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## Empowering Students Through the Application of Self-Efficacy Theory in School Social Work: An Intervention Model

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## Empowering Students Through the Application of Self-Efficacy Theory in School Social Work: An Intervention Model

### Abstract

Self-efficacy is a construct well suited for social workers in the educational setting. Among the various job functions that school social workers assume, a large portion of their time is directed toward providing counseling and clinical services. Perceptions of self-efficacy are based upon the extent students expect to successfully attain their goals. Self-efficacious students with strong beliefs in their abilities will choose activities and social situations where they believe that they will be successful. Thus, they will be motivated to devote more time and effort toward accomplishing related goals. Conversely, inefficacious students of similar intelligence and capabilities may choose to abandon a challenging activity or social situation when they believe they will not be successful. The purpose of this paper is to describe a psycho-educational intervention model that school social workers can use to increase students' self-efficacy. This article will first provide an overview of the theoretical foundations of Bandura's self-efficacy theory. Included will be the four sources of influences used in formulating a person's self-efficacy beliefs. Second, a self-efficacy intervention model will be introduced in which school social workers can counsel students to increase their self-efficacy. This intervention plan incorporates the four sources of Bandura's self-efficacy training – enactive mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiologic and affective states. Third, a case example will be presented that illustrates the application of this intervention model with 12 deaf and hard of hearing high school students who experienced bullying in one California school district.

### Keywords

school social work, counseling, deaf and hard of hearing students, mastery experience, self-efficacy

## **Empowering Students through Application of Self-Efficacy Theory in School Social Work: An Intervention Model**

School social workers provide services to enhance students' emotional well-being and improve their academic performance. Among the various job functions performed, school social workers direct the largest portion of their time in providing counseling and clinical services (Agesta, 2006). Clinical services are characterized as any type of direct intervention provided to individuals, families and groups including crisis management, case management, assessment, and individual and group therapy (Simpson, Williams, & Segall, 2007). Following assessment, school social workers support students in maximizing their accomplishments by employing evidence-based interventions. These interventions have their basis in cognitive-behavioral, structural and strategic therapies that utilize strength-based and empowerment perspectives; problem solving skills and communication training; and behavioral therapy skills such as goal setting, role-playing and feedback, contingency contracting and targeting specific behaviors for change (Allen-Meares, 2015).

Self-efficacy has emerged as a versatile construct in numerous social work education and practice settings (Holden, Barker, Kuppens, & Rosenberg, 2015). Although research on the application of the self-efficacy theory in school social work is limited, Holden and colleagues noted that self-efficacy has appealed to researchers studying various social work topics for over 20 years. There are two reasons why knowledge about self-efficacy may be important for the school social worker. First, self-efficacy has been shown to be a mediating factor in learning and achievement situations, particularly in academic domains (Luszczynska, Gutiérrez-Doña, & Schwarzer, 2005; Usher & Pajares, 2006). Students with high self-efficacy beliefs embrace more challenging goals (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez, 1992), undertake and persevere through difficult tasks (Pajares, 2006; Zimmerman, 2000), monitor their time more efficiently (Zimmerman, 2000) and are better able to solve conceptual problems (Bandura, 1997, Zimmerman, 2000) compared to inefficacious students of similar intelligence and capabilities. Second, teacher efficacy has been demonstrated to be another important factor in student learning (Alderman, 2008; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). It has also been shown that school social workers with professional licensure had higher levels of perceived efficacy when completing practice tasks (Teasley & Miller, 2011). Similarities exist between teachers and school social workers in that both professions work in the same educational system with the shared goal of helping students. Thus, knowledge about how students acquire self-efficacy for learning is critical for adjusting interventions and teaching methods to maximize students' efficacy expectancy (Alderman, 2008).

The purpose of this conceptual article is to illustrate how self-efficacy concepts can be integrated by the school social worker into direct service interventions with their students. First, an overview of the theoretical foundations of Bandura's self-efficacy theory including the four sources of influences used in

formulating a person's self-efficacy beliefs will be presented. Next, specific strategies illustrating how school social workers can apply the tenets of self-efficacy with their students will be described. Finally, the application of the self-efficacy principles will be demonstrated through a case study of 12 deaf and hard of hearing high school students regarding the subject of bullying in one California school district.

