

OPINION BLOG

Peter DeWitt's

Finding Common Ground

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TEACHING PROFESSION OPINION

How Teacher Confidence and Emotional Regulation Can Drive Student Success

The turmoil of the past few years makes these qualities a must

By Houston Kraft & Jenni Donohoo — June 25, 2023 ⌚ 5 min read

Efficacious: adjective

Successful in producing a desired or intended result; effective.

Not only is it an excellent word, it is the ultimate aim of the educational process; after all the curricula, coursework, and pedagogy, we hope schools are effective at teaching young people to be successful in their lives.

And here's what we know: A student's success is heavily reliant on a teacher's belief that they can help students be successful.

The level of confidence teachers have in their ability to guide students to success (known as teacher efficacy) has been highlighted for decades as an important influence on student outcomes. The greater a teacher's sense of efficacy, the more likely it is that their students will achieve. This is because efficacy beliefs impact a teacher's ability to cope with stress, the effort they put forth in their daily work, and the types of goals they set. A greater sense of efficacy leads to resilience and persistence on the part of educators (and education is an act of relentless persistence). Albert Bandura, one of the most influential educational psychologists of our time, noted this core belief is the foundation of human inspiration, motivation, and well-being.

In a time where student and adult well-being are more precarious than ever, it would make sense that a thoughtful approach to building efficacy is essential to a school's success. The emotional challenges and turmoil of the past few years make this work more than a nice-to-have, but rather a must-have. If we are going to support young people (and the adults teaching them) in withstanding the real challenges of an increasingly complicated world, then we must support a collective belief in our ability to understand and regulate our emotions through the storms. The importance of *emotional self-efficacy* has been more recently highlighted in the literature. High emotional efficacy aids individuals in regulating their emotions accordingly - even when faced with emotions that are challenging.

When we do this work well, we not only impact academic performance, but also increase prosocial behaviors. To put it differently, an emotionally intelligent campus becomes a kind campus. And a kind campus is a higher performing campus.

Bandura et al. (2003) found that the way you feel about your ability to control your emotions (emotional self-efficacy) has an important influence on how you behave in caring and kind ways towards others (prosocial behavior). It affects both how confident you feel in your scholastic abilities (academic self-efficacy) and how well you understand and respond to other people's emotions (empathic self-efficacy). This belief in your emotional abilities indirectly influences your prosocial behavior by first impacting your academic and empathic abilities, rather than directly affecting your kindness towards others. But the end result is the same: a school where people are more likely to feel like they belong and have increased mental health and well-being because of it.

So how do we build *emotional self-efficacy*? We must first teach people to know the language of feelings.

In surveys taken by 7,000 people over five years, Dr. Brené Brown and her team found that, on average, people can identify only three emotions as they are actually feeling them: happiness, sadness and anger.

One of the most research-backed approaches to emotion regulation is the practice of "Name it to Tame It", which is to be able to label a feeling in order to distance yourself from it and recognize it for what it is: a temporary emotional experience. Our ability to respond to challenging or big emotions is reasonably contingent on our ability to identify what we are feeling in the first place. If adults, on average, can only name three feelings, it makes sense that our mental health is in crisis; when we don't understand our feelings, we are more likely to be overwhelmed by them.

Dr. Clayton Cook, the chief development officer at CharacterStrong, says, "When it comes to school culture change, we are first and foremost in the business of adult behavior change." To put it differently, if we don't support the educators in their own

emotional development, we won't be able to effectively bolster the well-being of our students.

The systems to begin this process don't need to be overcomplicated. It can be as simple as inviting an ongoing "Temperature Check" for staff at the beginning of meetings where folks are invited, digitally or in person, to reflect on how they are feeling and, optionally, why. Providing a list of feeling words increases the likelihood of expanding our typically limited vocabulary.

Take, for example, this chart from Houston Kraft's book *Deep Kindness*. It helps provide more nuanced words for the basic categorical emotions.

How are you feeling?

	MAD	SAD	AFRAID	GLAD
INTENSITY ↓	IRRITATED	DOWN	STARTLED	RELAXED
	ANNOYED	DISCOURAGED	WORRIED	CONTENT
	TENSE	DISHEARTENED	INSECURE	SECURE
	JEALOUS	APATHETIC	STRESSED	HAPPY
	FRUSTRATED	SULLEN	ANXIOUS	HOPEFUL
	DISAPPOINTED	MOROSE	FRIGHTENED	PROUD
	RESENTFUL	LONELY	REJECTED	PLAYFUL
	HATEFUL	ASHAMED	EMBARRASSED	CONFIDENT
	LIVID	DESPONDENT	ALIENATED	OPTIMISTIC
	INFURIATED	DEPRESSED	INFERIOR	ENTHUSIASTIC
	ENRAGED	HOPELESS	INADEQUATE	INSPIRED
		DESPAIRING	OVERWHELMED	ECSTATIC
			TERRIFIED	JOYFUL
			LOVING	

What if you gathered this information each week from your staff and gave folks the opportunity to reflect on why they are feeling what they are feeling? What if staff took

this tool and employed it in classrooms to get an emotional snapshot of the students they serve, all the while expanding feeling vocabulary for themselves and young people?

Try it this week and see what you learn. It's hard to be effective in what we do when we are feeling anxious, lonely, inadequate, or discouraged. These unpleasant feelings diminish individual and collective teacher efficacy. It's even harder still when we can't put a finger on that emotion to begin the process of regulating it.

When you have a strong belief in your ability to manage your own emotions, it helps you feel more capable of tackling academics and being empathetic towards others.

A kind, mentally healthy, and efficacious campus is the byproduct of the emotional intelligence we teach - to students and adults.

Dr. Jamil Zaki, the author of *The War for Kindness* and director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Laboratory, says that, "[E]mpathy is not really one thing at all. It's an umbrella term that describes multiple ways people respond to one another, including sharing, thinking about, and caring about others' feelings."

So how do we build *emotional self-efficacy*? We use the vehicle of empathy.

Houston Kraft & Jenni Donohoo

Houston Kraft is a speaker and kindness advocate who has spoken at over 700 schools or events internationally. Jenni Donohoo works in school divisions across North America supporting high-quality professional learning designed to improve outcomes for all students, and is the Director of the Jenni Donohoo Center for Collective Efficacy.