He Kupu
The Word
Volume 7, Number 4 – October 2023

The role of self-efficacy: How early childhood leaders can empower collective efficacy.

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An increased focus on shared leadership in the ECE sector has challenged traditional models of leadership, and emphasised the impact that a collective, cohesive team can have on job satisfaction, sustained teacher motivation and positive learning outcomes for children. The concept of agency in leadership highlights the shift in view from leadership as a person or individual action, to that of a collaborative effort. A key attribute that contributes to a teacher's ability to exhibit leadership qualities, and a positional leader's success in building a cohesive team, is efficacy. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy has been utilised to build, measure and evaluate teachers' beliefs in their ability to achieve positive outcomes for children. The presence of collective efficacy is linked to teaching teams that demonstrate high student success, and, importantly, overcome barriers to learning such as poverty or lack of parental involvement.

This article draws on research to discuss the importance of teacher efficacy, how positional leaders can build a culture of collective efficacy among teams, and the role Associate Teachers play in building student teacher efficacy. Bandura (1977) proposed four main influences on self-efficacy which are considered in this discussion to evaluate Leaders and Associate Teachers' strategies for evoking both teacher efficacy and collective efficacy. The term 'student' refers to the learners in the educational setting (i.e. children), and 'Associate Teacher' to mentors of student teachers or 'teachers in training'.

Ehara taku toa I te toa takitahi. Engari, he toa takitini

My strength is not the strength of one, it is the strength of many

Introduction

The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum, *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum* (*Te Whāriki*) (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) aims to empower children as lifelong learners, healthy in mind, body and spirit. Effective leadership is widely known to have a pivotal role in regards to the success of children's learning, second only to that of quality classroom teaching (Lovett et. al., 2015).

Denee (2018, p. 63) suggests that "pedagogical improvement in early childhood education (ECE) is critically impacted by leadership and professional learning." It is therefore vital that leaders working in education services understand what it means to be an effective leader, and how they can commit to making a positive impact on the

learning success of children. A key component of effective teachers and leaders alike is self-efficacy – their 'perceived judgement' that they have the ability to course a path towards desired outcomes (Versland & Erikson, 2017). Not only do efficacy beliefs support a leader to evoke positive change, they also contribute to collective efficacy, promoting a sense of motivation within the whole team towards a common vision, which ultimately strengthens outcomes for children. This article will first of all explain the construct of teacher self-efficacy, and drawing on Bandura's social-learning theory, discuss how teachers can strengthen their belief in themselves. The ways positional leaders can influence both collective and individual efficacy within a shared leadership model will then be examined. Finally, implications for Associate Teachers mentoring teachers in training are suggested.

Teacher Self-Efficacy - individual efficacy

Self-efficacy can be described as the belief that teachers have in their abilities to work through "courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Bandura's social Learning theory recognises self-efficacy as a key factor in teacher success, maintaining that when teachers believe that they can have a positive and lasting effect on students' lives, they act more purposefully to enhance students' learning (Bandura, 1977). Teacher efficacy is the belief that teachers have in their ability to impact student learning. Efficacy includes teacher confidence in instructional, management and collaboration skills (Epstein & Willhite, 2015). Self-efficacy is malleable, changing and grows over time, and as a task-related characteristic, may differ depending on the context, for example, between curriculum areas. While *self-confidence* refers to a general personality trait and does not specifically determine a positive or negative outcome, *self-efficacy* is specific to having a positive belief in one's abilities to achieve a certain task (Price, 2015). In the case of early childhood teachers, tasks will be related to strengthening outcomes for children in any given area of teaching.

Self-efficacy becomes a driver for self-motivation, perseverance and resilience. If you believe you are able to do it, you are more likely to execute the actions required. Percy (2017) explains that teachers with high self-efficacy are "more likely to develop challenging learning activities and persist with students having difficulties" (p. 3). As can be expected, high teacher efficacy has been shown to be a strong determinant for positive outcomes for children. Not only do teachers put in higher effort and have a stronger focus on children's learning outcomes, but teachers' beliefs in their own capabilities are also likely to filter down to children's beliefs in themselves (Epstein & Willhite, 2015). Additionally, efficacy results in teachers enjoying challenges and responding proactively to failure (Wylie 2019), leading them to set higher goals and expend more effort towards their achievement. On the other hand, low self-efficacy can cause teachers to focus on their inadequacies in the face of change, resulting in higher levels of stress. Consequently, teachers are less likely to pursue the skills that will result in successfully reaching goals, perpetuating a negative cycle of failure (Ninkovic & Floric, 2016).