### **Structure and Definition of Self-Efficacy**

The construct of self-efficacy is based within the theoretical framework of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Bandura emphasized that individuals possess self-beliefs that enable them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings and actions. "What people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave" (Bandura, 1986, p. 25). Effective functioning requires both skills and efficacy beliefs to accomplish a task appropriately (Bandura, 1982, 1986). Bandura (1997) stated that it is not enough for an individual to have the knowledge and skills to perform a task, one must also possess the conviction to successfully perform the skill under challenging conditions. Bandura further emphasized that these two components act upon one another in a reciprocal fashion. He referred to this concept as reciprocal causation, in which the functioning of one component is dependent, to some degree, upon the functioning of the other.

Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs concerning one's capabilities to successfully attain personal goals through effort and determination (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Such beliefs should not be confused with general overall confidence, which refers to an individual's abilities over a wide range of situations (Bandura, 1986, 1997). According to Bandura, perceived self-efficacy is not concerned with the skills that one possesses, but rather with the judgments of what one can do with those skills. He states that, "people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true" (Bandura, 1997, p. 2). There are two important components of Bandura's definition of self-efficacy. First, self-efficacy is a belief about an individual's own perceived capability; it does not necessarily correspond to the individual's actual ability in a specific domain. Bandura emphasized that the most useful efficacy judgments in estimating one's capabilities are those that slightly exceed one's actual capabilities. This modest overestimation can increase a person's effort and persistence during challenging encounters. Second, efficacy judgments are made in reference to a specific goal, which reflects both the task- and situation-specific nature of efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986).

Self-efficacy is a major factor in influencing behavioral change, especially when complex skills need to be learned. Self-efficacy beliefs are situational or domain specific. Individuals can have high confidence in their abilities to accomplish a specific behavior in one domain, while at the same time, experience low confidence in their abilities to accomplish a different behavior in another domain (Smith, 2014). For example, a student may be confident in the ability to

use a computer to complete a homework assignment (i.e., computer self-efficacy), yet lack confidence in the ability to present in front of the class (i.e., public speaking self-efficacy).

### Sources of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy beliefs are constructed from four primary sources of information or experiences. Bandura (1977) described these four types of experiences as *enactive mastery experience* in which one successfully practices a skill or behavior, *vicarious experience* in which one observes respected role models, *verbal persuasion* in which one receives encouragement and support from valued others, and *physiologic and affective states* in which one learns to keep emotions and physiological arousal at a self-supporting level. Information relevant for judging personal capabilities becomes useful only through cognitive processing of efficacy information and reflective thought (Bandura, 1997). Any given influence may operate through one or more of these four sources of efficacy.

The first and most influential of the four types of experience in which self-efficacy is derived is enactive mastery experience (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Enactive mastery is defined as the “experience of overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort” (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). Individuals engage in activities, interpret the results of their behavior and use their interpretations to develop beliefs about their capability to engage in subsequent activities (Pajares, 2006). Mastery experience is subjective in that if a student interprets the outcome of their actions to be successful, their self-efficacy is increased and they tend to remain resilient and persevere in the face of difficulty. Once established, enhanced self-efficacy tends to generalize to new situations. In contrast, self-efficacy is likely to decrease when a student believes they did poorly on a task. Failures undermine self-efficacy, especially if they occur before a sense of mastery has been firmly established (Pajares, 2006).

The second source affecting self-efficacy beliefs is vicarious experience. As the second most potent influence (Bandura, 1977, 1997), vicarious experience is defined as learning “mediated through modeled attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). Bandura proposes that direct observation of others succeeding can bolster an individual’s belief that they too can succeed. When an observer sees a role model perform successfully, the observer’s self-efficacy is increased (Bandura, 1982). For example, if a student watches two other classmates effectively resolve a difficult situation, the student might end up thinking, “I can do that too!” If the model successfully performs the skills needed to achieve a behavior, the student will then be likely to judge their self-efficacy beliefs about their abilities as high.

The third and most common source affecting self-efficacy beliefs is verbal persuasion. Verbal persuasion is defined as feedback from others about one’s capabilities and probability of success (Maddux & Gosselin, 2003) and widely used due its ease and ready availability in attempts to influence human behavior

(Bandura, 1977). For example, if a student is persuaded verbally that they possess the capabilities to master a specific task, the student will be more likely to exert greater effort. Positive verbal persuasions tend to increase the self-efficacy beliefs of the individual; whereas, negative verbal persuasions can undermine self-efficacy judgments through criticism or if told by others that they do not possess the skills for success (Bandura, 1997). It is easier to weaken self-efficacy beliefs through criticism than to strengthen such beliefs through encouragement (Bandura, 1986).

