Collective Efficacy or Toxic Positivity? - ASCD

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Paul Emerich France on Toxic Positivity in School Professional Cultures (ASCD Connect: Powered by Bam Radio)

9:05

Leaving my teaching position in August of 2020 was one of the hardest decisions I've ever made. After playing a critical role in the formation of my school's distance learning plan the prior spring, I was appointed to a committee comprising administrators, various other school staff, and teachers from other grades that was tasked with creating a proposal for returning to school in person or in a hybrid format in the Fall. The teachers on the committee, by and large, were skeptical about returning to school, much like the majority of faculty.

We came to the table, though, looking to collaborate. We proposed ideas for a hybrid model and voiced concerns about safety. But we soon learned that we weren't actually there to help make the decisions. It was abundantly clear that the intention behind inviting us wasn't genuine, but only to make it seem as though the committee were an efficacious, cohesive body.

Over the course of two months, we teachers repeatedly shared our concerns about returning in person, pushing back in all the ways we knew how. The result was two-fold: (1) an email asking us to remove ourselves from the committee if we couldn't get on board with the plan, and (2) the formation of a new group, comprised of teachers who I assume were willing to fall in line with the predetermined plans—that is, who possessed, let's say, a more positive attitude about returning to in-person schooling. It's instances like these where "collective efficacy" can easily become toxic positivity, silencing dissent to amplify compliance.

Toxic positivity is the pervasive mindset that, no matter the circumstances, one should always see the positive. In education, this way of thinking often reinforces the idea of teacher martyrdom (Álvarez, 2021), coaxing teachers to put their students and their schools before themselves and their own families. Moreover, it creates a culture where outspoken teachers with dissenting viewpoints experience retribution from their superiors and are labeled "negative." Dissenters may even be gaslit, a form of mental manipulation that attempts to distort reality to press for compliance.

A Critical Lens on Collective Efficacy

I assume those leading the charge for collective teacher efficacy share my desire to build school cultures that genuinely push for teachers to collaborate and that strengthen everyone's belief that they can succeed. That said, I have a growing concern that if we don't apply a critical lens to collective teacher efficacy, this important body of research could become a tool for further silencing and oppressing teachers. Relying on clichés like "If you believe, you can achieve" primes schools for toxic positivity. It puts too much responsibility on individual teachers. "We're in this together," others will say. Or, my personal favorite, "We can do hard things." But being a teacher in these times is more than just a "hard thing." It's too often an *unsustainable* thing that no amount of

collective teacher efficacy can make possible.

My purpose here isn't to refute the research on collective efficacy, but to encourage others to examine it with a different lens, a critical lens that puts collective teacher efficacy in a *necessary* context of sustainable teaching conditions. If we don't, we're setting teachers up for failure and further oppression.

Sustainable Teaching Conditions: Beyond "Beliefs"

Beate Planche (2019) made this point in an article for the Canadian Association of Principals:

She's referring to six conditions for enabling collective efficacy within schools that researcher Jenni Donohoo (2017) has set out: (1) including teachers in schoolwide decision making; (2) finding consensus on collective goals; (3) understanding colleagues' work; (4) finding alignment on educational philosophy; (5) responsive leadership; and (6) effective systems of intervention.

The first of these conditions, including teachers in schoolwide decision making, matters above all else. Teachers deserve a seat at the table—but a seat is just a start. To push for sustainable teaching conditions, we must examine who has built the table, who has set the table, and the ways in which those without power can access a seat and a voice at this proverbial table.

In my situation last summer, it became clear to me that not only had the table been built and set by administrators, but sitting there came with conditions: Get on board or remove yourself from the group. While I was "included" in this conversation, it wasn't in an egalitarian fashion.

What Teachers Are Seeing

In response to a question I sent teachers through social media, some teachers told me that this is how collective teacher efficacy typically manifests in their schools. Their experiences suggest it's not the idea itself but the implementation of it that needs work.