Self-efficacy can be a determinate for how well student teachers transition into qualified teaching, and for overall job satisfaction. Fitchett et. al. (2018, as cited in Ma et.al., 2021) indicate that the transition from student teacher to the initial stages of qualified (primary school) teaching is one of the most vulnerable periods for teacher efficacy. This is likely to be observed in early childhood environments as well, with beginning teachers having similar responsibilities and expectations to that of experienced teachers, along with the high demands of the early childhood classroom climate. Therefore, a strong focus on efficacy beliefs during this time can help mitigate teacher attrition and improve mental wellbeing. This is particularly pertinent in light of recent studies revealing that nearly half of ECE teachers surveyed experience job stress (Williams, 2022).

There are a number of strategies that teachers can use to build their self-efficacy on an individual level. As described in Bandura's social learning theory; mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and awareness of internal emotional states are the four main sources for increasing efficacy (Bandura, 1997, as cited in

Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Building mastery is signalled as the strongest influencer of self-efficacy, marked by successful past experiences. As well as successful teaching experiences, teachers' funds of knowledge and personal life experiences should also be considered, including skills and attributes that teachers have shown in other disciplines (for example, creative or sports endeavours) as they provide a source of belief that their personal abilities will support them in further success in their teacher roles. A simple practice for teachers is to jot down one to three tasks or experiences each day that they successfully executed. This could range from engaging in a positive conversation with a parent, to supporting a child to settle in to the classroom. Doing so brings awareness to mastery experiences that may otherwise have been overlooked.

Engagement in professional learning and observations of more experienced teachers is the second factor to building self-efficacy, known as 'vicarious experiences' (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). This is especially impactful when the teacher being observed is effective *and* close to the level of experience of the student teacher. This allows the observing teacher to broaden the scope of what they personally believe they are capable of. Interestingly, observing their own practice through audio or visual recording can be a powerful source of belief in a teacher's own abilities.

Thirdly, as suggested by Withy (2019) possibly most importantly for student and beginning teachers, is 'verbal persuasion'. This includes gaining sincere, genuine feedback from a trustworthy source. As this factor relies more on external input, it will be discussed further within the leadership section of this article. For teachers looking to improve their own self-efficacy, seeking regular feedback from peers, parents, management, or even from children can lead to a greater sense of confidence. A willingness to be vulnerable and open to feedback also supports a student teacher's own leadership capacity (O'Neill & Brinkerhoff, 2018).

Finally, teachers' awareness of their own emotions and moods and how these affect performance (either positively or negatively) is a significant factor in building self-efficacy. This awareness can lead to strategies being put in place to exercise control over these states. Percy's (2017) research clarified that intentional breathing techniques, internal dialogue and seeking support from colleagues were useful strategies for increasing teachers' agency and control over heightened emotional states. Additionally, the ability to self-reflect is regarded as a key principle of effective teaching and is an indicator of high self-efficacy (Gibbs, 2003). Building a reflective practice into daily and weekly routines will support teachers to learn from mistakes, plan for growth and become more intentional in their teaching. This may look like regular professional conversations or perhaps journaling. Additionally, visualising a successful outcome to a challenge, even if the actual steps towards that are not yet clear, will increase the likelihood of success in reality. The act of visualisation, such as a teacher imagining themselves performing a particular task, can enhance self-efficacy (Gibbs, 2003). Teachers who are able to visualise successful scenarios are more likely to create an effective path to reach that goal. The car ride to work can be an optimal time for teachers to visualise themselves completing specific tasks or projects for that day.

A teacher's trust in their own ability and capacity to succeed, and belief in their worth, supports them to contribute to a "leaderful" environment (O'Neill, 2017, p. 36). In discussing teacher efficacy, we must consider how this can be also supported and cultivated by those in leadership positions. The positional leader has a considerable impact on building teachers' efficacy, leading to collective efficacy within a team, and in fact can be considered as one of the most critical factors toward building efficacy on a collective level (Ninkovic & Floric, 2016).

Leadership efficacy and building collective efficacy

Collective efficacy is defined by Bandura 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" (1997, p. 477). Versland and Eriskson

(2017) point out that collective efficacy does not imply a group of individually high-efficacy teachers, rather a common understanding within the team as a whole of their ability to influence student achievement. Social-cognitive theory, suggests that there is a reciprocal relationship between collective and individual efficacy, both influencing the other (Ninkovic & Floric, 2018). The impact of collective efficacy on learning outcomes for students is significant, being three times more predictive of achievement than socioeconomic status, and ahead of parental involvement and cultural variables (Donohoo, et al., 2018).

The role of a leader in building a team's collective efficacy has been widely documented, and correlated with transformational and distributed leadership models (Ninkovic & Floric, 2018; Versland & Eriskson, 2017). Key points for consideration in building collective efficacy are the leader's focus on creating a shared vision and holding the belief that their team is capable of fulfilling this vision. Implementing intentional strategies for uplifting teachers' efficacy through inquiry and collaboration is also an important contributor, as well as a leader's own self-efficacy.

