Whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re right.

Henry Ford (1863–1947)

The function of education in English language arts (ELA) is to produce connoisseurs of language, people who enjoy and appreciate the written word and who can evaluate arguments, see logic, and appreciate the aesthetics of language (Piirto, 2007). Master ELA teachers not only possess passion for these subjects, they also have cultivated their skill in sharing their love of literary letters with young learners. Supporting the motivation for the continual professional learning required to maintain high-quality instruction are teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs. Teacher self-efficacy beliefs are teachers’ “conviction that they can influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or unmotivated” (Guskey & Passaro, 1994, p. 7). This chapter explores the role of teacher self-efficacy beliefs in English language arts instruction.

Teacher Self-Efficacy in the ELA Classroom

Bandura (1977) introduced the concept of self-efficacy beliefs as an assessment of one’s capabilities to attain a desired level of performance in a given endeavor. He proposed that belief in one’s abilities was a powerful driver influencing one’s motivation to act, the effort one puts forth in the endeavor, persistence in that effort, and resilience in the face of setbacks. Bandura (1997) asserted that these beliefs were more powerful than one’s actual abilities for the task at hand in influencing people’s level of motivation, affective states, and actions (p. 2). Consequently, a teacher who did not expect to be successful in literacy instruction for certain students would likely put forth less effort in the preparation and delivery of instruction and would likely give up more readily as students struggled, even if she actually possessed teaching strategies that would likely assist these students if applied. Self-efficacy beliefs can therefore become self-fulfilling prophecies, validating either beliefs of capability or of incompetence.

The study of teachers’ sense of efficacy began in the mid-1970s with the RAND studies of reading instruction among low-income and minority students in Los Angeles (Armor et al., 1976). The RAND researchers, in search of variables that would explain differences in the effectiveness of certain teachers and methods, assessed the extent to which teachers believed they could influence student motivation and performance and whether teachers believed negative environmental factors overwhelmed the impact of their efforts in schools. The researchers found that teacher self-efficacy was positively related to variations in reading achievement among minority students, regardless of the reading curriculum used. Students taught by teachers who believed that they could influence students’ motivation and learning showed significantly higher reading achievement than students whose teachers believed that there was little they could do in light of the impediments to learning posed by the environment.

The results of the RAND studies piqued interest in the construct of teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs. Over the last three decades, researchers have repeatedly found teachers’ sense of efficacy to be related to teachers’ motivation, to the level of challenge in the goals to which teachers aspire, and the effort they invest in pursuit of those goals (Ross, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). These, in turn, impact their instructional practices and their behavior in the classroom (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Teachers with higher self-efficacy exhibit greater levels of planning, organization, commitment, enthusiasm for teaching, and persistence in assisting struggling learners (Allinder, 1994; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Teachers with strong self-efficacy are open to new ideas and more willing to experiment with new methods to better meet the needs of their students (Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977; Guskey, 1988; Stein & Wang, 1988). Teachers with stronger self-efficacy
beliefs have greater commitment to teaching (Coladarcì, 1992; Evans & Tribble, 1986; Trentham, Silvern, & Brogdon, 1985) and are more likely to stay in teaching (Glickman & Tamashiro, 1982). Teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs are also related to important student outcomes. Teachers’ self-efficacy predicts students’ sense of self-efficacy and motivation (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989), as well as their achievement outcomes (Anderson, Greene, & Loewen, 1988; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Moore & Esselman, 1992; Pajares, 1996, Ross, 1992). An ELA instructor who judges herself capable of marshaling the complex set of knowledge and skills required to make instructional decisions based on student needs will likely exert greater effort, persistence, and resilience in the face of challenges. Teachers with a high sense of instructional efficacy tend to view difficult students as reachable and teachable and regard their learning problems as surmountable by ingenuity and extra effort. Teachers with low self-efficacy are inclined to invoke low student ability as an explanation for why their students cannot be taught (Ashton & Webb, 1986).

A teacher’s sense of efficacy is not necessarily uniform across the different types of professional tasks that teachers perform, nor across different subject matter (Bandura, 1997). Teacher self-efficacy is context-specific, so that teachers who feel efficacious in one context may feel ineffectual in another. In fact, teachers may report different levels of self-efficacy for the different courses and student groups they encounter during the course of a school day (Ross, Cousins, & Gadalla, 1996). A growing number of scholars are conducting research on the influences of teacher self-efficacy as it relates specifically to language learning and teaching. Among a group of ELA preservice teachers, a positive relationship was found between language self-efficacy and the frequent use of a range of language-learning strategies in their preservice teaching (Wong, 2005). The self-efficacy beliefs of English teachers were found to differ across a range of English teaching tasks and competencies, revealing that teachers may purposefully select to teach specific components of the ELA curriculum for which they feel greater efficacy, while neglecting areas of the ELA curriculum in which they feel less confident (Hansen, 2006). The study of literature was found to be the strongest area of English teacher self-efficacy across a range of competencies.

