Self-Efficacy Holds Staying Power for New Teachers - ASCD

13-16 minutes

The challenges of first-year teaching are well documented. Particularly considering how the effects of the pandemic have compounded those challenges, school leaders will need to redouble their efforts to support novice teachers. A key area of support is the development of self-efficacy, or the belief in one's abilities to affect a successful outcome in any given situation. Albert Bandura (1977) connected self-efficacy to high levels of motivation, perseverance, optimism, and achievement, even in adverse circumstances.

Yet developing self-efficacy in novice teachers is often overlooked in acclimating and retaining new members of the profession. New teachers in many districts enjoy the benefits of being paired with skilled mentors and instructional coaches to whom they can turn for advice and support. But without regular and consistent support from their administrators, new teachers often fail to fully believe in their potential (Hong, 2010).

Administrators are crucial players in the development of a school culture that promotes teacher self-efficacy, which in turn influences collective efficacy (Dimpoulou, 2014). Laurent Daloz (1999) suggests that environments that combine a high level of challenge with a high level of support are the most conducive to growth. By contrast, environments that combine a high level of challenge with a low level of support result in less risk-taking, and low levels of challenge result in stagnant development of skills or leadership, regardless of support levels. The chart below illustrates Daloz's environmental descriptions and learning outcomes:

FIGURE 1. Levels of Support and Challenge in Mentoring and Adult Learning

	Low Support	High Support
High Challenge	Retreat	Growth
Low Challenge	Stasis	Confirmation

Source: Figure adapted from Daloz (1999).

For new teachers, "retreat" may take the form of conforming to expectations to avoid conflict, such as "giving in" to parents, veteran colleagues, and students to avoid complaints (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). "Stasis" may be evident in passivity; new teachers may continually defer to veteran educators in making decisions. "Confirmation" is the equivalent of staying in the comfort zone or upholding the status quo, where too much support creates little reason to venture into new territory. However, when teachers risk little, they gain little. Alternatively, "growth" can be a willingness to take risks and develop more self-efficacious behaviors. Administrators who can create cultures that combine high levels of challenge *and* support are more likely to foster higher levels of self-efficacy.

In our work at the university and secondary education levels, we have studied ways to mitigate the rates of attrition among novice teachers, and we were particularly interested to better understand how Daloz's theory of environments played out in school settings. During the 2018–2019 school year, we conducted interviews and collected written reflections over several months of secondary teachers' first or second years to see how administrative interactions support or detract from teachers' sense of self-efficacy. The teachers worked in five Midwest public schools, ranging from small and rural to large and urban.

We discovered that leaders' support for new teachers' efficacy comes in three specific areas:

1. Balancing autonomy (high challenge) and feedback (high support)

2. Balancing professionalism (high challenge) and self-care (high support)

3. Balancing risk (high challenge) and advocacy (high support)

Balancing Autonomy and Feedback

The novice teachers we interviewed believed they would be "under a microscope" during their first years of teaching. They were trained in teacher-preparation programs to expect that they would turn in detailed lesson plans each week, that they would be closely observed by administrators, and that they would receive frequent and detailed feedback about their performance.

However, most of the teachers stated that they had little to no idea how their administrators perceived their instructional performance. In some cases, they didn't have significant interactions with their administrators until halfway through their first semester. This lack of attention caused a range of emotions, from cautious acceptance to confusion to self-doubt. One teacher highlighted the tension between enjoying autonomy and wondering whether his practice was effective. Another told us, "I'm comfortable in what I know, but I'm not quite yet comfortable in making sure that I'm passing on that knowledge adequately."

The problem is that without clear and actionable feedback from administrators, novice teachers often rely on student affirmation to gauge their effectiveness. Students should, of course, enjoy their classes, but their enjoyment does not clearly indicate a teacher's instructional effectiveness, nor that teacher's areas for growth.

In situations where novice teachers received little feedback, the levels of challenge in the schools varied from low to high, but administrative support ranked very low. The novice teachers either retreated from becoming more self-efficacious or experienced stasis in the way they perceived their teaching skills.

Changing the Narrative

Donohoo, Hattie, and Eells (2018) suggest that administrators can positively affect school culture by changing existing narratives. For example, one narrative might be that new teachers need not interact with administrators until their required observation cycle. Though a hands-off approach may provide an initial sense of autonomy, it ultimately results in a lack of self-efficacy.

Administrators can demonstrate support by prioritizing time to check in with new teachers. One new teacher we interviewed had an administrator stop in to say hello every day before school started. "Even though it's just a small gesture, it goes a long way," the teacher shared. Although the interaction was not during instructional time, the principal was able to observe the teacher informally interacting with students and reinforce the effectiveness of building student-teacher relationships.

