Improving Self-Efficacy and Motivation:

What to Do, What to Say

HOWARD MARGOLIS AND PATRICK P. MCCABE

It is not surprising that many struggling learners have low self-efficacy for academics. They believe that they lack the ability to succeed. Consequently, they tend to avoid academics and give up quickly when difficulties arise. This article suggests practical solutions based on self-efficacy theory to improve the motivation of struggling learners. Specifically, the authors present three sources of self-efficacy—enactive mastery, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion—as ways for teachers to figure out what to do and what to say to strengthen struggling learners' beliefs in their academic abilities and increase their willingness to engage in academic tasks.

r. Ryan teaches struggling learners at Anyplace Middle School. Upset, he confides to Ms. Matthew, a fellow teacher, that his students are unmotivated. "These kids," he laments, "think they're failures, incapable of learning. I try so hard to use positive comments to make them feel good. I don't know what to do or say to motivate them. I praise them all the time. It doesn't matter—I keep striking out."

Mr. Ryan's problem is common: How do teachers motivate struggling learners to engage in schoolwork when they believe failure is inevitable (Brophy, 1998)? How can teachers transform students' "cannot do" beliefs into realistic "can do" ones (Ormrod, 2003)? The answer lies in knowing *what to do* and *what to say*. This is far more complex than it sounds. Fortunately, self-efficacy theory provides guidance. It can help Mr. Ryan motivate his students, which, in turn, can help them succeed in school.

Before offering specific suggestions about what to do and what to say, we briefly discuss why it is important for teachers to study self-efficacy.

Self-Efficacy

Many struggling learners believe they cannot succeed in school (Brophy, 1998; Pajares, 2003), convinced that school and academics guarantee failure and humiliation. In other words, their self-efficacy for academics—their belief that they have the "capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given [academic] attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3)—is low (Henk & Melnick, 1995; Walker, 2003).

According to self-efficacy theorists, low self-efficacy causes motivational problems. If students believe they cannot succeed on specific tasks (low self-efficacy), they will superficially attempt them, give up quickly, or avoid or resist them.

Low self-efficacy beliefs, unfortunately, impede academic achievement and, in the long run, create self-fulfilling prophecies of failure and learned helplessness that can devastate psychological well-being. For example, if struggling learners believe that composition writing is impossible for them, that whatever they write will earn a failing grade because they lack and can never develop the ability to write, they may resist writing by feigning illness, creating diversionary behavior problems, writing no more than a carelessly created sentence, or completing the assignment in a thoughtless, slipshod fashion. Such negatively reinforcing escape behaviors will seriously impede achievement, especially when low self-efficacy generalizes to other academic activities. In addition, such behaviors may exacerbate deficits and create additional school difficulties, such as poor grades, conflict with teachers, lower track placement, special education placement, failure on high-stakes tests, and retention.

Often, the key to motivating and engaging struggling learners is to get them to believe that they can succeed (Pressley et al., 2003). Beliefs, as Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) concluded, can change behavior: "As the research has shown, students are motivated to engage in tasks and achieve when they believe they can accomplish the task" (p. 134). This is the essence of self-efficacy. In the following section, we take a close look at its sources—factors that teachers can strengthen or manipulate.

Sources of Self-Efficacy

Students get self-efficacy information from four sources: their task performance, referred to as enactive mastery; vicarious experiences; verbal persuasion; and their physiological reactions or states (Alderman, 2004; Ormrod, 2003; Pajares, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000, 2001). Self-efficacy is what students infer from the information from these sources; it is the judgment they make about their ability to succeed on a specific task or set of related tasks. By understanding and systematically using these sources, teachers can influence struggling learners' self-efficacy.