Writing self-efficacy has been linked with writing performance and teacher beliefs about how to teach writing (Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007; Graham, Harris, Fink, & MacArthur, 2001). In a study of preservice teachers in a graduate program, the relationship between teacher performance as a student and performance as an ELA teacher revealed a relationship between writing self-efficacy and the quality of their writing at the graduate level (Lavelle, 2006). In a study on the influence of self-efficacy beliefs on the teaching of writing, high self-efficacy teachers differed from low self-efficacy teachers in classroom writing instruction practices (Graham et al., 2001). Teachers in the highest quintile of self-efficacy reported spending significantly more time on writing each week, taught more writing processes, more grammar, and were more positive in the affect they displayed around writing. The language and writing self-efficacy of ELA teachers matters when it comes to their teaching practices.

Cultivating Teacher Self-Efficacy Beliefs. With the well-documented link between teacher self-efficacy beliefs and a range of positive outcomes, it seems logical to investigate how these beliefs can be cultivated among ELA teachers. Teacher self-efficacy is determined in part, by the individual teacher’s comparative judgment of whether their personal current abilities and strategies are adequate for the teaching task in question. Bandura (1997) proposed that self-efficacy beliefs emanate from four sources; vicarious experiences, social persuasion, physiological and emotional states, and mastery experiences. Each of these is explored below.

Vicarious Experiences. ELA teachers construct their beliefs in part from watching other educators teach. Teachers entering the field have typically experienced “apprenticeships” of at least 17 years as students. An ELA teacher may attribute the aspiration to become a teacher to a great ELA teacher whom they hoped to emulate. This modeling may continue during teacher preparation, as student teachers observe their cooperating teacher as well as their university instructors. Opportunities to observe colleagues teach are increasingly being structured into professional development for teachers. The degree to which the observer identifies with the model will influence the degree to which the performance of the model impacts the self-efficacy of the observer, such that when the model performs well self-efficacy is enhanced and when the model struggles with performance, self-efficacy beliefs decrease (Bandura, 1997). An ELA teacher who observes a literacy coach successfully model a particular reading strategy may experience an increase in self-efficacy if she views herself as similar to the model. However, if the literacy coach is observed having great difficulty with the lesson modeled, it may diminish the self-efficacy beliefs of the teacher observing the lesson.

Social Persuasion. Social persuasion involves receiving feedback from others about one’s capabilities as a teacher. Self-efficacy is likely to increase when feedback is supportive, and diminish with criticism (Bandura, 1997). During teacher preparation, when the self-efficacy of a prospective ELA teacher is initially being developed, the feedback of supervisors is likely to have a strong impact on self-efficacy beliefs. Once in the field, supervisory or coaching conversations may play a role in either bolstering or undermining the teacher’s self-efficacy. The finding that the support of their administrators was not a strong predictor of the self-efficacy beliefs of either novice or career teachers, however, may suggest the traditional practice of twice-a-year classroom visits from administrators with a preprinted evaluation form does not provide enough feedback to shape a teacher’s belief about his or her professional capability (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007).
Teachers may also experience social persuasion during grade-level or department meetings or during informal conversations in the teachers’ lounge. It is in these more informal settings that the role of the collective efficacy of the team may come into play. Collective efficacy is a group belief related to group performance. Collective efficacy beliefs may refer to the beliefs of an entire faculty or to smaller subcultures within the whole, such as departments of specific subject-area teachers. Collective efficacy may have a socialization effect shaped by the attitudes of other teachers about the task of teaching, the availability of resources, the challenges posed by the environment, and the prospects for student success (Goddard & Goddard, 2001). Individual teacher self-efficacy, collective teacher efficacy, and goals have been found to be related such that a change in one dimension can have an impact on the others (Kurz & Knight, 2004). Just as individual teacher self-efficacy impacts student performance, collective efficacy has been shown to affect student achievement as well (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004).

**Physiological and Emotional States.** How teachers feel as they anticipate a teaching task also influences self-efficacy beliefs. Positive energy and emotions will contribute to a higher and more robust sense of self-efficacy while awareness of feelings of nervousness and anxiety will dampen self-efficacy beliefs. Physiological and emotional states may add to the feeling of mastery or incompetence, dependent upon whether the individual perceives their physiological response as positive or negative. Passion for the subject matter has not been studied as a source of self-efficacy but may be a factor for ELA teachers when it is experienced as a source of positive emotion.