The principal also inquired about how various physical components of the teacher's classroom, such as seating arrangements and bulletin boards, aided in student learning. Later, when the teacher had classroom management issues, the principal was able to suggest tailored strategies, such as prioritized seating and teacher proximity, because he was familiar with the teacher's strengths and teaching style. As the new teacher implemented the suggestions, she made direct connections between her actions and improvements in students' behavior, thereby building her sense of self-efficacy as an effective classroom manager.

Feedback can also take the form of modeling. When administrators model effective strategies, novice teachers can replicate those behaviors until they become habitual. The new teacher in this case noticed that her principal was visible in the building and proactive in setting up communication structures with parents through social media to reinforce positive behavior expectations at home and school. Following the principal's open communication style, the teacher sent weekly emails to parents that highlighted students' behavioral and

academic performance in connection with the syllabus and class expectations. The principal's balance of frequent observation and autonomy reinforced high levels of challenge and support, which in turn allowed the teacher to grow and reflect on the changes that made growth happen.

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Balancing Professionalism and Self-Care

Novice teachers are often entering the career world for the first time and encounter difficulties in setting boundaries between their professional and personal settings. They are eager to demonstrate their professionalism, and working beyond their contract hours may seem like an obvious show of dedication. But they need clear guidance from their administrators to navigate time management.

The novice teachers in our study described not only high levels of fatigue and exhaustion, but also feelings of being overwhelmed and burnt out. They worked on weekends, stayed up late to complete paperwork, and put healthy practices, such as exercising and cooking nutritious meals, on the back burner. They described losing patience with students, allowing more "free" days (foregoing academic work), and not taking opportunities to connect with students in nonacademic ways during passing periods and lunch. They disconnected from family and friends in favor of playing video games or flipping channels. Over time, these practices not only had detrimental effects on teachers' feelings of self-efficacy, but also caused them to question whether they should continue an education career.

Changing the Narrative

It is not enough for leaders to preach self-care or assume that teachers understand how to achieve a work/life balance; novice teachers need to know what that means and how to practice it. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) suggested that administrators should develop an awareness of subtle cues that either encourage or undermine a school culture that values personal care. Administrators can begin by examining their own practices and whether they are openly modeling self-care. They also can talk with new teachers to gain an understanding of what teachers' perceptions are regarding work requirements and expectations.

For example, new teachers often wonder how to set boundaries with students and families while maintaining a level of professional support. How can they determine if and when to answer emails outside of work hours?

When new teachers know their administrators' expectations for work requirements and simultaneously feel support for respecting those boundaries, they are more likely to proactively achieve a balance that benefits their mental and physical health.

One teacher's administrator persuaded the district to pay a month's subscription for a health and wellness expert who shared tips about nutrition, efficient meal prepping, and the benefits of exercise. The teacher was able to save time, gain energy, and renew her sense of self-efficacy in creating a work-life balance that matched her values.

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Balancing Risk and Advocacy

The novice teachers we interviewed all reported preexisting expectations from their predecessors or from department colleagues. As one teacher said, "I could take a week off if I had a dollar for every time someone said, 'That's not the way [your predecessor] did it.'" In another school, department members handed the new teacher materials and curriculum from the previous teacher with the suggestion that nothing should change. Still other novice teachers felt that because the veteran teachers had already established certain practices and procedures, they had very little choice other than to comply, even when the practices conflicted with their values. One teacher said that although he did not agree with the way grades were weighted, "I've gone with that because that's how the department does it."

Certainly, when new teachers are acclimating to a new position and district, veteran teachers may want to share materials and current processes so that new teachers won't have to create everything on their own. However, overdictating new teachers' work can be a blow to their self-efficacy. The subtle message is that new teachers will likely fail if they do not replicate existing structures.

Changing the Narrative

To help new teachers blend existing policies with their own unique teaching styles, materials, and strategies, administrators need to assure teachers that they encourage thoughtful risk taking and will support them if the risk doesn't turn out the way they had hoped. One of the teachers we interviewed often reflected on her lessons to understand where things had gone wrong, but it was the words from her administrator that finally led her to

change her approach. He told her: "We want you to take risks, even if you fail. Some things work; some things don't, but as long as everything revolves around student learning, try it."

With that reassurance, she re-examined the prior teacher's curricular units to determine which she would continue to use and which she would rebuild to address current students' needs. She sought out an instructional coach to help implement a blended learning approach and saw students' confidence grow as they received more individual feedback from her. She still used the common resources other subject teachers used, but she was more confident in blending those resources with her own.

A More Cohesive School Culture

Schools and educators will feel the effects of the pandemic for some time to come. Fostering self-efficacy is one way to bolster new teachers' ability to navigate future changes successfully. Through balancing challenge and support, school leaders can mentor novice teachers toward developing self-efficacy. Checking in daily with new teachers, modeling behaviors, setting clear guidelines and expectations, and supporting risk taking all encourage a more cohesive school culture where teachers believe in themselves.