Enactive mastery refers to students' recognition of the degree to which they succeeded on tasks. If, for example, Mr. Ryan modified an assignment to make it moderately challenging to struggling learners, and Kelly, a struggling learner, answered 9 of 10 questions correctly, she might say to herself, "I answered 9 of the 10 questions correctly. I now understand what I read." By modifying the assignment, Mr. Ryan gave Kelly a chance to do well and to interpret her success in ways that strengthen her self-efficacy. He took advantage of enactive mastery. In contrast, Mrs. McCormick, Kelly's English teacher, constantly gave Kelly writing assignments that Kelly found extremely difficult. During one assignment, Kelly muttered to herself, "Everything I do is wrong, wrong, wrong. Trying does not help. I am dumb; I will never learn to write." By failing to modify assignments to capitalize on task-performance information, Mrs. McCormick helped to erode Kelly's self-efficacy. Generally, teachers can capitalize on the natural tendency of struggling learners to evaluate task-performance information by giving them tasks of moderate challenge, that is, tasks they can succeed on with moderate effort.

Vicarious experiences, such as observing friends model a task, provide struggling learners with direct guidance about how to do something. When modeling is used as an instructional method, to demonstrate a skill or learning strategy, the models usually explain what they are doing and thinking at each step. Often, such guidance helps struggling learners develop the internal imagery they need to conceptualize and implement targeted skills or learning strategies. Teachers can take advantage of this source of self-efficacy by regularly and systematically hav-

ing struggling learners observe models perform targeted skills or learning strategies, live or on video.

Verbal persuasion gives learners information they interpret and evaluate, which, in turn, affects their self-efficacy. For example, if Kelly is reluctant to use the RAP strategy (Ellis, 1996) to comprehend what she is reading, Mr. Ryan might say, "Kelly, you can do this if you use the RAP strategy. All week you did well with it. Remember, 'R' stands for read a paragraph, 'A' stands for ask yourself what the paragraph is about, and 'P' stands for put the main idea and two details in your own words. Let us try it."

Generally, the greater the credibility of the message giver and the more learners believe that they will succeed on the task, the more likely they are to try. If, however, learners repeatedly fail these tasks, after exhortations to try and assurances of success, future verbal messages from the message giver or people in similar roles (e.g., teachers) will be less persuasive. In many cases, struggling learners will dismiss the messages, believing they are false. By regularly stating that learners will succeed on specific tasks, tasks on which they do succeed, and following up with task-specific feedback outlining what learners did that produced success, teachers can capitalize on this important source of self-efficacy.

Physiological reaction or state refers to how students feel before, during, and after engaging in a task. If, for example, a struggling learner feels queasy and highly anxious about beginning a reading assignment, believing that he or she will fail, the learner might disrupt the class to escape the assignment. Typically, such escape behavior

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reduces anxiety, causing more escape behavior. To use struggling learners' physiological reactions or states to strengthen self-efficacy, teachers or counselors might teach them relaxation techniques and ways to challenge irrational thoughts that provoke exaggerated or inaccurate physiological responses.

This article does not examine how teachers can directly deal with unwarranted or dysfunctional physiological reactions or states but suggests that help in such situations is warranted. Relaxation training can help (Margolis, 1987, 1990). However, many teachers are uncomfortable using relaxation training; many lack relevant

training. If struggling learners suffer from excessive anxiety and their self-efficacy for academics is low, teachers should refer them for counseling and work with the counselor to help the student (Margolis, McCabe, & Alber, 2005).

By emphasizing three of the four sources of self-efficacy, this article helps teachers determine *what to do* and *what to say* to strengthen struggling learners' self-efficacy. Specifically, *what to do* stresses enactive mastery and vicarious experiences; *what to say* stresses verbal persuasion. If combined rather than separated, the *doing* and *saying* suggestions become more powerful.

General Strategies for Strengthening Students' Self-Efficacy

What to Do

Plan Moderately Challenging Tasks. Tasks should not be overly simple—their simplicity and level of challenge should not bore or embarrass struggling learners or communicate that the teacher doubts their abilities (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Pressley et al., 2003). Similarly, task difficulty (e.g., reading level, length, complexity, abstraction) should not provoke more than passing fear of failure or prove frustrating. Consequently, instructional-level tasks should be slightly above the learner's current performance level. That is, to improve struggling learners' willingness to invest time and energy in schoolwork and to develop the persistence needed for meaningful achievement, teachers should give struggling learners with low self-efficacy for academics work the learners view as moderately challenging (Stipek, 1998).