The fourth source of information regarding self-efficacy judgments, physiological and affective states, informs individuals about how they feel physically and emotionally when they contemplate an action (Bandura, 1997). Known also as emotional arousal, one of the main ways individuals evaluate their ability to engage in demanding activities is by attending to their physiological and affective states (e.g., anxiety, excitement, stress, fatigue). Self-efficacy is boosted in a positive emotional state and lowered in a negative emotional state (Bandura, 1997). How people interpret the emotional arousal will vary depending on their perceptions of the situation. Thus, “the problem is not arousal per se but one’s interpretation of it” (Bandura, 1997, p. 109). For example, if a student is stressed or frustrated, has sweaty palms or increased heart rate when performing a skill, they will likely interpret those states and judge their self-efficacy as low. Conversely, a student with high self-efficacy for their abilities will likely have positive interpretations of their physiologic and affective states when performing behaviors.

### **Self-Efficacy Strategies in School Social Work**

The self-efficacy component of the social cognitive theory provides explicit strategies on how to enable people to exercise greater influence over how they lead their lives (Bandura, 1986). A case example illustrates the application of self-efficacy strategies around the topic of bullying with a group of deaf and hard of hearing high school students in one California school district. Consistent with the school district’s policy on bullying, the teachers informed the school social worker that the students were at-risk for bullying based on several reported incidents. Identified bullies included students from the deaf and hard of hearing program and hearing students from the high school. The school social worker conducted a needs assessment that revealed the students’ need for effective skills to deal with bullying. As an integral component of a school-wide systematic approach to bullying and in collaboration with the teachers, the school social worker developed a group intervention plan to implement the following objectives: (a) increase the students’ oral, written, and manual (i.e., signed) vocabulary regarding the topic of bullying; (b) increase the students’ communication skills around the issue of bullying; (c) increase the students’ ability to protect themselves through assertiveness training; and (d) increase the students’ awareness of the socio-emotional impact of bullying. Twelve deaf and hard of hearing students from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds ranging in age between 15 and 18 years old participated in the intervention program. Sign language and spoken English were the two communication methods used in the group sessions. Specific strategies of how

school social workers can apply the principles of self-efficacy with their students are provided below.

### **Enactive Mastery Experience**

**Support students in establishing attainable goals for their progress.** A sense of mastery begins by having the students set clear, specific and realistic goals to serve as motivation and guide them in developing mastery of a new skill. In the case example, the school social worker supported the students in creating goals around the topic of bullying. Incentive to understand and develop skills to successfully deal with bullying stemmed from the students' desire to learn how to protect and defend themselves. Bandura (1997) emphasized, "simply adopting a goal without knowing how one is doing, or knowing how one is doing in the absence of a goal, has no lasting motivational effect" (p. 128). Thus, the most persuasive way for enhancing self-efficacy is to help clients in practicing specific behaviors required to achieve their goals (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, & Strom-Gottfried, 2017).

**Structure skill training by dividing new skill into distinct subsets.** Mastery of a new skill requires the mastery of a subset of skills. The school social worker structures the skill training by initially dividing the new skill into smaller identifiable steps with a focus on introducing and practicing the easier skills first. Students can then advance to more difficult skills as the easier skills are mastered. In the case example, addressing vocabulary gaps was the first objective before teaching the deaf and hard of hearing students how to address bullying. The social worker introduced new words with its concepts associated with bullying in written, pictorial and manual forms. Various types of bullying were identified and discussed. Frequent use of new vocabulary words coupled with visual demonstrations assisted in increasing the students' communication skills around the topic of bullying.

**Introduce and model new skill and provide practice opportunities.** The school social worker introduces and models the new skill so students can visualize the skill, ask questions and engage in discussion. Schulze and Schulze (2003) defined modeling as the process of describing and demonstrating a new skill for a learner to master. Modeling is effective for increasing self-efficacy as it provides the learner with explicit information about how to acquire a skill while raising their expectation of skill mastery (Schunk, 1989, 1991). With the mastery model, the social worker would correctly model a specific skill and then provide numerous opportunities for students to perform the skill through direct and extensive practice (Alderman, 2008). The coping model differs from the mastery model in that the social worker models the skill to be learned, intentionally displaying some difficulty at first (Alderman, 2008). In the case example, assertiveness training was introduced to increase the students' self-protective abilities utilizing both mastery and coping models. Skills were divided into subsets such as establishing direct eye contact, standing with an erect body stance and clearly ordering the bully to stop

through words, gestures and body posture. Frequent practice opportunities were provided for the students to develop both communication and assertiveness skills.