**Mastery Experiences.** Mastery experiences are considered the most powerful source of self-efficacy. An individual perceives future success to be strongly linked to proficiency in past experiences. Conversely, the perception that one’s own performance was a failure may lower self-efficacy beliefs contributing to an expectation for future poor performance. The self-efficacy beliefs of ELA teachers will likely be raised when they witness improvement in student performances as a result of their teaching. This belief subsequently contributes to optimism that future performances will also be proficient, resulting in greater effort and persistence. Repeated student failures, on the other hand, will likely lower self-efficacy beliefs and decrease motivation and resilience (Guskey, 1988; Ross, 1998; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

**Self-Fulfilling Prophecies.** As we have seen, current self-efficacy beliefs contribute to current effort, which then creates a self-reinforcing cycle of success or failure. Teachers cognitively process information about their experience with the teaching task and assess the consequences; these assessments become new inputs of the four sources of self-efficacy information to repeat the cycle. Once teacher self-efficacy beliefs are established, such beliefs may be resistant to change. Contextual factors such as interpersonal support from colleagues, parents, and members of the community, and the availability of resources have been found to play a larger role in the self-efficacy beliefs of novice teachers than for career teachers (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007). Teachers who begin their careers with strong self-efficacy beliefs tend to build upon the motivation and persistence that those beliefs foster, fueling continued strong self-efficacy beliefs. Conversely, teachers who begin with weak self-efficacy beliefs are likely to engage in reinforcing action of those self-defeating beliefs and to persist in these beliefs as well. In this way, self-efficacy becomes both a product and a constructor of experiences (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

**Efficacy-Bolstering English Language Arts Interventions** The research on teacher self-efficacy, in general, and on ELA teacher self-efficacy, in specific, has significant implications for teacher preparation programs and professional development initiatives for ELA teachers. In addition to concentrating on content and pedagogical skill development, teacher preparation programs would do well to attend to cultivating the self-efficacy beliefs of preservice teachers so that they enter the field with a robust sense of their capabilities. This would mean structuring preparation programs with an eye to the sources of self-efficacy, such as abundant opportunities for the observation of teaching strategies by successful role models and the provision of specific, useful, and encouraging feedback on early teaching experiences. Because mastery experiences are such a powerful source of self-efficacy, carefully structuring early teaching experiences to include gradually increasing levels of complexity and challenge to bolster a growing sense of proficiency would be important. These experiences would likely result in greater self-efficacy than the traditional practice of a long period of academic preparation followed by a short, intense period of full-immersion into teaching, which many novice teachers find daunting and discouraging. Finally, interpersonal support to find productive means to cope with the emotions attendant in beginning teaching would help support the fledgling self-efficacy beliefs of novice teachers.

An individual’s self-efficacy beliefs are effected by whether the person believes that the abilities and strategies necessary for a certain task can or cannot be acquired through additional training (Bandura, 1993). Thus, preparation programs may seek to cultivate the conviction among their graduates that the skills they lack can be learned through professional development and practice. In exploring sources of teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs for literacy instruction (TSEL1), Johnson and Tschannen-Moran (2004) found that TSEL1 was significantly related to teachers’ ratings of the perceived quality of university teacher preparation, ratings of the perceived quality of professional development, participation in a children’s literature course, in a teachers-as-readers group, as well as participation in a book.
I Know I Can!

All four sources of self-efficacy are likely to be at play during preservice preparation and professional development initiatives. A study of undergraduate preservice teachers found that although the preservice teachers came to their reading methods class with fairly high self-efficacy scores, they increased their self-efficacy as a result of their increased knowledge and the application of that knowledge in practice experiences (Shaw & Dvorak, 2007). The development of self-efficacy beliefs is not a linear progression, however, with new sources of self-efficacy adding incremental gains (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). As teachers apply new learning, they may experience an “implementation dip” in self-efficacy as they begin to implement a change initiative (Ross, 1994; Stein & Wang, 1988; Woolfolk Hoy & Burke-Spero, 2005). These self-efficacy beliefs tended to rebound for teachers who were able to successfully implement the change initiative. In a quasi-experimental study, Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) tested the potency of different sources of self-efficacy beliefs by structuring four professional development formats, presenting the same teaching strategy for beginning readers, with increasing levels of efficacy-relevant input. Results indicated that the professional development format that supported mastery experiences through follow-up coaching had the strongest effect on self-efficacy beliefs for reading instruction as well as for implementation of the new strategy. A substantial proportion of the teachers who participated in formats that included a demonstration with local students and a planning and practice session, but no follow-up coaching, experienced a decrease in their self-efficacy for reading instruction.