Regularly giving struggling learners tasks they view as difficult or impossible is a prescription for failure, for superficial engagement, or resistance. To prevent these problems and provide appropriate challenge, teachers should regularly assess present levels of achievement and plan accordingly, using the following guidelines to initially determine difficulty levels:

- To read at the instructional level, students should quickly recognize 90% to 95% of words in context and understand 70% to 89% of the text. Instructional level assumes that teachers will work with students, teaching vocabulary and comprehension strategies while monitoring and guiding practice and structuring independent practice. The criterion for independent-level material, on the other hand, is quick recognition of 96% or more of the words in context and a comprehension level of 90% or more (McCormick, 1999). Whenever students work by themselves, such as completing independent seatwork or homework, materials should be at their independent level.

- To determine if a student has adequate background and reading ability to comprehend a specific textbook, teachers should develop several short cloze tests for the beginning of chapters that the struggling learners are expected to read (Walker, 2004). Such tests delete every 5th word from passages of 300 or more words, excluding the first and last sentences, which are left intact. Criteria for instructional level are 40% to 59% correct (Walker, 2004). A higher percentage of correct answers indicates an independent level; a lower percentage indicates the frustration level, the level to avoid.
- To determine writing ability, teachers should give struggling learners several sample assignments and evaluate them with an explicit rubric that represents what teachers expect at different stages of achievement. Teachers should then modify assignments to reflect the struggling learners' instructional and independent levels: what learners can successfully write—with moderate effort—when teachers work with them and when learners work alone.
- For most nonreading or nonwriting learning tasks, an 80% or better correct response rate indicates instructional level. For independent level (e.g., homework) or review levels, 95% or better is optimal (Paul & Epanchin, 1991; Rosenshine, 1983).

By continually giving struggling learners moderately challenging materials and tasks (Turner, 1995) and increasing task difficulty to reflect progress, teachers can help the learners succeed. Continued success with such materials and tasks creates a record of enactive mastery or performance that teachers can use to show struggling learners they can succeed. This highly motivating realization helps ensure further academic engagement on similar tasks. Simply put, success is essential to boost confidence and the willingness to keep trying.

Use Peer Models. A powerful way to help students acquire new skills and strategies is to have them watch other students do well on targeted tasks (Alderman, 2004; Maag, 1999; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 2001). To maximize the effects of modeling on self-efficacy, models should be similar to student observers in ways the observers deem important (Alderman, 2004; Robertson, 2000; Schunk, 1999, 2001; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997; Zimmerman, 2001). Similarities can include age, race, gender, ability, interests, clothing, social circles, and achievement levels.

Peer models can be mastery or coping models. Mastery models flawlessly demonstrate a targeted skill or learning strategy, whereas coping models demonstrate how to learn the skill or strategy and how and when to apply it. For students with low self-efficacy, observing coping models may be particularly effective (Schunk, 2003). By observing how coping models overcome mistakes, struggling learners of similar ability often realize they too can achieve (Zimmerman, 2000). Many begin to believe, "He is like me. If he can do it, I can" (Schunk, 2001).

To maximize the benefits of using coping models, it is important that

- the skill or strategy is moderately challenging but not overly difficult;
- models correct their mistakes and explicitly attribute failures to controllable factors (e.g., "I did not listen to the directions. That is why I did poorly.") and successes to both controllable factors (e.g., "I worked hard and did not quit. That is why I did well.") and modifiable abilities (e.g., "I followed the steps. That is why I did well. Following the steps took brains.");
- students with low self-efficacy see models reinforced for correctly applying the targeted skill or strategy; and
- students with low self-efficacy are initially reinforced for correctly applying the targeted skill or strategy.