O'Neill (2017) describes having a shared vision as a key element of collective leadership, serving as a focal point that unites a team. Hardin's (2010) study stresses the importance of a well-articulated institutional philosophy that is shared by all teachers. The impact of positional leaders having a strong moral purpose and shared vision is a focal point of Dempster's *Leadership for Learning framework*, highlighting the impact that this can have on lifting student (children) outcomes (Dempster, 2012). In the early education sector, our purpose is reflected in New Zealand's curriculum, *Te Whāriki* - the vision that children will grow as "competent and confident learners" and "strong in identity, language and culture" (MoE, 2017 pp. 6-7). A shared vision focused on outcomes for children supports a team of teachers to believe that they are capable of making a difference. When this vision is developed and discussed as a team, all members feel connected to this purpose, and are more likely to take the actions required to pursue this. The Māori value of whanaungatanga can be applied here; the purpose of relationship building from a leadership perspective is to harness the knowledge and capabilities of all people in order to achieve a common purpose (Katene, 2013).

In developing a shared vision, Coughlin et al. (2013) suggest that the question "If you had all the resources you needed, what would you do with it?" can be used as a tool to "ignite the imagination" and look past barriers (p. 9). Staff stated that this type of visioning "created a culture where we gave more attention to *where we wanted to go* rather than *what was stopping us*" (p. 9). A mindset that reflects a team's belief in themselves to achieve their shared goals nurtures collective efficacy. When obstacles do arise, high efficacy teams are able to identify the resources that are required to overcome them, harnessing the skills and strengths of individual team members (Versland & Erikson, 2017).

In terms of a leader's efficacy, their *belief* in their own and other's ability to achieve this vision supports the centre to create a course of action. Leading from this belief, as described by Versland and Erikson (2017, p. 16), a school setting in Australia, created an "operationalised sense of vision and mission" and contributed to the sense of collective efficacy. Doonahoo et al. (2018) also noted that leaders can cultivate a narrative within the team that emphasises setting high expectations for learning and focuses on how initiatives and goals will support children's learning.

A leader may create a clear pathway for promoting professional learning opportunities that specifically reflect teachers' natural strengths - another factor in developing collective efficacy. Involvement in appraisal procedures and teacher inquiry can help leaders to support individual teachers to seek professional learning opportunities based on their personal priorities. This may include securing financial support as well as providing platforms for teachers to share their new learning (for example, during staff meetings). By providing time for teachers to revisit, reflect on and study particular areas of practice over time, leaders can support a deeper understanding of theory

(Donohoo et. al., 2018). Through inquiry, leaders can encourage teachers to identify what impact their practise has on children's learning. Making this link between improving practice and outcomes for children is a key for collective efficacy as it brings awareness to the teaching team's ability to positively influence the learning environment (Donohoo et. al., 2018). Professional development can also be utilised to build on teachers capacity as leaders, strengthening the culture of shared leadership and collective efficacy. Derrington and Anelle, (2013, as cited in Donohoo, 2016) confirmed the connection between the extent of teacher leadership within a team and high collective efficacy.

Additionally, pairing teachers to work on joint projects supports relationship building and further strengthens the team to strive towards a common goal. This promotes a sharing of knowledge and supports teacher efficacy in the form of 'social modelling', (or vicarious experiences, as mentioned earlier), that seeing a teacher with a similar level of capabilities demonstrate their ability at a certain skill, increases their belief in their own capabilities (Bandura, 1977 as cited in Withy, 2019). Celebrating successes (children's learning outcomes) that result from these joint projects, for example, sharing these in a centre's newsletter, creates a teaching team who believe in their own abilities, hold a growth mindset towards change and who support each other to implement high quality instruction.

Leaders may identify a need for collective efficacy in a particular domain or curriculum area, for example, visual arts. Providing space and time for kaiako to achieve mastery, for example, a staff meeting focused on exploring an art medium such as clay, leads to higher efficacy and can override previous experiences that may have led to low levels of efficacy.

In further examining a leader's role in building collective efficacy, they can, by example, demonstrate their own self-efficacy. Gibbs (2017) explains that while the acquisition of knowledge and expertise is essential to effective leadership, self-efficacy is an attribute that can determine whether or not these skills will be applied. A leader's efficacy can be strengthened and demonstrated through commitment to their own learning and growth by engaging in higher education. In Versland and Eriskson's case study (2017), teachers reported that the positional leader often shared research with her staff and used evidence-based knowledge gained from study to inform new school improvement activities.

In recognising the positive influence that collective efficacy has on team performance and ultimately children's learning outcomes, the leader's obligation to cultivate this type of culture is emphasised. Building a shared vision, believing in their team, and strengthening relationships through collaboration are key strategies for promoting collective efficacy. A leader's own self-efficacy and their mahi towards cultivating collective efficacy can only increase the likelihood of long-term improvement, and help to withstand the difficulties and obstacles that will inevitably arise along the journey.

