THE IMPACT OF SELF-EFFICACY ON STUDENT MOTIVATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: *Self-efficacy, defined as individuals' beliefs in their capabilities to organize and perform actions required to attain particular outcomes, is an important construct in educational psychology. This paper examines the influence of academic self-efficacy on student motivation and academic performance through a narrative review of foundational and subsequent literature. Drawing primarily on Bandura's social cognitive theory and Schunk's account of academic motivation, the paper discusses the reciprocal relationships among efficacy beliefs, effort, persistence, self-regulation, and achievement. It also reviews four major sources of self-efficacy mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological or emotional states and considers how these sources operate in educational contexts. The reviewed evidence indicates that academic self-efficacy is generally associated with stronger motivation, greater persistence, more effective learning strategies, and better academic performance; however, these relationships vary according to task specificity, prior achievement, contextual conditions, and the accuracy of students' efficacy judgments. Practical implications include appropriately challenging tasks, attainable proximal goals, credible models, strategy-focused feedback, and opportunities for reflection and self-regulation. The paper concludes that self-efficacy should be supported through instruction and learning conditions that build genuine competence rather than through encouragement alone.*

Keywords: *self-efficacy; academic motivation; academic performance; self-regulated learning; educational practice*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding why students initiate learning activities, sustain effort, and persist when they encounter difficulty is a central concern in education. Academic outcomes are influenced by prior knowledge, instructional quality, social conditions, and access to learning resources, but students' beliefs about their own capabilities also shape how they approach learning. Among these beliefs, self-efficacy has received extensive attention because it connects students' judgments of capability with motivation, self-regulation, and performance.

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs about their capabilities to organize and execute the actions required to attain designated levels of performance (Bandura, 1997). It is not a general feeling of confidence or self-worth; rather, it is typically specific to a task or domain. A student may feel efficacious in reading comprehension but uncertain about mathematical problem-solving, or confident when completing routine exercises but less certain when asked to apply knowledge in an unfamiliar situation. This specificity is important when examining relationships between self-efficacy and educational outcomes.

Students with stronger efficacy beliefs are generally more willing to select challenging tasks, invest effort, apply learning strategies, and persist after setbacks. Students with weak efficacy beliefs may avoid difficult work, interpret errors as evidence of limited ability, or withdraw effort prematurely. These patterns suggest that self-efficacy can influence motivation and performance; however, successful performance can also strengthen subsequent efficacy beliefs. The relationship is therefore dynamic and potentially reciprocal rather than a simple one-way causal process.

This paper examines the influence of self-efficacy on student motivation and academic performance through a narrative review. Bandura's (1997) theoretical account and Schunk's (1991) analysis of academic motivation provide the conceptual foundation, while later reviews and meta-analytic research are used to evaluate and extend their claims. The paper addresses the nature and sources of self-efficacy, its relationships with motivation and achievement, practical implications for educators, and limitations that should guide implementation and further research.

II. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF SELF-EFFICACY

2.1. Self-Efficacy in Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's (1997) account positions self-efficacy within social cognitive theory, in which personal beliefs, behavior, and environmental conditions interact reciprocally. Efficacy beliefs affect the goals people set, the effort they expend, their persistence, and their emotional responses to demanding situations. At the same time, the outcomes of previous actions provide information from which later efficacy judgments are formed.

Self-efficacy is consequently both an influence on behavior and a product of experience.

This framework explains why students of similar ability may respond differently to the same academic task. A student who believes that effective action is possible may approach the task strategically, seek assistance, and persist long enough to improve. Another student with comparable knowledge but lower self-efficacy may avoid the task or disengage at an early stage. Nevertheless, self-efficacy cannot compensate indefinitely for missing knowledge or ineffective strategies. Belief is most productive when it is accompanied by the skills and learning opportunities needed to perform the task.