Teach Specific Learning Strategies. As Lenz, Deshler, and Kissam (2004) noted, learning strategies "provide students with a logical sequence of steps for attacking difficult tasks. These steps make the task at hand manageable and provide students with a place to start" (p. 261). This, in part, may explain why teaching learning strategies can significantly improve struggling learners' academic achievement (De La Paz, 1999; Graham, Harris, & Troia, 2000; Swanson, 2000).

When teaching strategies to struggling learners, teachers must first identify one or two critical strategies that struggling learners have to master to succeed on specific tasks, such as note taking, essay writing, test taking, or reading comprehension. (Introducing too many strategies creates confusion and reduces opportunity for practice.) Then teachers must help learners understand when and why to use the strategy and have them overlearn it, so they successfully apply it when working alone. Without overlearning and knowing when to use specific strategies, struggling learners will likely abandon them (Swanson & Deshler, 2003).

To help ensure that strategies are systematically taught to struggling learners, to the point of overlearning, teachers should consider this adaptation of Rosenberg,

Wilson, Maheady, and Sindelar's (1997) instructional sequence:

- Determine the struggling learners' current level of strategy competence; have them make a verbal or written commitment to master the strategy.
- Describe the strategy in ways that will help struggling learners remember it.
- Model the strategy while using an explicit think-aloud; prompt struggling learners to verbally self-instruct themselves while using the strategy; provide corrective feedback. Figure 1 shows how think-alouds can be combined with attribution training, which we discuss later in this article.
- Have struggling learners verbally elaborate and re-hearse each step of the strategy as well as its purpose.
- Provide ample amounts of guided and independent practice with familiar materials and content.
- Provide ample amounts of guided and independent practice with other coursework materials.
- Tell struggling learners when they have mastered the strategy.
- Discuss how students can use the strategy in a variety of situations, including homework.
- Teach struggling learners to monitor their use of the strategy.
- Teach struggling learners to reinforce themselves for correctly using the strategy.
- Throughout the process, provide task-specific feed-back, deserved praise, and encouragement.

By knowing what strategy to use and exactly what to do, struggling learners are apt to develop optimism—in-creased self-efficacy—about their ability to succeed on tasks for which the strategy was designed (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997).

Capitalize on Student Choice and Interest. Choice is a major motivator (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). When pre-sent, it encourages high levels of engagement (Allington & Johnston, 2001); when missing, it can arouse resistance: "Lack of choice in school reading is one reason frequently cited by secondary students who are willing readers out-side of school but resist assigned reading" (Alverman & Phelps, 1998, p. 329). As a consequence, teachers should frequently let struggling learners choose their assign-ments, books, start times, break times, grading strategies, and extracredit work. Each choice should be meaningful to the learners and acceptable to the teacher. In addition, choices should be presented in ways that avoid stigmatiz-ing learners. For example, all students, instead of only struggling learners, might choose one of four books to read, one of three homework assignments to do, or one of two classwork assignments.

Like choice, interest promotes engagement and im-proves learning (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). As a con-

sequence, teachers should try to identify and respond to struggling learners' interests by (a) observing struggling learners during free time, listening to their conversa-tions, looking at what they read on their own, asking their parents about them, or administering interest in-ventories and (b) developing assignments that incorpo-rate or focus on the identified interests.

In addition to focusing on identified interests, teachers can capitalize on interest through relevance and novelty. *Novelty*, though short-lived, often kick-starts in-terest, which teachers can later supplement and extend. For example, showing struggling readers a card trick and then showing them how to do it can create interest in the underlying mathematics concepts. It also gives them something to show their friends and parents, perhaps im-proving their self-efficacy.