**Introduce and utilize role-playing to help practice new skill.** Role-playing is the most prevalent form of behavioral rehearsal to encourage a student to master a skill (Hepworth et al., 2017). When the skill has been introduced and modeled, the school social worker provides repetition using various role-playing vignettes. Students practice the skill repeatedly in a variety of scenarios to enhance their confidence for using newly learned skills in different contexts. Meanwhile, the school social worker can be attentive to students' learning curve to support their experience in overcoming challenges through sustained effort. This approach encourages students to expand their application of a specific skill during increasingly complex situations while simultaneously assessing their own development. In this case example, specific bullying incidents as experienced by the students and vignettes of common bullying situations were role-played. The school social worker play-acted the bully and each student practiced their communication and assertiveness skills in standing up to the bully.

**Subjective assessment of learned skill and appraisal of past performances.** The school social worker can solicit information from students to understand how they evaluate their own performance rather than assuming that students view themselves as capable when mastering a new skill. Pajares (2006) emphasized that self-reflection should be proactive rather than reactive. In this case example, conversations among the students revealed that they compared themselves with their peers instead of evaluating their own performances during the role-play activities. The students' negative self-talk was addressed with the aim of assisting them in cognitively reframing their difficulties with bullies. The school social worker further encouraged them to reflect on their progress and adjust their learned strategies based on their own level of performance and experience.

### **Vicarious Experience**

**Provide peer models to learn from one and another.** In the case example, viewing peers role-play various bullying scenarios provided visual examples from which the students could learn. Peer-learning models assisted in expanding the language skills of their classmates while connecting the actions of role-playing to the intervention strategies. Occasionally, teachers may have difficulty relating to the learners' point of view and explaining concepts that the students can understand. Small group projects in which students help guide each other through a complex task is therefore a suitable strategy to enhance the students' sense of self-efficacy (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). Peers are often more able to assess what sort of explanation another student would best understand (Schunk, 1989).

**Opportunities to learn from trusted adult role models.** When teaching a new skill, school social workers can use role models who share attributes similar to those of the students. Role models become more influential when individuals



can self-identify with the role model's characteristics such as gender, age and ethnicity (Bandura, 1997). Role models can share their challenges and efforts to persevere in the face of difficulty, situations when they experienced failure or doubt, mistakes they have made and lessons learned along the way. In the case example, the school social worker's childhood stories as a person living with a hearing loss served to foster students' self-identification with the social worker as a professional role model. Anecdotes of the school social worker's efforts to persevere and seek support in the face of bullies provided the students with a realistic model of confidence and competence. Slightly advanced and experienced students also provided positive examples, especially for those peers struggling to see themselves as capable when using the school social worker as a mastery model.

**Provide opportunities for vicarious learning utilizing technology.**

Technology can be effectively employed by the school social worker to facilitate vicarious learning opportunities. One use of technology is instructional films in which students can watch the performance of a new skill being executed. Preferably, they would feature performers considered as peers for the students. In the case example, instructional films on bullying were first reviewed by the school social worker for captioning and language level before the students watched the performance of a new skill being executed. Another benefit of utilizing technology for vicarious learning is through videoing. Watching their videoed performances as self-modeling information served as a powerful learning tool to reinforce or alter the students' performance for the skill learned. By observing their own performances, the students could identify what was being done correctly or incorrectly.

**Create opportunities for cognitive rehearsal.** Cognitive rehearsal is a strategy that can be employed by the school social worker to teach the students to mentally rehearse ways of developing and practicing a skill. Designed to promote confidence and critical thinking, Smith (2014) described cognitive rehearsal as the mental visualization of one's self-execution of a skill or behavior to increase self-efficacy through vicarious experience. In this case example, the students were first asked to visualize a bullying situation that they have personally encountered or witnessed. The school social worker then led a discussion on strategies the students could use in dealing with bullying. Next, role-playing opportunities were provided for students to practice standing up to the school social worker who play-acted the bully. After each role-play activity, the students were asked, "When you stood up to the bully, what skills were you using?" The students' cognitive rehearsal of the role-play activity became part of the group discussion that provided vicarious learning opportunities to assess each other as well as their own performances in managing a bullying incident.