Bandura's work is especially valuable because it treats self-efficacy as malleable rather than fixed. Educational experiences can strengthen or weaken students' beliefs about what they can accomplish. This offers a practical basis for intervention, but it also requires care: the educational objective is not simply to make students feel confident. It is to support accurate, resilient beliefs grounded in developing competence and meaningful evidence of progress.

2.2. Self-Efficacy and Related Constructs

Schunk (1991) distinguishes self-efficacy from constructs such as self-concept, perceived control, outcome expectations, and the perceived value of outcomes. Self-concept generally refers to a broader judgment about the self within a domain, whereas self-efficacy concerns perceived capability for particular actions or tasks. Outcome expectations concern the likely consequences of an action, while self-efficacy concerns whether the individual believes that the action can be performed successfully.

These distinctions have practical consequences for assessment. A student may value academic success and believe that studying usually produces good grades, yet still doubt their ability to use an effective study method. Conversely, a learner may believe that they can complete a task but consider the outcome unimportant. Motivation is therefore unlikely to be explained by self-efficacy alone; value, goals, emotions, prior attainment, and contextual support also contribute to students' choices and effort.

2.3. Sources of Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1997) identifies four major sources of efficacy information: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological or emotional states. Mastery experiences are generally the most influential because successful performance provides direct evidence of capability. Repeated failure may weaken efficacy, particularly when students have not yet developed a stable sense of competence. The interpretation of success and failure is therefore as important as the event itself.

Vicarious experiences arise when students observe others perform a task. Models are especially informative when learners perceive them as similar in relevant respects. Observing a peer succeed through effort and appropriate strategy can make a difficult task appear attainable. However, comparison can also undermine self-efficacy when students interpret another person's success as proof of their own inadequacy. Teachers should consequently use models to make strategies and learning processes visible, rather than merely displaying polished outcomes.

Social persuasion includes feedback, encouragement, and messages from teachers, peers, and families. Credible, specific feedback may strengthen students' willingness to attempt a task, particularly when it identifies effective strategies and realistic next steps. General praise that is not supported by evidence is less likely to produce durable efficacy beliefs. Physiological and emotional states, including anxiety, fatigue, tension, or enthusiasm, also inform students' judgments. Students may interpret anxiety as evidence of inability, although the same activation can be reframed as a normal response to challenge. Usher and Pajares (2008) emphasize that the four sources interact and that their influence varies across contexts and individuals.

III. SELF-EFFICACY AND STUDENT MOTIVATION

3.1. Goal Setting, Choice, and Effort

Self-efficacy influences which activities students select and the goals they are prepared to pursue. Students are more likely to approach tasks they believe they can manage and avoid those they perceive as exceeding their capabilities. Appropriate efficacy beliefs can encourage students to establish challenging but attainable goals, whereas very low efficacy may result in avoidance and minimal effort. Goals can in turn provide standards against which learners judge progress, creating new information for later efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 1991).

Proximal goals can be particularly useful

because they divide a complex task into visible stages. When learners observe progress toward a near-term goal, they gain evidence that their actions are effective. Long-term goals remain valuable, but without intermediate indicators they may appear remote and provide little guidance for immediate learning behavior. Teachers can support efficacy by helping students translate broad intentions into specific actions and reviewable milestones.

3.2. Persistence and Responses to Difficulty

Efficacy beliefs influence how students interpret difficulty. Learners with stronger self-efficacy are more likely to treat obstacles as problems requiring additional effort, a different strategy, or assistance. Those with weaker efficacy may interpret the same obstacle as confirmation that success is beyond their capacity. This difference affects persistence, emotional response, and the willingness to return to a task after failure.

Persistence should not, however, be confused with repeating an ineffective behavior indefinitely. Productive persistence requires monitoring, feedback, and strategic adaptation. Educators can support it by normalizing revision, explaining that errors provide information, and teaching students how to change approach when progress stalls. In this sense, self-efficacy supports motivation most effectively when it operates together with strategic knowledge and self-regulatory skill.

