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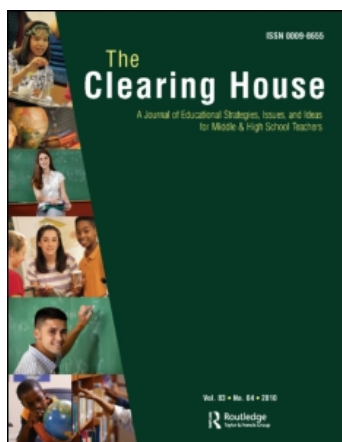
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### Principles and Practices for Building Academic Self-Efficacy in Middle Grades Language Arts Classrooms

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# Principles and Practices for Building Academic Self-Efficacy in Middle Grades Language Arts Classrooms

ERIN MCTIGUE and JEFFREY LIEW

**Abstract:** Academic self-efficacy contributes to students' motivation and persistence for learning. However, motivation for reading and learning, and students' self-efficacy in school often declines in adolescence. This manuscript presents research-based strategies for facilitating students' motivations within the context of language arts classes.

**Keywords:** motivation, reading disabilities, academic performance, adolescents

Through the use of practical classroom vignettes and research-based explanations, we present empirically based principles for language arts teachers seeking to promote students' academic self-efficacy. This integrative approach can be particularly effective when teaching struggling adolescent readers, who often approach language arts with a defeatist attitude. We structured our review of the literature around common questions that teachers pose regarding academic self-efficacy and how to implement these ideas in their classes. Via classroom examples, we provide specific ideas as to how to facilitate academic self-efficacy in a middle school classroom.

## Can Reading Teachers Afford to Spend Time on Nonacademic Learning?

Integrating social and emotional skill development into the daily activities of a middle school classroom is well supported by research (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning 2003; Liew and McTigue 2010), which shows that social and emotional learning (SEL) and traditional academic learning go hand-in-

hand for students to develop into academically responsible and socially competent young adults. For example, time spent proactively creating safe and effective classrooms reduces teachers' needs for managing student misbehavior (Pianta 1999). As part of SEL, developing students' self-efficacy provides long-term academic benefits via motivation and persistent learning behaviors. In short, teachers cannot afford to neglect social-emotional development.

## What Is Self-efficacy Anyway? Is it Like Self-esteem?

Middle schoolers undergo major biological, cognitive, and social-emotional changes during adolescence, and it is important for researchers and practitioners to be aware of such developmental changes in students' self-concepts and self-beliefs (Wigfield et al. 2006). Although self-efficacy and self-esteem both refer to aspects of self-concept, they differ in both their definitions and their relations to performance outcomes.

According to social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986, 1991), *self-efficacy* in general is a set of beliefs that refer to whether one is capable of mobilizing and maintaining the effort needed to achieve a goal. Students' self-efficacy in the academic domain (or academic self-efficacy), therefore, refers to the belief "that they can control their achievement outcomes" (Wigfield and Wagner 2005, 224). In contrast *self-esteem* refers to students' sense of self-worth. For example, a struggling reader may have low academic self-efficacy but high overall self-esteem if she derives her self-worth from other domains (e.g., sports). Alternatively, a skilled reader with high academic self-efficacy could have low

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self-esteem if she defines her sense of self-worth in other domains (e.g., being popular with peers).

Additionally, relative to self-esteem, self-efficacy may be more directly related to school success. A large body of research has shown that self-efficacy beliefs are critical for self-regulated learning and achievement (see [Pajares 2003](#); [Wigfield et al. 2006](#); [Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons 1992](#)). Research generally highlights that “if people believe they have no power to produce results, they will not attempt to make things happen” ([Bandura 1997, 3](#)). Conversely, academic self-efficacy predicts persistence on a difficult learning task and is associated with positive academic motivation, learning, and achievement ([Bandura et al. 2003](#); [Liew et al. 2008](#); [Wigfield et al. 2006](#)).

### How Do Self-efficacy, Confidence, and Motivation Develop in Middle School Readers?

#### *Self-beliefs*

To foster confidence in adolescent readers it helps for teachers to understand the influences responsible for self-directed learning. According to social cognitive theory, “self-regulatory systems lie at the very heart of causal processes” ([Bandura 1991, 248](#)). People innately possess self-reflective capabilities that allow them to exercise control ([Bandura 1986](#)). Self-regulation underpins goal setting (e.g., I will read this Web page to figure out how to upload an online video), self-monitoring (e.g., Did I really understand that?), and self-evaluation (e.g., I did not understand that page, I should find another source).