Relevance relates to struggling learners' lives. If, for example, an urban seventh-grade class is studying civil rights and the teacher expects struggling learners and other students to have trouble with an abstract discussion, the teacher might show and discuss brief portions of the PBS video *The Murder of Emmett Till* (2003), the story of a Black teenager who was beaten and shot for whistling at a White woman in Mississippi. Many historians believe that his death, the quick acquittal of the murderers by an all-White jury, and the bravery of Emmett's mother gal-vanized the civil rights movement. Then, using materials from the PBS American Experience Teacher's Guide (2003), the teacher might organize the class into small groups to discuss how Emmett's death and his mother's re-fusal to drop the case contributed to the students' rights.

To involve struggling learners in relevant small-group discussions, the teacher might use this adaptation of Vacca and Vacca's (1996) guidelines:

- arrange the room so students can see one another and meet to share ideas;
- explicitly state the topic and the goal of the discussion (e.g., "True or false? One person can influence every-one's rights?");
- encourage and reinforce good listening;
- begin discussions with mixed-achievement groups of two or three students;
- monitor discussions—keep them focused on the cen-tral topic, core question, or problem; and
- use simple language, frequently check for understand-ing, and clarify misunderstandings.

By engaging struggling learners in conversations to which they can relate, teachers help them to succeed, in-creasing the likelihood of strengthened self-efficacy.

Reinforce Effort and Correct Strategy Use. Some strug-gling learners need a far more formal and systematic pro-gram of applied behavior analysis than this discussion allows. Interventions might include reinforcing students

*Using the **POW** Strategy to Begin a Writing Assignment.* To write this story I need to make up my mind to use the **POW** strategy, and I will not give up. If I need help I will speak to my writing partner.

Teacher Think-Aloud: Correctly Applying the Strategy: (Using an overhead projector and large oak-tag index cards, the teacher models the strategy while speaking.)

To start writing, I first need to **P**ick my idea, **O**rganize my notes, and **W**rite and then say more by writing again. This can take 3 or 4 days.

My idea is that Emmett Till's mother was extremely brave. She insisted that her murdered son's coffin remain open, so 50,000 people could see how brutally he was murdered. She insisted that the government stop the murder of Blacks in Mississippi.

Now to organize my writing. Let me see what note cards I have to support my point. These five cards should go in this pile—what happened before Emmett was murdered; these four go in this pile—why the murder happened; these four go in this pile—why the jury acquitted the murderers; and these five here—what Mrs. Till did after Emmett's murder. No, this card belongs in a different pile. I will take it from Mrs. Till's pile and put it in the jury pile.

OK—It all makes sense. Time for me to start writing. I must remember not to worry about spelling, grammar, and neatness when I write my first draft; I can correct things later, when revising and editing. Now my task is to get everything down on paper, in an organized way.

———————————————

Teacher Attribution Statement: I think I did well. I stuck to it. I did not give up. And I used the POW strategy. When I had trouble, I spoke to my writing partner and reviewed my POW checklist. By correctly using the strategy, I should do well.

Figure 1. Sample teacher think-aloud using the POW strategy. POW strategy created by Mason, Harris, & Graham, 2004.

for effort, persistence (i.e., working longer on moderately challenging tasks), and correct strategy use; providing extrinsic reinforcers and gradually phasing them out by moving from continuous to fixed to variable schedules of reinforcement and substituting naturally occurring reinforcers for more novel ones; and negotiating behavioral contracts for working longer, accomplishing more, and correctly using strategies. Three particularly helpful sources that discuss reinforcers, reinforcement schedules, and contracts in clear, practical ways are Alberto and Troutman (2003), Heron and Harris (2001), and Maag (1999).

What to Say

Encourage Students to Try. Teachers should regularly encourage struggling learners to try new academic activities, telling them success is likely if they make the effort, persist, and correctly use previously learned strategies. If the academic activities are at the appropriate instructional and independent levels, struggling learners will likely believe that moderate effort will produce success. The axiom of moderate effort is important for two reasons: First, struggling learners, like all of us, fatigue when a continuous, herculean effort is required; second, struggling learners often interpret excessive effort as signs of personal inadequacy and low ability (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Both factors negatively affect self-efficacy and motivation.