The Associate Teacher's role in supporting student teacher efficacy

As well as positional leaders (ie. Centre Managers, Head Teachers), Associate Teachers (ATs) play an essential part in supporting teacher efficacy. Drawing on Bandura's sources of efficacy, verbal persuasion and vicarious experiences align well with the Associate Teacher's role. This is confirmed in the Ma et al. (2021) study, attributing to the fact that student and first-year teachers rely heavily on external feedback and information. Alongside demonstrating and discussing best practices with student teachers, Associate Teachers can bring awareness to the student teacher's self-efficacy. From here, both parties can evaluate the student teacher's level of efficacy and determine how it impacts on various areas of their teaching.

Associate Teachers can strengthen student teachers' efficacy through verbal persuasion, emphasising their capabilities to overcome specific challenges (Gibbs, 2003). Together with genuine positive feedback, verbal persuasion drives the student teacher to attempt more skills with more effort and to persist through failures (Price, 2015). It is important that Associate Teachers explicitly recognise student teachers' strengths and support them to believe in their capabilities as this encourages teachers to become more confident in their own abilities. Literature points to the importance of the role of the Associate Teacher in the success of the student teacher, in providing "positive reinforcement and meaningful feedback" (McDonald, 2009, p. 34). This could be achieved through informal conversations or written notes, which are most effective when given during or immediately after the event or practice. Public recognition of the teachers' innate values and positive dispositions is also important. For permanently employed student teachers, a monthly staff meeting ritual or 'teacher attributes' box could be considered as ways to highlight strengths. Overall, these practices promote a safe space for student teachers to venture outside of their comfort zone, which aids in gaining mastery experiences.

'Vicarious experiences' are the second source in the Associate Teacher's toolbox. This is particularly useful when the student teacher has limited experience in their teacher role (Akhter et. al., 2022), and when tasks modelled are similar to the ones expected of them. The Associate Teacher's own pedagogical knowledge and teaching practices are invaluable here. This concept suggests that student teachers will determine their likelihood of success or failure based on the differences they perceive between themselves and the person they are observing. Effectiveness of vicarious learning is increased when the 'model' is within close proximity to the observer's abilities. Where possible, Associate Teachers can guide student teachers to collaborate with other student teachers or beginning teachers, increasing the possibility of the thought, 'if they can do it, I can do it too'. Associate Teachers discussing their own difficulties, obstacles or mistakes can also be a valuable model for student teachers as it demonstrates that struggles are a normal part of achieving success and can be overcome (Withy, 2019). McDonald (2009) maintains that time and assistance given for reflective processes increases its effectiveness. In one research project, a student teacher commented on the value of being modelled reflective processes by their Associate Teacher, as it highlighted the positive impact that reflection has on teaching practice (McDonald, 2009).

A key role of Associate Teachers is to bring student teachers' awareness to their self-efficacy. As stated earlier, efficacy beliefs can differ between teaching tasks and curriculum areas so assessment of student teachers' abilities should be considered across a range of teaching responsibilities. Associate Teachers can draw attention to ways that student teachers can improve efficacy, including encouraging them to recognise past successes, be open to feedback and employ emotional regulation strategies. Goal-setting can be a strategy for determining tasks or responsibilities that the student teacher can work towards, and Associate Teachers can guide student teachers to define and break down goals into measurable tasks. These should be challenging enough to require persistence but within the realms of the student teacher's abilities. Verbally encouraging student teachers to set their own goals improved not only their efficacy beliefs and achievement but also their commitment to attaining the goals (Schunk, 1985, as cited in Zimmerman, 2000). Similar to observing and understanding children's current strengths and abilities, scaffolding and goal-setting work best when the student teacher's current skills are identified through self and joint reflection.

Mentor/Associate Teachers play a pivotal role as student teachers move in to qualified positions. In light of the efficacy studies mentioned, continual focus on a newly qualified teacher's self-belief should be maintained through their first months of teaching.

Conclusion

Strong pedagogical knowledge, while essential for quality teaching, is deeply influenced by a teacher's belief in themselves, as well as the collective belief of the teaching environment. By bringing awareness to the idea of efficacy, teachers and leaders alike can become more critical about how they cultivate efficacy, and identify areas in which a higher efficacy could improve teaching practices. This discussion highlights the role leaders and mentors have in fostering efficacy, as well as the responsibility student teachers hold in reflecting on their own self-belief systems. Ultimately, the early childhood teacher's goal of building children's confidence and competence as learners is what we also strive for as teachers.

More extensive research on the interplay between teacher self-efficacy and collective efficacy, and of the leadership structures that are antecedents of high efficacy will shed further light on how this construct can be harnessed within early childhood settings.

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