#### *Personality Factors*

In addition to self-beliefs, researchers have found that temperament or personality differences in self-regulatory abilities, as measured by effortful control, contribute to learning ([Blair and Razza 2007](#); [Liew et al. 2008](#); [McClelland et al. 2007](#)). *Effortful control* (more commonly referred to as self-control) is the ability to inhibit a dominant response in order to activate an alternate response ([Rothbart and Bates 2006](#)). For example, one demonstrates effortful control in eating when avoiding the favorite brownie (dominant response) and selecting the apple (e.g., healthy but possibly less desirable alternate). Within schools, [Liew and colleagues \(2008\)](#) found that first graders’ effortful control is a precursor to their academic self-efficacy beliefs in second grade, which then predicts their literacy skills in third grade. Such findings suggest that helping young and older children learn to manage their emotions, attention, and behavior could have a positive impact on their future self-efficacy beliefs and achievement.

### Why Is Promoting Self-efficacy Relevant for Middle-grade Literacy Teachers?

Many middle-grade readers struggle with reading—the 2007 *National Assessment of Educational Progress* findings indicate that 74 percent of eighth-graders demonstrate only *basic* reading skills ([Lee, Grigg, and Donahue 2007](#)). Such statistics suggest that a large population of older struggling readers may be at risk for having low self-efficacy and high anxiety with literacy if they experience difficulties or repeated failures. Additionally, academic self-efficacy beliefs decline across the elementary school years and through the high school years ([Wigfield et al. 2006](#)). Yet, teachers may not easily detect the anxiety felt by these struggling older readers who often mask anxiety with “fake reading,” timely trips to the nurse, forgetting books, plagiarism, feigned (or real) disinterest, and copying work from peers ([Tovani 2002](#); [Bartholomew 2007](#)). This cycle of learned helplessness has been deemed in reading by [Stanovich \(1986\)](#) as the *Matthew’s effect*, in which the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” To reverse the Matthew’s effect, literacy teachers play an important role to help adolescents develop their skills while maintaining a healthy sense of self-esteem and efficacy ([Wigfield, Lutz, and Wagner 2005](#)).

### What Is the Ideal Learning Environment for Supporting SEL for Adolescents?

An ideal, safe learning environment for older students is one that challenges, without overwhelming, students’ cognitive and emotional capabilities ([Inlay 2005](#)). For example, adolescents respond poorly to micromanagement and “being treated like a child” but still need consistency from their teachers. Teachers who provide a safe, organized environment foster academic achievement because it encourages students’ engagement, and therefore self-direction, in their learning. Classroom management that is based on warm and supportive teacher–student relationships lays the foundation for creating a safe and flexible environment ([Pianta 1999](#)). In such environments, students are more willing to take risks, become engaged in classroom activities, and accept challenges ([Birch and Ladd 1997](#)).

### What Are Teacher Practices That Underlie the Development of Self-efficacy?

In the following set of vignettes about one language arts class we illustrate specific practices. After each example, we provide an explanation regarding the underlying SEL principle. The principles that we advocate are: creating a safe classroom environment; integrating social, emotional, and academic learning; monitoring students’ self-efficacy; modeling self-efficacy within academic learning; providing effective feedback; and facilitating self-evaluation with goal setting.

### *Vignette 1. Class Meetings: Creating a Safe and Democratic Classroom Environment*

Every Friday, Ms. Clark's sixth-grade language arts classes start with a 20-minute class meeting. This day, she explains that a student anonymously asked her to address a class problem. The problem is that some books have gone missing from the classroom library while others have been returned marked up with rude comments and lewd drawings. Despite initial class reactions of giggling and blaming students in the other class periods, Ms. Clark encourages the sixth graders to take a problem-solving stance. Madeline suggests creating a system so that people would be more accountable. "Very constructive!" responds Ms. Clark, "What could that be?" As students brainstorm, Ms. Clark asks for a volunteer "recorder." After three feasible ideas are proposed and discussed, the group votes on the ideas. The winning proposal includes a designated, but rotating, "librarian" position in each class. Ms. Clark explains that if a student would like to be the class librarian that student should write "a brief proposal" by Monday. Based on the proposals, she would select accordingly.

To provide opportunities for developing autonomy and self-regulation, students should be involved in select class decisions. Ms. Clark demonstrates how to enhance students' development of problem-solving skills by addressing a typical problem in a language arts classroom. By including democratic elements within classroom management in general, adults and students learn to treat each other with mutual respect, regard, and trust (Inlay 2005). A democratic environment encourages student involvement and engagement (Bartholomew 2007), which leads to academic risk-taking rather than avoidance.