A 4th grade teacher in Virginia told me, "I find it just another way teachers are expected to solve problems being created by systems outside our control." A pre-K teacher from Queens, New York, has seen an unintended conflation of collective teacher efficacy and unrealistic expectations for "consistency" among teachers:

A 7th grade science teacher who formerly taught in Colorado said that in their situation, collective teacher efficacy "was a tool leveraged to meet the needs of the few at the expense of the many," after which they clarified that in some cases, collective teacher efficacy can easily become a mechanism for pushing the priorities of those in power, as opposed to providing teachers with the professional learning they actually need. "There was no critical lens applied to John Hattie's work [on collective efficacy]," this teacher continued, "asking who does this benefit? Who does it leave out?"

To avoid such misapplications, it's important for school leaders to consider what they are using collective efficacy to accomplish. Ultimately, if you're applying the concept simply to raise test scores, then leveraging collective efficacy may mainly benefit the testing industry and administrators (who are lauded when test scores rise) without addressing teaching conditions or needs. If, on the contrary, educators are asked to apply collective teacher efficacy to figuring out this "new normal" of schooling during a pandemic, committing to sustainability, humanization, and the redefinition of what it means to be successful in schools, then their efforts toward efficacy could well have an impact on student learning. The concept could become an asset in changing our school systems for the better, centering everything we do on educational equity, and protecting the humanity of all who make our schools great places to learn.

To build on Planche's point, for collective teacher efficacy to improve learning in schools—and be healthy for teachers—it requires specific actions and learning conditions that expand beyond the six conditions cited by Donohoo. If we want collective efficacy to be carried out in ways that are inclusive, humanizing, and supportive

of teachers, it must be carried out through processes—layers of sustainability—that bolster teachers by providing positive school *cultures*, the right *pedagogy*, and needed *resources* for teaching.

If we don't do so, we risk setting up important findings of collective teacher efficacy to be diluted by toxic positivity or by an uncritical acceptance of research that may not take into account the systems that have created conditions in which teachers feel a dire need for support.

Layers of Sustainability

Let's look at how collective teacher efficacy initiatives could take into account the layers of sustainability just mentioned.

Sustaining Teachers as People

For a school to be culturally sustainable, the aggregate of conditions in which teaching and learning operate must sustain the *individuals* participating in teaching and learning. Schools must be places where teachers can be self-efficacious (Abrams, 2021)—actualizing their identities as educators, while working to align with and help shape an evolving vision of the school.

This cannot happen without a culture of autonomy that allows for vulnerability. Teachers must feel empowered to take risks and grow their practice. What's more, they must know that collective teacher efficacy doesn't mean every classroom has to look the same. Instead, it entails working toward common goals, knowing full well that in a diverse teaching population, how these collective goals are realized may vary in healthy degrees. This lets all teachers share their particular assets.

Too often, when teachers disengage from the professional learning culture of a school, they're seen as negative or difficult. But there may be good reasons why they've disengaged from that collective consciousness. Sometimes that culture is hostile to their approach as a teacher, or even to their identity. As a queer elementary school teacher, I know the sting of feeling unwelcomed and unsafe in a school environment. In my fourth year of teaching, a colleague and I tried to teach a lesson on marriage equality, shortly after its legalization in Illinois, the state where I was working at the time. Our actions not only led to disciplinary consequences, but to microaggressions against me—from the assertion that I was trying to push my gay "agenda" to threats of someone screening my classroom library for "inappropriate" children's literature.

If we don't apply a critical lens to collective teacher efficacy, this body of research may become a tool for silencing teachers.

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The culture of that school couldn't sustain me or my identity—no matter how much I believed I wanted to impact student learning. By the end of that teaching year, I moved to San Francisco and sought refuge in a new arena of education work. I was seeking social acceptance but also a new way of thinking about teaching.

Sustainable Pedagogy

I spent the following three years working for an education technology company and network of microschools. Our charge was digitally driven personalized learning, through an innovative tool called a "playlist" that individualized curriculum. The idea was exciting at first. But I soon realized this brand of personalized pedagogy was not only unsustainable, it wasn't best for kids, either (France, 2020; 2021).

As a teacher at these schools, I had a great deal of influence in decision making. The project's collective goals were clear, documented in the form of objectives/key results. We had systems in place to better understand our colleagues' pedagogy, from videotaped classrooms to a centralized documentation tool where teachers could describe best practices. We even implemented 360-degree evaluations.

