levels of performance (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). In addition, when collective teacher efficacy is lacking, educators are more likely to ascribe failure to students' lack of ability, seek exclusion for challenging students (Gibbs & Powell, 2011), and experience higher levels of stress (Klassen, 2010; Lim & Eo, 2014). Conversations are often reflective of external blame, or an "us" versus "them" mentality.

The Role of Evidence

So how do school leaders build collective efficacy? The primary input is *evidence of impact*. When instructional improvement efforts result in improved student outcomes that are validated through sources of student learning data, educators' collective efficacy is strengthened. Evidence of collective impact, in turn, reinforces proactive collective behaviors, feelings, thoughts, and motivations. Bandura referred to this as "reciprocal causality" (Bandura, 1993), noting that collective efficacy is a social resource that does not get depleted by its use; it gets renewed.

It is essential, therefore, to help educators make the link between their collective actions and student outcomes. To understand collective impact, teams need to determine if changes in classroom practice positively influenced student outcomes by examining specific evidence of student learning. They need to hear from students about their learning, their progress, their struggles, and their motivation to keep learning. They need to examine student artifacts such as assignments, tests, portfolios, and other indicators of daily progress. With all these activities, the key is making the link between teachers' actions and student outcomes explicit, so that teachers understand that the factors behind student progress are within their collective sphere of influence.

School leaders play a key role in creating non-threatening, evidence-based instructional environments. By promoting a culture of collaboration focused on "knowing thy collective impact," leaders have the potential to support school improvement in ways that positively influence teachers' collective efficacy beliefs and thus promote student achievement. Leaders do this by engaging in conversations with teachers about the

meaning of impact, about the difference between achievement goals and progress, and about the use of dependable evidence. These conversations help to shift educators' thinking from task-related concerns (for example, "How much of my time is *x* going to require?" or "How will I manage *x* as part of my daily routine?") to broader impact concerns ("What was the impact when I did *x*?" "How did *x* affect the students in my classroom?" "How can we work together to make *x* even better?"). Teachers can increasingly orient their work around outcomes: "Did the students gain the essential understandings and skills?" "How do we know?" "How can we use evidence of student learning to improve classroom instruction?"

Leaders can also influence collective efficacy by setting expectations for formal, frequent, and productive teacher collaboration and by creating high levels of trust for this collaboration to take place. "Productive" means that teachers' collaborative efforts can help to account for consequences in the classroom. The emphasis should be on identifying student learning needs and detecting problems that need to be addressed in classrooms, using a variety of evidence to determine if approaches made a difference, and making adjustments as necessary. When leaders ensure that dependable, high trust, collaborative structures are in place, teachers learn from and with one another and build common understandings. Teachers need to see how collecting evidence fits into their daily routines, how they can use daily evidence to determine impact, and how they can make adjustments to their classroom practices when results aren't demonstrating increases in student outcomes.

Building common conceptions of progress requires more than just the structures that increase forms of collaboration. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) warn about "administrative contrivances" that become artificial and short-lived. In addition, the collective impact typically only occurs where there are high levels of social sensitivity among the group members. Therefore, school leaders must foster empathy and effective interaction among teams. Administrators can model social sensitivity by paying close attention to verbal and nonverbal clues and exercising situational awareness—including heightened awareness of the undercurrents that have the potential to derail joint problem-solving (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). When leaders have a pulse on the emotional tone of the team, they can anticipate potential pitfalls that might occur during collaboration, sense when tensions rise, and not only have the fortitude to address the issues, but do so in a way that is respectful to the feelings and viewpoints of others.

Resetting the Narrative

Team members' confidence in each other's abilities and their belief in the impact of the team's work are key elements that set successful school teams apart. Publicly seeking evidence of positive effects on student learning does not happen serendipitously or by accident and neither does a sense of psychological safety. School leaders must work to build a culture designed to increase collective teacher efficacy, which will affect teachers' behavior and student beliefs. The power and promise of collective efficacy is that it can be influenced within schools, so focusing on it as a change point is a viable path to

greater student achievement, greater commitment to learning, and a more inviting place to come and learn.

The greatest power that principals have in schools is that they can control the narrative of the school. If the narrative is about bus timetables, tweaks in the curriculum, and test schedules, this percolates through the school as the purpose of schooling—compliance to procedures. In such schools, students think learning is coming to school on time, sitting up straight, keeping quiet, and watching the teacher work. But if instead the narrative is about high expectations, growth in relation to inputs, what it means to be a "good learner" in various subjects, and what impact means, then teachers and students will think about learning in a different way. They will believe that learning is about challenge, about understanding and realizing high expectations, and that setbacks are an opportunity to learn. Students will also believe that coming to school means investing energy in deliberate practice.

Success lies in the critical nature of collaboration and the strength of believing that together, administrators, faculty, and students can accomplish great things. This is the power of collective efficacy.

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KEYWORDS

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diverse classrooms and school, achievement gap, professional development, school climate and culture, school improvement and reform, teacher leadership, school and district management, supported, engaged, challenged, audience: administrators, audience: district-based-administrators, audience: higher-education, audience: new-principals, audience: new-teachers, audience: principals, audience: teacher-leaders, audience: teachers, audience: building-level-specialist, audience: instructional-coaches, audience: superintendents, audience: students, level: k-12

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