

# TEACHER SELF-EFFICACY: A BELIEF ABOUT PERSONAL TEACHING CAPABILITIES OR ABOUT CAPABILITIES TO BRING ABOUT DESIRED EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES?

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Although studies on *teacher self-efficacy* over the last 20 years have continued to reveal its value in education research, the accrued theoretical messiness of the concept has a potential to undermine the powerful messages that the research is trying to send. The main theoretical issue regarding the concept relates to its unclear definition, rooted in a historical development of theory from two theoretical strands (*social learning theory* of Rotter (1966) and *social cognitive theory* (SCT) of Bandura (1997)). For example, following Rotter's association of *teacher self-efficacy* with *external control*, some define it as beliefs related to teachers' capabilities to affect the learning outcomes of students (Ozder, 2011); or suggest that *teacher efficacy* comprises of *personal efficacy* (relating to teachers' beliefs about their individual skills), *outcome efficacy* (relating to their actions in bringing about required outcomes) and *teaching efficacy* (relating to *external control*, concerning the ability of teaching in general to overcome external influences) (Soodak & Podell, 1996).

Following Bandura, others depart from the explicit association of *teacher self-efficacy* with *locus of control*, and instead focus on appraisal of teachers' personal capabilities. They define *teacher self-efficacy* as, for example, "the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organise and execute the courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context" (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, p. 22); or "teachers' subjective judgment about their capability to successfully execute a course of action required to fulfil their roles as a teacher" (Cho & Shim, 2013, p. 14); or simply "one's beliefs in their ability to teach mathematics effectively" (Bates, Latham, & Kim, 2011, p. 326).

To complicate the matter further, it is not actually uncommon for researchers to be confounding the two definitions in their own studies. For example, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy define *teacher self-efficacy* as, "a judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001, p. 783), shifting the focus back to the aspect of control and away from teachers' personal attributes.

This deliberation, between beliefs about personal capabilities for executing actions and beliefs about capabilities to bring about desired educational outcomes, left us with a fundamental question about what *teacher self-efficacy* actually is. One might argue that what we are facing is a simple linguistic liberty, which in itself should not be problematic as long as one defines concepts clearly. The issue, however, has serious theoretical and methodological implications. These relate to the confounding treatment of *teacher self-efficacy* and a concept of *control*, subsequently leading to difficulties in interpreting success and failure. In the following section, using Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, we discuss the fundamental differences between the two concepts, explaining why it is incorrect to treat them synonymously.

## TEACHER SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS AND THE CONCEPT OF CONTROL AS TWO SEPARATE CONCEPTS

Skinner (1996) explains that a sense of control is not synonymous with *teacher self-efficacy* but that it is rather a general concept consisting of two components.: *Competence*, in relation to *teacher self-efficacy*, is “conceptualized as a context-specific and malleable belief about what the individual teacher can accomplish given the limitations caused by external factors” (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007, p. 612). *Contingency* is “conceptualized as a general and relatively stable belief about limitations to what can be achieved through education” (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007, p. 612). This reflects two kinds of expectations discussed by Bandura (1997): *efficacy expectation* – an affective “judgement of one’s ability to organise and execute given types of performances”; and *outcome expectancy* - “a judgement of a likely consequence such performances will produce” (p. 21). Here self-efficacy beliefs are clearly defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action, required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).

Bandura (1997) explains that although the two are inextricably linked, they cannot be treated as one general efficacy concept. Firstly, although *outcome expectancy* provides an incentive for initiating action, it does not actually directly affect behaviour (Bandura, 1997). Belief that a successfully performed action brings about certain desired outcomes, without a belief a person can execute this action, will not result in action. Secondly, the relationship between *self-efficacy* and *outcome expectancy* is not of a simple deterministic nature but can exhibit one of three different dependency scenarios: performance determining outcome, performance accounting only for part in the variation of outcomes (joint effect of performance and external factors on outcomes, such as, for example, “students taking responsibility for their own learning” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 754)) and outcome being completely independent of performance (for example in strictly segregated and discriminating circumstances) (Bandura, 1997). Lack of attention to those often leads to an interpretation of personal success in terms of outcomes, as opposed to performance (Morris, Usher, & Chen, 2017). Bandura (1997) explains, however, that the measure of an individual success can be based only on personal attainment. The fact whether this attainment will bring an external outcome has little to do with personal success in reaching a set goal. For example, in an educational context, a teacher might have a high-level of efficacy in teaching specific content or teaching in a certain way, and they might be able to execute this action successfully, yet, the specific approach might not be valued or appreciated by their school, exhibiting low *outcome expectancy*. As an example, one can consider democratic classrooms where there is a clear conflict between well-executed teacher-centred practices and constructivist values, which emphasise the very idea of teachers letting go of classroom control (Wheatley, 2005).

Importantly, attainment and *outcome expectancy* differ conceptually and temporally. *Outcome expectancy* relates to the assessment of physical, social and self-evaluative outcomes and focuses on what will take place following a successful action (Bandura, 1997). In contrast, attainment focuses on a performance that has already taken place and includes self-evaluative and attributive processes. Such an assessment is not based on a simple indicator of success and failure but rather on how these successes and failures are cognised, interpreted, weighted,

“organized and reconstructed in memory” (Bandura, 1997, p. 81), based on task difficulty, capabilities and effort expenditure. For example, an individual with high efficacy, when experiencing failure, might not change their self-efficacy beliefs because of attributing the failure to a lack of sufficient effort or an influence of external factors. Charalambous, Philippou and Kyriakides (2008) illustrate this with a quote of a pre-service primary teacher who said: “At first, I assumed sole responsibility [for the failure], but after experimenting with several approaches, I concluded that it was not always my fault. Some pupils are not engaged, simply because they don’t care” (p.139).

## FINAL REMARKS

There is much current research that uses Bandura’s *teacher self-efficacy*, but many use misleading definitions of the concept, confounding the aspects of teacher personal capabilities with that of general *control*. Yet, as discussed above, treating those concepts interchangeably ignores their nuanced differences, standing in the way of interpreting results in valid ways. This liberal treatment of the concept and the definition of *teacher self-efficacy* is in need of addressing, especially in the context of numerous quantitative studies, results of which are often accumulated with a purpose of sending powerful messages.

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