### *Vignette 2. Integrating Social and Emotional Learning into Literacy Assignments*

To ensure practical writing practice in different genres, the day's writing topic was "thank-you notes." Class members analyzed multiple examples of thank-you cards brought in by Ms. Clark. As they discussed the relative merits of each note, Ms. Clark recorded their thoughts on the chalkboard, creating a table of identified positive and negative traits. For example, students considered it incomplete to just state "thank you," but not identify the reason. Then Ms. Clark passed out papers with the name of a peer, explaining that they now need to write a thank-you note to their assigned peer. Some students rolled their eyes or groaned. Others complained that they had not received gifts and had nothing to write about. Ms. Clark reminded the class that thank-you notes can be appreciation for what a person does. She directs them to the chart to be reminded of their opinions of a quality thank-you note and sets the timer for 10 minutes of quiet writing.

Language arts is replete with opportunities to consider the emotional aspects of life and practice skills that are critical in interpersonal relationships. In the thank-you card writing exercise, students were challenged to consider the positive nature of their relationships with

peers. Such thinking can foster skills, such as empathy, as well as prosocial behavior and peer competence (Eisenberg and Liew 2009). The students were also challenged to identify and label emotions. This task requires an awareness of emotions and can foster students' cognitive development by articulating abstract concepts. In our experience with similar assignments, despite initial resistance, students tend to value such notes from peers and often save them. Such practices create social connections and build a sense of community among learners. Furthermore, it fosters students' self-efficacy in being agents of change in creating a positive classroom environment.

### *Vignette 3. Monitoring and Assessing Students' Self-efficacy*

During the independent writing time Ms. Clark observes her students' engagement and literacy behaviors. She notices that Miguel is frustrated as he crumples his paper and tosses it away. However, he persists on the writing task so she does not intervene. She notes that Christiana is talking to a neighbor. As she approaches the pair to redirect them, she realizes that Christiana is getting an idea to write about from her friend. Next, Ms. Clark notes on her clipboard that Vlada is using an electronic thesaurus to find another word for "thanks."

Converging evidence indicates that, above and beyond students' intellectual ability, self-efficacy also contributes uniquely to academic success. Therefore, it is critical that teachers can identify which students may be at risk of having low self-efficacy. Currently, there are few structured measures for self-efficacy. However, informal measures can be used effectively, particularly structured observations. The key characteristics to observe are: engagement and participation levels, self-monitoring behaviors, and inquiries for help (McTigue, Liew, and Washburn 2009).

Within this snapshot observation, Miguel is engaged in the task despite struggling. Ms. Clark lets him persist because he is maintaining his interest in the task. Self-monitoring can be observed in the manner that students recognize when they need help. Vlada is demonstrating this by noting that he is overusing one word and therefore seeks a resource to help him find an alternative. Proactive help-seeking behavior is generally a positive sign of academic resilience and self-efficacy. When learners actively seek help rather than passively wait on others to offer help, such self-directed behavior suggests that the learners believe they can accomplish the goal but may need some assistance. It is a natural extension of self-monitoring. In Christiana's case, she is actively seeking help and engaging in cooperative learning by turning to her peer as an external support or resource.

### *Vignette 4. Modeling Self-efficacy within Academic Learning*

In addition to Miguel, Ms. Clark notices that a few other students are struggling. After five minutes she pauses the

timer and mentions to the group that some people seem to be having “writer’s block.” She explains how she has this problem sometimes, especially when the assignment was imposed on her. She details that the more frustrated she feels, the harder it is to start writing. To avoid this frustration, she has found a few tricks that help her. The best one, she explains, is just to start writing. . . writing anything. Ms. Clark models that she may write, “I just don’t know what to write. I’m not sure why it is so hard today, but I just don’t have any good ideas.” Eventually she can usually come up with something worth keeping, even if it means a whole page or two of junk that she throws away. After sharing her idea, she opens up the floor to other students to share what they do when they get stuck during writing. After two students share their ideas, she declares it “writing time again,” and the timer resumes.

Modeling, the process of observing and patterning one’s thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors after an exemplar (Schunk 1987), can be used in literacy classrooms on a daily basis. When engaged in modeling, a teacher gives concrete explanations and demonstrations to show students how to use a new skill (Schunk and Zimmerman 2007). In addition to modeling for *thinking strategies*, teachers can also model *coping strategies*. Ms. Clark models how she manages when she gets stuck with the writing process. This provides students with the insight that even teachers can struggle with academic tasks and feel frustration (Pajares 2005). Peer modeling can be a more effective means of raising student self-efficacy than teacher–student modeling (Schunk 1987). Ms. Clark capitalized on this by asking students for their strategies for dealing with writing problems rather than simply offering her own.