Meaningful professional development support is essential to ameliorating the “implementation dip” in self-efficacy beliefs common during the crucial early stages of change (Guskey, 1989; Joyce & Showers, 1988; Stein & Wang, 1988). In examining the effect of various components of professional development models, Joyce and Showers (1988) found a jump in effect sizes when practice feedback was added to information, theory, and demonstration components within professional development programs. There was further increase in effect size when coaching to support the implementation was added. Professional development programs that aim to support teachers’ ongoing utilization of new knowledge of effective practice need to develop a delivery system characterized by the provision of continued support and follow-up after initial training (Guskey, 1989; Stein & Wang, 1988). Self-efficacy beliefs tended to rebound for teachers who successfully implemented the new instructional practices and continued the process of change.

Teacher self-efficacy and willingness to innovate are both a cause and an outcome of witnessing improvements in student achievement (Guskey, 1988, 1989). Teacher self-efficacy may impact the learning of diverse students dependent upon teacher perceptions of those students. Timperley and Phillips (2003) found generally low expectations and a low level of self-efficacy among teachers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. After participating in a 6-month intervention in which teachers learned new and more powerful literacy teaching strategies and witnessed improved student outcomes as a result, teacher self-efficacy beliefs increased significantly. The teachers’ expectations of both themselves and their students increased regardless of student backgrounds.

Current Issues in ELA Teacher Self-efficacy

In a challenge to the view that “more is better” when it comes to self-efficacy beliefs, Wheatley (2002) has proposed that doubts about one’s efficacy can sometimes be beneficial in that uncertainty or doubt is crucial for teacher reflection that leads to new insights. Wheatley challenged Bandura’s (1997) claim that it is difficult for a person to achieve while fighting self-doubt, stating instead that it is difficult for teachers to learn and improve without experiencing self-efficacy doubts. This disequilibrium and uncertainty may come about from a challenge to teachers’ beliefs about their existing practices. Wheatley suggested that factors such as follow-up coaching might moderate the debilitating influence that teacher self-efficacy doubts may have on teachers, resulting in improved practice. Gregoire (2003) has proposed a model of teacher conceptual change based on whether teachers, when presented with an instructional reform initiative, appraise it as either a threat or a challenge. In this model, teachers who believe that they are already implementing the reform will assess that they are not implicated in the changes being proposed and will process the new content superficially. Teachers who do feel implicated by the reforms presented will experience stress and discomfort. Those with low self-efficacy are predicted to respond to the reform initiative as a threat, leading to an avoidance intention and superficial belief change. On the other hand, teachers with high self-efficacy who perceive that they have the resources, time, and support necessary to implement the proposed changes, would likely interpret the reform as a challenge and consequently engage in more systematic (and thus effortful) processing of the information presented. This model explicates the mechanisms through which teachers’ self-efficacy mediates their response to instructional change.

An ongoing puzzle associated with teachers’ self-efficacy is the accuracy of their self-assessments in terms of external standards of knowledge and skills. Few studies have tackled this issue, but there is evidence that teachers’ calibration of the level of their content knowledge is not especially accurate, with teachers tending to overestimate their knowledge and skills. Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, and Stanovich, (2004) asked primary teachers to assess their level of content knowledge of phonics, and found that teachers tended to overestimate their knowledge and skills. This overestimation of skill level may negatively affect...
self-efficacy beliefs in the face of evidence that personal knowledge and skills were not as strong as originally believed. Bandura (1997) suggested that a slight overestimation of skills may be beneficial in that it may lead to greater effort and persistence than a lower self-assessment might yield. On the other hand, grossly overestimating one’s level of skill may lead to placing the blame for a lack of progress on students or of failing to engage in appropriate professional development opportunities. Several researchers have made use of observers’ performance ratings of teachers in relation to self-report data of efficacy beliefs (Saklofske, Michaluk, & Randhawa, 1988; Trentham et al., 1985), and more studies of this kind would be useful.

Final Thoughts

Self-efficacy, the belief in one’s abilities to accomplish desired outcomes, powerfully affects people’s behavior, motivation and, ultimately, their success or failure (Bandura, 1997). Without self-efficacy, people do not expend effort in endeavors since they may perceive their efforts will be futile. Teachers with high self-efficacy may devote more classroom time to academic activities, provide all students with the guidance needed to succeed, and affirm academic accomplishments of students. In contrast, teachers with low self-efficacy may spend more time on nonacademic pastimes, readily give up on students who exhibit teaching challenges, or criticize students for performance failure (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development for practicing teachers that take seriously the impact of teacher self-efficacy will incorporate demonstrations, feedback, coaching, and monitoring of student progress. In addition to improved instruction, the results are likely to be teachers with greater commitment to teaching, who expend greater effort and persistence, and who remain in the field even in challenging circumstances. Bolstering the self-efficacy of ELA teachers is likely to contribute to their motivation in pursuit of the goal of every ELA teacher, that is, to develop proficient connoisseurs of the English language.

References