**Verbal Persuasion**

**Provide realistic and continuous feedback.** In this case example, the school social worker provided realistic feedback on the specific efforts and

capabilities of what the students were doing correctly following the students' performance of the skill. The school social worker began by first asking the students how well they believed they executed the skill and then provided them with feedback on the specific efforts and capabilities of what the students are doing correctly, "I liked how you stood up straight when I role-played the bully. I would like it more if you would make direct eye contact as well." Bandura (1993) stated that when feedback emphasizes progress, personal capabilities are improved; whereas, feedback that underscores deficiencies undermines self-regulatory processes. Although verbal persuasion has been proposed to be a limited source of efficacy, persuasive statements can be a useful efficacy resource (Bandura, 1997) when based on the client's perceptions and assumptions about competence and sense of self (Hepworth et al., 2017).

**Encourage the students' own positive self-talk.** Self-talk is a cognitive strategy used for skill acquisition and performance improvement. Theodorakis, Weinberg, Natsis, Douma and Kazakas (2000) defined self-talk as "what people say to themselves either out loud or as a small voice inside their head" (p. 254). With this technique, students observe their own thinking to identify cognitive distortions. The school social worker then guides them with more accurate and realistic thoughts to increase their self-efficacy. In this case example, some of the students' conversations revealed the presence of negative self-talk. The school social worker employed verbal persuasion by providing examples of positive self-talk. This feedback brought to the students' awareness of how they were sabotaging their own confidence and sense of capability in dealing with bullying.

**Provide students with materials/handouts on specific skill being taught.** Verbal persuasion can come in the form of educational materials and handouts. The school social worker can utilize various resources such as manuals, articles, handouts, illustrations and videos to augment and reinforce the specific skill being taught. In the case example, verbal persuasion included power point presentations that illustrated the various forms of bullying and the range of emotions associated with bullying incidents. Again, careful attention was given to the language level of the materials to address the group's minimal level of linguistic ability and utilized illustrations in practicing inclusivity with all students.

### **Physiological and Affective States**

**Create a calm, safe and stable counseling environment.** The school social worker can foster an emotionally safe atmosphere to facilitate students' self-efficacy by first being an approachable professional for the students. In the case example, group norms were democratically created by the students and included using a talking-stick, demonstrating a positive attitude, accepting differences, and respecting each other to promote a cooperative atmosphere. A cooperative environment is advantageous not only because it enhances the self-efficacy of students in need of assistance, but also the collective efficacy of the group as a whole (Goddard, 2002). In addition, the school social worker can schedule breaks

as needed, provide reassuring feedback, allow flexibility at the pace in which students are expected to learn, practice skills by occasionally changing the focus to a different skill than the one being attempted and reduce their stress through encouragement.

**Encourage awareness of emotional arousal during stressful learning situations.** The school social worker can help students become conscious of how their perceptions of success or failure in performing a task is influenced by their physiological and affective states. This can assist students become cognizant of how these states influence their sense of self-efficacy. One way to accomplish this is through mindfulness practices. Creswell (2017) characterized mindfulness as a practice of openly attending to one's present moment experience with awareness. Creswell further noted that initial efficacy evidence incorporating mindfulness activities can be beneficial. In the case example, the first two minutes of every group session was spent in quiet to allow the students to mentally and emotionally transition from their classes and become oriented and present to the group. With the goal of encouraging greater insight, reduced emotional arousal and self-regulated behavior during stressful learning experiences, Broderick (2013) stated that mindfulness practices designed for adolescents can serve to cultivate attention, emotion regulation and performance.

## Discussion

School social workers can utilize self-efficacy principles in conceptualizing students' difficulties and providing intervention strategies to promote positive outcomes. This conceptual paper described self-efficacy strategies within Bandura's four sources of influence that social workers can incorporate in their practice. Included, but not limited to, were several behavioral therapy approaches considered to be evidence-based interventions such as goal setting, role-playing, feedback and targeting specific behaviors for change (Allen-Meares, 2015).

A case example illustrated the application of self-efficacy strategies with a group of deaf and hard of hearing high school students around the issue of bullying. School social workers play a vital role in anti-bullying efforts by focusing on the students' emotional, mental and behavioral needs (Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2009), particularly in conjunction with teachers (Lynn, McKay, & Atkins, 2003). It is important to note that in the case example, the teachers and the school social worker collaborated in supporting the students' self-efficacious activities in addressing bullying as part of a school-wide intervention program to support a favorable school climate.

It would appear that the construct of self-efficacy can provide a sound theoretical basis for school social work practice; however, further research is needed in the development and validation of self-efficacy enhanced interventions. An informed, creative and intelligent use of self-efficacy sources can provide the school social worker with powerful set of intervention strategies. Such

interventions require that a program be designed to include elements of the four sources of efficacy information (Betz, 2008) as the combination of all four sources of influence is the most effective way to promote self-efficacy (Maddux & Lewis, 1995).

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