#### Vignette 5. Effective Feedback and Teacher Language to Promote Self-efficacy

After the mini-lesson on “getting unstuck,” Ms. Clark gives the students five more minutes to write. During that time she stops at Chela’s desk. After checking with Chela, Ms. Clark quietly reads her note aloud. Ms. Clark remarks that in her note, she identified her peer’s contribution to the class and explained why that contribution was important. Also, because Chela is an English language learner who often struggles with word order in her writing, Ms. Clark points out each of the correctly ordered sentences. Then she points out the one sentence that is incorrect and asks Chela how she could fix that one. She encourages Chela by stating, “Remember last time, you had to fix five or six sentences because of word order? Today, you got almost all of them just right! You must be working very hard!”

The medium of feedback, teacher language, is a potent and pervasive tool. Seemingly small and subtle adjustments by the speaker can reap significant consequences for the listener (Johnston 2004). We advocate three features of effective feedback: specific, accurate, and process-oriented. *Specific* feedback should provide information that is indicative of the student’s perfor-

mance on a certain skill rather than the generic “good job.” In vignette 5 Ms. Clark focuses her emphasis on how Chela provides a rich description in her writing. This practice can help learners better identify what is making them successful and allows students to take control of their learning (Johnston 2005). *Accurate* feedback provides students with judgments that comment on their present performance in reference to past performance. In contrast, unmerited positive feedback is harmful by creating a false perception of ability (Linnenbrink and Pintrich 2003). *Process-oriented* feedback attributes learning to effort (Pajares 2005). For example, Ms. Clark emphasizes how Chela must have been “working hard” rather than emphasizing that Chela was “smart,” which indicates a fixed conception of intelligence. Students can control their effort and process and such feedback encourages them to continue to put effort into their learning.

#### Vignette 6. Facilitating Self-evaluation and Goal Setting

After the students finished drafting thank-you notes, Ms. Clark refers them to the chart on the board regarding characteristics of good and poor thank-you notes. She points out that this is a class-created rubric. Based on their own criteria, they can use this as a standard to judge the quality of their notes. First, they analyze their notes to find at least one good standard that they met. They document this judgment in their writing journal. She then has students share their successes with a partner. Next, she challenges them to find one area that they didn’t fully meet and revise accordingly. She also has them document this change in their writing journal.

To foster self-efficacy, teachers should aim for students to self-evaluate their literacy progress. The skill of self-evaluation supersedes the boundaries of literacy classrooms because, as Pajares (2005) states, “without the capability to self-reflect, human beings would be reactive souls without the capacity for self-improvement” (363). The evaluation process ideally reflects a student’s progress toward specific goals. In this case, the goals were determined by their rubric. Incorporating multiple instructional activities that require students to set specific goals and monitor their progress will help facilitate self-evaluation and positive learning goals. The documentation of revisions, such as the use of a writing journal, helps to explicate the process.

Inseparable in the process of self-evaluation is goal-setting. Schunk (2003) contends that “goals are integral components of motivation and learning” (163) and should be set with specificity, proximity, and difficulty in mind if students are to experience raised self-efficacy. A *specific* goal is individualized and targeted on learning a certain skill. Similar to effective feedback, the achievement of specific goals is more likely to raise self-efficacy because they are much easier to evaluate than a general goal (i.e., “Try my hardest”; Schunk 2003). Daily goals with short *proximity* are useful because those that are

accomplished quickly, including those within a matter of minutes, result in greater motivation and higher self-efficacy. In vignette 6, the goal is specific because it pertains directly to a rubric. The proximity is short because it is a task that can be accomplished in the resulting few minutes. Because the goal is derived from the students' self-evaluation, it will likely be of appropriate difficulty.

## Conclusion

Through vignettes of a single class period of a middle school language arts class, we aimed to illustrate key principles of building self-efficacy and demonstrate how they can be seamlessly integrated within quality literacy instruction for adolescent learners. To summarize, the following are the key principles:

- Creating a safe and democratic classroom environment
- Integrating social and emotional learning into literacy assignments
- Monitoring and assessing students' academic self-efficacy
- Modeling self-efficacy within academic learning
- Providing effective feedback
- Facilitating self-evaluation and goal-setting

However, there are myriad ways to implement these key principles in literacy instruction and we do not want to limit teachers to our examples, but rather encourage them to think creatively as to how to integrate SEL within the structures of their own classrooms. As stated previously, helping to increase adolescents' social-emotional and self-regulatory skills can help them maintain self-efficacy and a positive sense of self during a period when adolescents are experiencing major transitions at school. Ultimately, such efforts may positively impact students' academic as well as social-emotional lives.

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