

Accessing Efficacy:

Self-Assessing our Way to Success



“We find that people’s beliefs about their efficacy affect the sorts of choices they make in very significant ways. In particular, it affects their levels of motivation and perseverance in the face of obstacles. Most success requires persistent effort, so low self-efficacy becomes a self-limiting process. In order to succeed, people need a sense of self-efficacy, strung together with resilience to meet the inevitable obstacles and inequities of life.”

~Albert Bandura

By Sandra Herbst

In two very similar communities, there are two very similar schools. Both serve children who are predominantly newcomers to Canada and whose parents or guardians are working hard to secure entry-level employment positions. Financial resourcing of the programs and the teachers’ years of experience is comparable. They follow the same mandated provincial curriculum.

Yet, as you walk their hallways and eavesdrop on their conversations, there is a conspicuous difference. The teachers in School A seem highly frustrated and stressed. They speak of parents who are not supportive and students who are not motivated. School B’s teachers seem buoyant. They speak positively of the diversity of the student population, seem confident and talk about the ways that they are engaging students in their learning.

The differences between the two groups of teachers can be attributed to many factors, however it may be that teachers in School B have a greater sense of efficacy.

Costa and Garmston (2002) define efficacy as an, “...internally held sense that one has the knowledge and skills to impact the learning processes in the school to attain the desired results” (p. 44). Teachers with a high degree of efficacy believe that their actions will positively affect student learning. Efficacious teachers:

- Have internal resourcefulness;
- Initiate responsibility;

- Know that they have choices;
- Are problem solvers; and
- Take action.

In fact, research (Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001) reveals that teachers with efficacy do not tend to despair, hopelessness, rigidity and blame.

Efficacy of the teachers in School B can be further characterized by and result from several factors including, but certainly not limited to, effective professional development and the creation of collaborative learning communities. However, an additional and critical attribute stems from the teachers’ ability to engage in self-assessment of their teaching skills. Linda Darling-Hammond et al.’s (2005) research connects to the body of research in efficacy by reporting that the “adaptive expert” is one who investigates and assesses the impact of his or her teaching and views that act as essential to improvement, while the “routine expert” regards the act of reflecting on and assessing one’s teaching as undermining one’s inherent professionalism.

Leaders work each day to increase their efficacy and that of the teachers in their organizations. They value and deeply understand that, as Michael Fullan (2007) believes, efficacy is a vital factor in the successful implementation of change. With this in mind, schools and systems across Canada and beyond have found that the model and stance of coaching is

a significant way to positively impact on teachers' feelings of efficacy (Costa and Garmston, 2002). The bodies of research in coaching and efficacy both hold that the practitioner has an internal focus and locus of control.

Take for instance Jared's (not his real name) account. Jared is a Grade 7 teacher with over 15 years of experience at the same rural school. He is well known and has been active in community-based sports. He teaches mathematics and was part of the divisional team that provided advice and support to his fellow Grade 7 teachers regarding the provincial assessment. He has been noticing that his students are not as flexible in selecting an appropriate strategy to solve problems, particularly in mental mathematics. As this is an area of the provincial assessment, his students have been struggling to meet the mid-Grade 7 level of performance. He wants to learn more about what he might do differently.

As a result, Jared has been engaging in professional learning both inside and outside of the school division. He has been doing a bit of reading on this topic and has, in his opinion, adjusted some of his teaching. Since there is no PLC structure at the school, inquiry into his practice has been self-directed.

At the same time, Jared's school division has had a focus on quality classroom assessment for several years. As an external support, I have provided professional learning at the system, school and classroom levels. Jared's principal contacted me to see if I would work with Jared.

I travelled to meet with Jared and some other members of his staff. Middle years mathematics is not an area of expertise for me but we had negotiated that I would engage Jared in a coaching cycle—a cycle of planning, classroom lesson and observation, reflection and self-assessment. The role was not one of expert but of coach. And as a coach, I could hold up a mirror to Jared, his practice and his recent learning. In a coaching relationship, the coach illuminates the thinking of the teacher. She offers no advice or expertise, but uses the skills of paraphrase, pausing and mediational questioning to assist the teacher in uncovering recollections, insights and applications.

