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Inclusion and Teachers’ Beliefs in their Efficacy.


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Inclusion and Teachers’ Beliefs in their Efficacy

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Introduction

What we believe about ourselves affects what we do and how we do it. What we succeed in doing today affects our beliefs about what we can do in the future: our sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Simmons et al., 1999). What we believe we can or should do is also partially determined by our psychological environment (Cho & Shim, 2013; Gibbs & Powell, 2012; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Further, and despite some illusions that we are sole determinants of our actions, whatever we do, we do not do it alone. We are part of interlinked human, social systems interacting and in dialogue with others. Others help create the selves that we believe we are and are able to be (Sampson, 2008).

In this chapter I set out some of the parameters for teachers’ beliefs, and relate what is known about key aspects of the nature of teachers’ beliefs, motivations and practices to the psychological environments for teaching. In doing so, I will draw attention to the potential constraints or inconsistencies between what teachers might believe is their core purpose or capability and what is actually permitted or encouraged (with reference to the work of Festinger, 1962; and Seligman, 1972). What teachers believe is possible for them to do affects what they do, the nature and quality of the education they provide, and their motivation and determination to succeed – or otherwise. The chapter is grounded in concerns about teachers’ well-being, the evidence of the likely causes and consequences of teachers’ stress (Kokkinos, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, 2016), as well as a wish to support the development of educational practices that are more inclusive of difference and diversity. The main purpose of the chapter is, therefore, to examine how teachers’ beliefs about what they can do to achieve specific educational outcomes (their self-efficacy as teachers) are influenced by their psychological and organisational contexts (R. Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Ross & Gray, 2006).

Amongst the most relevant and immediate contexts for teachers’ practices are government policies regarding education and schools, and the yet more immediate contexts of individual schools. Further, while the effects of stress factors for teachers and consequent attrition are not unique to the UK, the focus here is on issues that are particularly pertinent in the UK, and England in particular.

Teachers’ efficacy beliefs

We may hope and assume that all who train to be teachers truly want to teach and educate young people - albeit for varying reasons (Klassen, Al-Dhafri, Hannok, & Betts, 2011; Tang, Cheng, & Cheng, 2014). It is also evident that teachers who are strongly motivated to develop
and improve their practice are likely to inculcate similar motivations in their students (Schiefele & Schaffner, 2015). Teachers with positive beliefs in their efficacy, believing they know what it is necessary to do to achieve specific desired outcomes, are more likely to achieve these outcomes for the children in their classrooms (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Tournaki & Podell, 2005). Teachers’ efficacy beliefs have been shown to be positively related to superior outcomes in specific subject areas (see, for example Akyol, Tekkaya, Sungur, & Traynor, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011) as well as teachers’ survival in the profession (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014, 2016). Teachers’ beliefs in their efficacy are also associated with the development of more inclusive practice in mainstream classes by, for example, accepting greater responsibility for the education of children with identified and significant special needs, reducing segregation or exclusion because of problematic behaviour, and in general, accepting and understanding diversity (Ekins, Savolainen, & Engelbrecht, 2016; Gibbs & Powell, 2012; Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel, & Malinen, 2012).

In addition to the substantial body of work devoted to understanding the nature and effects of individual teachers’ efficacy beliefs, conceptual and empirical research has shown how the collective efficacy beliefs of school staff are closely associated with the ethos of schools, the development and transformational effects of leadership, and beneficial outcomes in terms of motivation, attainment and well-being for both students and staff (Goddard, Kim, & Miller, 2015; Moolenaar, Sleegers, & Daly, 2012).

Teachers (individuals and staff groups) gain their efficacy beliefs mainly from experiences of success (direct first-hand experience, as well as observed (vicarious) experience (Bandura, 1997, 1998; Wolters & Daugherty, 2007)), and within environments that foster professional reflection and transformational learning that generates changes in the learner beyond expectation (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Black, 2015; Gibbs & Miller, 2012; Kurt, Duyar, & Çalik, 2011). Of course it is something of a truism that success breeds success, but if we start with the premises that teachers want to be successful and that successful education depends on successful teachers, we do then need to think about what helps teachers be successful and what, if anything, hinders that. One of the answers offered to this question refers to teachers’ perceptions of the environment for education; another answer that is sometimes offered refers to the perceived ‘nature’ and background of children.