In addition, if tasks require excessive effort, they usually are too difficult. Because excessively difficult tasks imply poorly developed skills, they tend to lower self-efficacy (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Frequent assignment of such tasks, combined with encouragement to try, will likely lessen the teacher's credibility, reducing the struggling learner's willingness to again try.

Stress Recent Successes. By explicitly explaining and showing how new work resembles recent work on which struggling learners succeeded, teachers can help learners believe they will again succeed. To help struggling learners see similarities, teachers can ask them to compare new assignments to similar ones on which they succeeded. To bolster their confidence, teachers can ask them how they can apply previously learned strategies to the new work.

To bolster self-efficacy, teachers also can meet with struggling learners to record and chart their recent successes, to teach them to do this (Alberto & Troutman, 2003; Heron & Harris, 2001), and to regularly discuss with them the reasons for their success. This provides observable, permanent feedback about progress, feedback that can powerfully influence self-efficacy (Schunk, 1999, 2001; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). Teachers can use simple forms, such as those in Figure 2, to teach learners to self-record their progress.

Assignments (Week of May 5–9)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Grade ____														
90–100		■	■			■					■			
80–89	■	■	■	■		■			■	■	■	■		
70–79	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		
60–69	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		
50–59	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		

Figure 2. Sample of form a learner used to self-record progress. Shaded areas for Assignments 1 through 12 illustrate how a learner completed the form. Numbers below the word *grade* represent the percentage of items answered correctly.

Give Frequent, Focused, Task-Specific Feedback. When teachers focus task feedback on what struggling learners did correctly and on the steps necessary for improvement, they give learners a map for success, which often strengthens their self-efficacy (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). For example, Mr. Ryan might tell Kelly, "You used the TELLS strategy. You studied the story title, examined the page for clue words, and looked for important words. That is why you found six clue words and three important words. You made progress—you found twice as many clue words as you did yesterday. That is great! But you forgot to look for the hard words and describe the setting of the story. Together, let us look for the hard words and then describe the setting of the story." By adding indications of progress—"you found twice as many clue words as you did yesterday"—Mr. Ryan increased the likelihood that Kelly's self-efficacy for using the TELLS strategy and comprehending reading materials would improve (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997).

Providing immediate, task-specific feedback is critical when struggling learners are given something new to learn. During this acquisition stage, mistakes are common. Therefore, teachers should immediately provide feedback to correct learners so their mistakes do not become entrenched (Heward, 2000) and cause problems that diminish self-efficacy. To strengthen correct understanding and expand learning, Salend (2001) recommended five kinds of teacher-directed feedback:

- *Corrective feedback:* Use corrective feedback to show struggling learners how to correct mistakes. Corrective strategies include restating, rephrasing, or changing questions; clarifying directions; and reteaching prerequisite skills.
- *Prompting:* Use prompts when struggling learners need visual, auditory, or tactile information to help them correct their mistakes. In essence, prompts are external, antecedent stimuli that help struggling learners respond correctly (e.g., "Kelly, a few minutes ago, when we started using TELLS, you told me that *specific* was a hard word. Are there other words in the story that are just as hard, or harder, than *specific*?" Here, *specific* is a prompt.).
- *Process feedback:* Use process feedback when all or most of a struggling learner's answer is correct but the learner is unsure about the answer. When providing process feedback, the teacher restates the correct answer and indicates why it is correct.
- *Instructive feedback:* Use instructive feedback when struggling learners can benefit from extra information, such as the definition of a word that expands or amplifies the targeted concept.
- *Praising:* Use praise only when struggling learners have legitimately earned it; otherwise they may soon think it is insincere or perfunctory. Brophy (as cited in Good & Brophy, 2003) noted that effective praise is delivered contingently, specifies accomplishments,

is spontaneous, focuses attention on task-relevant behavior, and suggests competence. Salend (2001) suggested that praise should also be used to "encourage independence, determination, and creativity" (p. 327).