Jared and I met and quickly moved into a planning conversation (Costa and Garmston, 2010). The goal here was to support Jared as he:

- *Clarified his goals:* What did he hope to accomplish in the lesson? What were the students going to be able to know, do and say as a result of the lesson? What was Jared going to learn more about as he taught the lesson?
- *Specified success indicators:* In what ways would Jared know that he had met the goals of his lesson, for both the students and himself?
- *Anticipated approaches, strategies, decisions:* What might Jared do in the lesson to meet his goals?
- *Established personal learning focus and processes for self-assessment:* What areas would Jared like me to focus on during the lesson and in what ways would he like me to collect evidence on his behalf?

These questions send a strong message. This cycle of learning is about the teacher, for the teacher and directed by the teacher. As a coach, one takes the lead from the person who is being coached; the focus is not about the coach's agenda but rather is meant to allow the coachee to access his internal resources, a key element in efficacy.

We were now ready to move to the classroom. Jared had asked me to collect data for three different reasons and in three different ways:

1. Script all of the questions that he asked the students, both as a large group and when he interacted with individual students. In the planning conversation, Jared had identified that he wanted to make sure to ask questions that moved up Bloom's Taxonomy. He saw this as an indicator of students' flexible thinking.
2. Mark the time that he spent in talking metacognitively; that is, the time that he spent speaking about his own thinking as he solved mental math problems. In the planning conversation, Jared had spoken of the importance of the "I do" stage of gradual release of responsibility.
3. Mark the time that he paused before asking students to respond to his questions. Jared had stated in the planning conversation that "wait time" is important in students' ability to process.

This provided me with specific expectations of my time during the 45-minute lesson. The data that I gathered was directly related to what Jared had asked me to collect there was no room for analysis, judgment or the assignment of value to his words and actions.

After the lesson, Jared and I met once more. The focus of this conversation was reflection (Costa and Garmston, 2010) and it centred around the following five phases:

1. *Summarize impressions and recall supporting information:* As Jared reflected on the lesson, what were his impressions?
2. *Analyze causal factors:* As Jared thought about how the lesson went, what might account for the ways that the lesson unfolded? As Jared referred to the evidence that was collected, what was he noticing?
3. *Construct new learnings:* Given this experience, what might Jared consider next time?
4. *Commit to application:* What insights was Jared gaining?
5. *Reflect on the coaching process and explore refinements:* In what ways had this conversation been helpful?

Let us return to these questions regarding the evidence that was collected. During this time, Jared was again "in the driver's seat." I showed him the data and then sat alongside him and posed questions that caused him to interact with the data. For example, "What was he noticing?", "What was surprising to him?", and "What patterns were emerging for him?" The task was not to raise my interpretations of the data; I offered no hypotheses, nor did I put forward my opinions. This is a critical phase—the phase of self-assessment wherein Jared identifies where he is (based on his analysis of the data) in relation to what he had expected. This ability to look in the mirror—to self-assess—and discern what the data was telling him was crucial; this is, as has been highlighted earlier, an indicator of efficacy.

As this account suggests, to value efficacy is to value the professional and his ability to access his internal resourcefulness. Though there may be other structures and processes that require professionals to engage in self-assessment and reflection, the coaching cycle certainly assists in fine-tuning one's ability to do both.

What might happen in School A if despair changed to hope, if rigidity was converted into flexibility of thought and action, and if blame was transformed into the ability to envision possibilities? As the

research into efficacy and school effectiveness suggests, teacher efficacy may be the single most consistent variable related to school success (Goodard, Hoy, and Woolfolk-Hoy, 2000). And perhaps the stance of coaching, as opposed to a default stance of evaluator or expert, serves as a strategy of promise and possibility. ■

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