**Education for all: inclusivity**

There is an apparently natural and insatiable need (in western cultures at least) to objectify, classify and categorise phenomena – and people. There are a number of factors (several enshrined in legislation and policy) that influence and encourage categorisation within education. In the UK (but by no means only in the UK) children may find themselves categorised in a number of ways that affect where and how they are taught. (It might also be remembered that until the early 1970’s in the UK it was not required that all children could / should be educated. Up to the passing of the 1970 Education (Handicapped Children) Act children who were, on the basis of a medical examination, considered to be ‘mentally deficient’ were not fully entitled to education.) Children’s age, ‘ability’, gender and religious faith may be used to determine the type of school they attend. The labels that are used to characterise them (ostensibly often to describe their perceived ‘special’ educational needs) can
also influence how and where they are taught and what teachers believe they can to do to help them. Such categorisation of children continues to influence teachers’ conceptualisation of their role and competency with regard to certain groups. Thus, it has been found that teachers may hold firm views about whether or not they know how to or are prepared to teach children with specific ‘disabilities’ (Jordan & Stanovich, 2003). Such beliefs can be easily influenced. It has, for instance, been known for some time that teachers’ expectations of children generate self-fulfilling outcomes. Thus in an experiment when children were arbitrarily described as being more likely to do well, they achieved better outcomes than their peers who had not been assigned that label (Friedrich, Flunger, Nagengast, Jonkmann, & Trautwein, 2015; M. J. Harris & Rosenthal, 1985; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). More recently, we found that just the arbitrary use of a particular label (‘dyslexia’ vs ‘reading difficulties’) created significant differences in teachers’ beliefs about the essential nature of children’s educational difficulties and their efficacy beliefs about being able to intervene significantly with such children (Gibbs & Elliott, 2015).

So, in summary, it is important to recognise that the beliefs that teachers hold (both about themselves and their students) are important, are vulnerable to influence, and that significant differences follow in terms of classroom practice and outcomes for the children. So what of the current educational environment and context, how may these affect the beliefs teachers hold, and what may be the effects of these ‘environmental’ and systemic factors in practice for teachers and children?

**Government Policies: context and consequences**

The UK is currently home to one of the biggest gaps in the world between the earnings and wealth of the richest and poorest in society (Dorling, 2014, 2015; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). It has been estimated that currently some 3.7 million (28%) children may be living in poverty in the UK (CPAG, 2015). It is evident that the socio-economic status of families can profoundly affect children’s readiness for school, ultimate levels of attainment, employment prospects and life-span (Hills, 2015). However, despite a lack of evidence to warrant their value as means of ensuring greater social mobility and inclusion, current government policy appears to be to promote educational structures and systems that in reality only perpetuate social and economic stratifications (Ayscue & Orfield, 2016; Hattie, 2009; Piketty, 2000; Tranter, 2012; Triventi, 2013) that, *inter alia,* will generate or reinforce expectations about the educational potential of groups of children. As I write, the new Conservative government under Theresa May’s leadership is ardently promising the development of new grammar schools. These, we are told, are intended to promote ‘social mobility’. The available evidence suggests it is more likely to enhance the ‘Matthew Effect’ – the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

In pursuit of government policy schools continue to be subject to intense scrutiny, competition and increasing pressure from marketisation (Allen, 2015; Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Wright, 2012). For teachers (and schools) the culture of performativity adversely affects the quality of professional relationships and yields self-serving compliance (Ball, 2003; Hardy & Lewis, 2016; Jeffrey, 2002; Perryman, 2006). The regular and frequent inspection of schools by Ofsted often generates more heat than light, and for many schools and teachers serves only to perpetuate a fear of failure. Interestingly, in this respect at least,
the government seems to recognise the potentially adverse effects of labelling. Thus schools that ‘fail’ are most often closed and rebranded (else otherwise who would want their child to attend – who would want to work in - a school that was labelled as a failure? (Gorton, Williams, & Wrigley, 2014; Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005)) As one commentator has noted of Government strategies that are publicly intended to raise standards in schools:

‘...those factors that impede improvement are constant outside interference, and detailed external control and inspection. Factors which help improve standards include teachers’ feelings of ownership and responsibility over change, and the sense of the school as a centre of change, changes that happen over time rather than at once.’ (Cullingford, 2013, p. 3)

Currently, therefore, it seems likely that factors that impede school improvement prevail over factors that might be more beneficial for schools, teachers and young people. There is evidence that external inspection is more likely to have negative than positive effects for teachers both as individuals and as members of staff teams. Thus, the pressure to perform for Ofsted is too often ‘damaging emotionally and professionally... [and] may reduce trust, inhibit discussion of difficulties and diminish honest self-evaluation’ (Hopkins et al., 2016, p. 59).

There is a growing consensus that the determination of recent UK governments to push through their reforms ‘leaves a demotivated teacher workforce, [and] a possible impending teacher recruitment crisis’ (Allen, 2015, p. 36). Psychologically, a persistent fear of failure and the perception that there is little that individuals or groups can do to avert failure can lead to a sense of passive helplessness that is often associated with professional burn-out and depression (Fincham & Cain, 1986; Maier & Seligman, 2016; Schonfeld & Bianchi, 2016). The phenomenon of ‘learned helplessness’ was first reported by Seligman (1972) who in a series of experiments on animals and humans showed how when repeatedly unable to control unpleasant circumstances (‘aversive stimuli’), participants typically become passive, depressed and ‘helpless’, and unable to do anything to change or avoid the unpleasant situation. It is not hard to see how being unable to avoid repeated inspections could leave teachers feeling depressed and ‘helpless’.

But what, also, of experiences of the teacher who is required to subject themselves to repeated inspection (with no formative feedback) whilst knowing in their heart it is valueless? Such ‘cognitive dissonance’ (Festinger, 1962) induces stress and a motivation to minimise the dissonance. At the least, this is likely to confirm that either the teacher’s own views are not recognised or valued, or to deny that inspections have no merit.

Perhaps, in extremis, one of the few viable solutions for many teachers, the only apparent escape from the helplessness and dissonance, is to stop being a teacher? In fact there is already cumulative evidence that the recruitment and retention of teachers is a significant cause for concern. Department for Education data in the academic year 2014-15 indicate that although just over 25,000 newly qualified teachers entered the profession, 43,000 qualified teachers left (DfE, 2016). Further, of those entering the profession, current trends suggest that within three years about 22% will have left teaching (DfE, 2016). Absenteeism is also a
concern. In the same period (2014-15) 56% of teachers had at least one period of sickness absence, with an average of 7.6 days lost in the year for each of these teachers. Absence rates such as these (higher than the national average of 5.3 days for all employees (EEF, 2016)) are financially and educationally costly, entailing interruptions to the predictable programme for children’s education and the cost of employing additional staff to cover for absent colleagues.

Counter-measures
The evidence summarised above does not lend credence to a view that the regime of inspection, accountability and performativity contributes positively to maintaining an effective and well-motivated teaching workforce – in fact, quite the reverse. It is, therefore, quite easy to suggest what we might stop doing. However, what does appear to be important and effective in sustaining the motivation and positive belief of teachers in the importance of teaching and education includes: high-quality leadership and management of schools, high quality teacher development, an emphasis on supportive dialogue within staff teams, and between teachers and students, and regular opportunities for collaboration and joint problem-solving (Brown, Gibbs, & Reid, In preparation; Gibbs & Miller, 2012; Mulholland, McKinlay, & Sproule, 2016). I will address each of these in turn - though none can stand alone. These are interdependent aspects of educational practices that benefit teachers, children and societies. For me, however, the golden thread that runs through them all and should, I suggest, be at the heart of the curriculum for all, is the quality and understanding of human relationships.