3.3. Self-Regulated Learning

Schunk's (1991) analysis connects self-efficacy with academic self-regulation. Students who believe they can influence performance are more likely to plan, monitor understanding, seek feedback, and evaluate progress. Successful use of these processes can improve performance and subsequently reinforce self-efficacy. Low self-efficacy may interrupt the cycle by discouraging students from investing the effort required to test or refine a learning strategy.

The relationship is not uniform across all learners and tasks. Students may overestimate their capability and therefore prepare inadequately, while highly capable students may underestimate themselves and avoid suitable challenges. Effective self-regulation requires not only positive beliefs but also calibration—reasonable correspondence between perceived capability and actual performance. Feedback should help learners compare expectations with evidence without reducing a temporary difficulty to a fixed judgment about ability.

IV. SELF-EFFICACY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

4.1. Evidence of Association

Bandura (1997) and Schunk (1991) describe several pathways through which self-efficacy may influence academic performance, including task choice, effort, persistence, goal setting, and strategy use. Later evidence generally supports a positive relationship. Richardson et al. (2012), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of psychological correlates of university achievement, identified academic self-efficacy as an important correlate of grade performance. Honicke and Broadbent's (2016) systematic review likewise concluded that academic self-efficacy is associated with university students' academic performance, while also highlighting mediating and moderating variables.

These findings do not mean that self-efficacy directly produces high grades in every situation. Measures that closely correspond to the academic task tend to be more informative than broad measures of confidence. Prior achievement, cognitive ability, study behavior, course design, assessment practices, and access to support may all affect both efficacy judgments and performance. Claims about impact should therefore preserve the distinction between association, prediction, and causation.

4.2. Reciprocal Relations Between Belief and Performance

The relationship between self-efficacy and achievement is reciprocal. Strong efficacy beliefs may support the behaviors that contribute to success, while successful performance provides mastery information that strengthens later efficacy. Talsma et al. (2018) examined longitudinal evidence through a meta-analytic cross-lagged analysis and found support for reciprocal effects between self-efficacy and academic performance. The relationship is therefore better represented as a developing feedback process than as a fixed personal characteristic causing achievement in isolation.

This reciprocal perspective also explains why early learning experiences can have continuing effects. A sequence of manageable successes may build confidence, increase participation, and create further opportunities for success. Conversely, repeated failure without adequate explanation or support may weaken self-efficacy and reduce engagement. Timely instructional assistance can

interrupt this negative cycle by helping students experience progress attributable to understandable strategies and sustained effort.

4.3. Context, Diversity, and Calibration

The meaning and development of self-efficacy may vary with cultural expectations, socioeconomic conditions, gendered experiences, disability, subject domain, and access to educational resources. Earlier foundational work offers a broadly applicable framework, but it gives limited attention to how unequal opportunities shape the mastery experiences and feedback available to different learners. Low self-efficacy should therefore not automatically be interpreted as an individual deficit; it may reflect a history of exclusion, poorly matched instruction, stereotype-related experiences, or limited access to support.

Interventions must also consider calibration. Inflated self-efficacy unsupported by knowledge may produce insufficient preparation, whereas underestimation may lead capable students to avoid opportunities. The educational aim is well-founded confidence: students should believe improvement is possible while remaining able to identify gaps, use feedback, and select appropriate strategies. This balance requires repeated opportunities to compare judgments with authentic performance evidence.

V. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

5.1. Designing Mastery Experiences

Educators can strengthen self-efficacy by designing tasks that provide genuine opportunities for mastery. Appropriate scaffolding, worked examples, guided practice, and a gradual increase in difficulty allow students to develop competence without removing meaningful challenge. Tasks that are consistently too easy provide little evidence of growth, while tasks far beyond students' current knowledge may generate failure without useful learning. The level of challenge should therefore be adjusted as learners become more capable.