Despite these practices, which were aligned with collective teacher efficacy (and the research on it), teaching with the kind of pedagogy to which the company subscribed was ultimately unsustainable. On good weeks, I worked well into the evenings and weekends; on my worst weeks, I clocked in 70–80 hours. I hoped that if I willed myself into believing this method of personalizing learning would be effective, eventually it would get easier. It didn't, and I burned out.

Sustainability of Resources

If leaders within education don't seriously consider the question of whether schools and teachers have sufficient resources to teach well, they may put the burden of changing the system disproportionately on one entity—teachers. I'm concerned that the way collective teacher efficacy is often framed does this, making it more of an issue of teachers' attitudes than of the systemic constraints under which we find ourselves. It's true that the education system will only evolve if individuals and groups make conscious decisions to change. But individuals have limits on their power—especially teachers.

When trying to actualize teacher efficacy, teachers and administrators must be keenly aware of the resource constraints in their school or district and do what they can to alleviate them. Time, money, and energy are scarce. Distance learning is the most recent example of resource unsustainability in action. Teachers spent the

2020–2021 school year in survival mode, attempting to fill systemic opportunity gaps over which they had little control. Sadly, this wasn't a new reality for many educators, just a new manifestation of systemic constraints that have for years resulted in a scarcity of resources.

There are some barriers that collective teacher efficacy won't help us overcome; those barriers need to undergo systemic change before any confidence-building teacher collaboration can take effect. By only discussing the inputs to teacher efficacy, without looking at systemic pressures, we risk contributing to a culture of toxic positivity. This will inevitably lead to more teachers leaving the profession.

The fact is, we can't "do hard things" when we don't have cultures, pedagogies, and resources that can sustain us. Asserting the need for collective teacher efficacy without acknowledging the necessary conditions is synonymous with "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps." It unfairly puts the onus on individuals to overcome barriers through Herculean efforts.

Toxic positivity is the mindset that, no matter the circumstances, one should always see the positive. This way of thinking reinforces teacher martyrdom.

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Toward Sustainable Collective Efficacy

Despite my critique, I do believe that the findings on collective teacher efficacy will be helpful to schools, as long as leaders and teachers apply a critical lens. The following suggestions are good places to start. (Of course, each school leader should also get feedback from her or his teachers to understand what they need to feel supported moving forward.)

Share power. When examined with a critical eye, it becomes quickly apparent that collective efficacy is too often framed as something done *to* teachers, as opposed to something that's built in partnership *with* teachers. Instead of simply "including teachers" or "providing opportunities to participate" in decision making, commit to sharing power with teachers, make survey data transparent, and otherwise democratize decision-making.

Embrace doubt. Doubt shouldn't be immediately seen as negative. To build trust with teachers, meanwhile working toward sustainable collective teacher efficacy, school leaders and education thought leaders should honor the lived experiences of teachers by validating concerns and making space for teachers to share doubts. Instead of leadership simply being "responsive" to teachers, leaders must lead with compassion, listen with the intent of understanding, and hold the humanity of their teachers sacred.

Zoom out. Instead of a deficit-framing view that centers what's wrong with teachers' beliefs, consider that teachers' complaints or comments that something "won't work" may be realistic and based on years of lived experiences. School administrators must zoom out to the system level and first ask: What systemic constraints are wearing our teachers down? What procedures, policies, or pedagogies are we using or proposing that are unsustainable?

Liberating Teachers!

If we're going to commit to the findings of John Hattie and others on collective teacher efficacy's power (2016), let's also make sure to liberate teachers in the process. Let's remember that teaching has historically been a profession that's openly asked for sacrifice and not been given much respect—and that's certainly been true lately. Teachers may need some collective healing. This will mean creating spaces where educators can show up as their authentic selves: negative feelings, doubts, and all.

But most of all, let's work toward addressing the systemic barriers that have precipitated this conversation on collective efficacy, so that teachers work in places where, beyond just a sense of mastery, they can find wholeness, community, and a deepening of their humanity.