Leadership
There is now a substantial body of evidence demonstrating how leadership practices in schools and school systems not only help ensure good outcomes for students but also ensure the ongoing professional development of teachers and professional learning communities (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; A-Harris et al., 2013; D-Hopkins, Stringfield, Harris, Stoll, & Mackay, 2014). Cross-cultural comparisons also make available a radically different vision of the cultural importance and leadership of education (Hargreaves, Halász, & Pont, 2007) in which leadership and purpose are nationally shared values. Thus, in Finland for instance, “Public education is seen as vital to the country’s growth and security, and the shared high regard for educators who are seen as central to this generational mission, draws highly qualified candidates into the teaching profession.” (Hargreaves et al., 2007, p. 14). This makes it clear that the leadership of schools is no simple vacancy-filling exercise but should be a matter of national concern for both social and economic reasons, now and in the future. As indicated and empirically validated, this requires that the leadership and management of schools be a shared and collaborative sociocultural enterprise that is in a reciprocal relationship (and dialogue) with its immediate and distal contexts (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). It may be argued that only in such circumstances can teachers professionally and personally prosper.

Collaborative work
It is implicit in the above that staff collaborate and take shared responsibility for the benefits to their professional community (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Moolenaar, 2012; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). In the past, therapeutic insights have been found helpful in developing teachers’ responsiveness and collaboration (Hanko, 2002), and Gibbs and Miller (2012) indicated how
the collaborative work of psychologists as facilitators of teachers’ understanding has been beneficial. However, an understanding of the nature of collaboration, joint exploration, and learning also requires a reformulation of the nature of schools as learning organisations that are democratic, fluid and transformative (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012). This also implies that all involved in education, all those with an investment in education, need to recognise themselves as ‘learners’. This underlines the centrality of dialogue as a process that enables learning about the nature of learning, about society and each other (Biesta, 2015; Sampson, 2008). Given the social, economic and cultural schisms both within our (UK) society and internationally we need to heed the evidence about intergroup prejudice (Tajfel, 1969, 1982) and put in place educative processes that enable the development of mutual inter-group and cross-cultural understandings (see, for instance, Stephan & Stephan, 2013; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2015).

Staff Development

In order to develop schools and teaching practices that provide some immunity to the corrosive effects of economic and social policies on education, and their divisive effects for children and families, staff need support to reflect and learn. There is evidence that enhancing teachers’ individual and collective efficacy beliefs is productive. So, for example, when staff believe and understand how they may work collaboratively with their neighbourhood communities, this helps reduce outcomes often associated with economic or social disadvantage. Thus, schools in which staff espouse higher collective-efficacy with respect to learning and behaviour have been found to buck the typical trend of exclusion, lowered attainment and minority segregation found in other schools in similar circumstances where staff perceptions of their efficacy are depressed (Belfi, Gielen, De Fraine, Verschueren, & Meredith, 2015; Brown et al., In preparation; Gibbs & Powell, 2012). So, when staff believe and understand how they may work collaboratively with their neighbourhood communities, this helps reduce outcomes often associated with economic or social disadvantage. Whilst some responsibility for developing the ethos and culture in which efficacy beliefs can grow lies with organisational leadership, the importance of dynamic, mutually respectful and legitimating reciprocal relationships between team members and leaders cannot be underestimated in developing learning organisations (Benlian, 2013; Thomas, Martin, Epitropaki, Guillaume, & Lee, 2013; Valcea, Hamdani, Buckley, & Novicevic, 2011). In Bandura’s terms, such endeavours represent ‘group enablement’ (1997, p. 477) that enhance organisations’ staff collective-efficacy.

Summary

In this chapter I have outlined evidence about the effects of teachers’ beliefs in themselves as professional practitioners. This has been contextualised by consideration of social, economic, cultural and psychological factors that have been found to affect teachers’ beliefs and practices. In considering alternatives to what may restrict educational beliefs, policies and practices I have put forward some evidence of how dialogue and better understanding of human inter-relationships might provide the foundations of an alternative schema for education - one based on the principle that a good education is profoundly rooted in humanity and relationships, and in caring for both young people and teachers, for the future of education and of society.
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