Success should be connected to controllable processes. After completing a task, students can be encouraged to identify which strategies, decisions, and forms of effort contributed to the outcome. Reflection helps convert performance into efficacy information. When a task is unsuccessful, teachers can help students distinguish between a correctable strategy problem, insufficient preparation, misunderstanding of the task, and a need for additional support.

5.2. Feedback, Goals, and Models

Feedback is most useful when it is specific, credible, and directed toward actions that students can take. Comments such as 'Your organization makes the argument easier to follow; the next step is to support the second claim with evidence' offer clearer efficacy information than general praise. Feedback that attributes success only to fixed ability may discourage persistence when later tasks become difficult. Strategy-focused feedback instead shows students how performance can be influenced.

Goal setting should combine attainable proximal targets with meaningful longer-term purposes. Teachers can invite students to monitor progress, revise plans, and record evidence of improvement. Peer and teacher modelling can also support self-efficacy when models demonstrate not only successful performance but also planning, error correction, help-seeking, and revision. Models should be selected carefully so that students can recognize a plausible pathway from their current position to improved performance.

5.3. Supporting Emotion and Self-Regulation

Academic anxiety and other emotional states can affect both efficacy judgments and performance. Teachers can reduce unnecessary threat by clarifying expectations, providing practice with task formats, and presenting feedback in ways that preserve dignity. Students may also benefit from strategies for planning, monitoring attention, managing time, and responding to setbacks. These practices help learners experience control through action rather than relying on reassurance alone.

Classroom language should avoid presenting ability as permanently fixed, but educators should also avoid suggesting that effort alone guarantees success. Students require effective strategies, appropriate instruction, adequate resources, and timely support. A balanced message acknowledges present difficulty while identifying realistic means of improvement.

5.4. Challenges and Limitations of Implementation

Students enter classrooms with different histories of success, failure, support, and opportunity. A single efficacy-building activity is therefore unlikely to affect all learners in the same way. Teachers need sufficient knowledge of the construct to avoid confusing self-efficacy with self-esteem or indiscriminate confidence. Professional development should address task-specific assessment, feedback practices, cultural

responsiveness, and the design of mastery experiences.

Time and curriculum demands may constrain implementation, although many efficacy-supportive practices can be embedded within ordinary instruction. Goal setting, modelling, formative feedback, and reflection need not form a separate programme. The greater challenge is consistency: isolated encouragement is unlikely to produce lasting change if assessment, classroom interaction, and learning resources repeatedly communicate that improvement is unattainable.

Long-term effects also require cautious evaluation. Immediate increases in reported confidence may not persist or translate into achievement. Evaluation should therefore examine changes in efficacy, strategy use, persistence, and performance over time. It should also consider whether an intervention benefits different groups equitably and whether students' efficacy judgments become more accurate as well as more positive.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the influence of self-efficacy on student motivation and academic performance through foundational theory and subsequent review evidence. Bandura's social cognitive framework explains how efficacy beliefs shape goals, effort, persistence, emotional responses, and behavior, while Schunk's work clarifies their relevance to academic motivation and self-regulated learning. Later reviews and meta-analytic findings generally support a positive relationship between academic self-efficacy and achievement, while also demonstrating that the relationship is reciprocal and context-dependent.

Self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences, observation of others, social messages, and interpretations of physiological or emotional states. Among these sources, successful performance is especially important because it provides direct evidence of capability. Educational practice should consequently focus on creating appropriately challenging learning experiences, making effective strategies visible, providing credible feedback, and helping students interpret both success and difficulty constructively.

Self-efficacy should not be treated as a universal explanation for academic outcomes or as a substitute for knowledge, instruction, and resources. Confidence that is disconnected from competence may be unhelpful, while low efficacy may reflect unequal opportunities rather than a personal deficiency. Effective support aims to develop accurate and resilient efficacy beliefs together with genuine skill. Further research should examine the long-term effects of interventions, the role of cultural and institutional contexts, and the conditions under which changes in efficacy translate into sustained motivation and academic performance.

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