Using task-specific feedback and praise does more than direct the struggling learner's attention to the critical factors responsible for success. It also prevents the problem of unearned praise—praise that is unsubstantiated by success and that many struggling learners eventually understand is undeserved and false. Such praise can weaken the teacher's credibility, minimizing the effectiveness of future praise (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

If teachers make comparisons when providing feedback or praising struggling learners, they should compare struggling learners' current performance to their previous performance rather than to their peers' performances. This establishes realistic standards, eliminating comparisons that struggling learners are likely to find disappointing, discouraging, and dysfunctional.

Stress Functional Attribution Statements. Attributions identify particular causes and affect future behavior. Functional attributions are optimistic: They tell learners that success is possible and that making the effort and correctly using the right strategy likely leads to success. Dysfunctional attributions are pessimistic: They tell learners that trying is useless and that success is impossible because they lack the ability. Unlike high-achieving students, many low-achieving students—including struggling learners with low self-efficacy for academics—bombard themselves with dysfunctional attributions, erroneously convincing themselves that they lack needed abilities.

Fortunately, research suggests that dysfunctional attributions can be changed to functional ones (Kozminsky & Kozminsky, 2003; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002, 2003; Ring & Reetz, 2000; Robertson, 2000; Shelton, Anastopoulos, & Linden, 1985) and that making such changes often benefits those who doubt their abilities (Fosterling, 1985; Kozminsky & Kozminsky, 2002; Robertson, 2000). Before teachers begin helping struggling learners to make functional attributions, they must ensure that tasks match the struggling learners' instructional or independent levels. If tasks are too difficult—if struggling learners make valid efforts but struggle and fail—attribution retraining will likely backfire.

To prevent backfiring and to increase the likelihood that attribution retraining will succeed, teachers should stress the following (Alderman, 2004; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Mushinski-Fulk & Mastropieri, 1990; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ring & Reetz, 2000):

- Success is due to controllable factors. These factors include strong, persistent effort (struggling learner: "I tried hard and did not give up. Because I tried I got 90% correct."), correct use of specific learning strategies (e.g., struggling learner: "I outlined the essay before writing it. That is one reason I did well."), and modifiable ability (e.g., struggling learner: "Because I learned to concentrate, I succeeded.").
- Failure is due to inadequate, short-lived effort, half-hearted or incorrect application of specific learning strategies (e.g., struggling learner: "I did not outline the essay. I got frustrated and gave up. That is why I messed up. Next time I will outline and will not quit."), or inadequate information.
- Failure is not due to permanent limitations (teacher: "Kelly, you did not outline the essay before writing it. That is why you did poorly. You are wrong: You are not 'dumb.' Let us do an outline together.").

When making functional attribution statements or teaching struggling learners to make them, teachers might follow this sequence: First, state why learners succeeded or failed, then state their degree of success (e.g., "You used the RAP strategy correctly: You read the paragraph, asked yourself what it was about, and put the main idea and two important details in your own words. Because you did this, you got all the answers right. Nice job."). This helps counter the possibility that first stating value-laden, short-cut achievement words, such as *success* or *failure*, will focus learners' attention on these words to the exclusion of attributions that follow (Lyden, Chaney, Danehower, & Houston, 2002).

To broaden the sources of functional attribution training, teachers might teach struggling learners to become cross-age peer tutors. Yasutake and Bryan (1996) did this in an innovative experiment in Chicago public school classes. They taught elementary and middle school students with learning disabilities and students at risk for referral for special education assessment to tutor younger children, to attribute tutees' correct answers to ability and effort, and to offer strategy suggestions for incorrect responses. They found that students had a profound influence on one another, that attribution training appeared "to have had a generalized impact on students' self-perceived competence … [that] the combination of peer tutoring with attribution training influenced [the tutors' and tutees'] self-perceived competence in a dramatic and positive way" (see discussion, paragraph 3).

Conclusion

The *what to do* and *what to say* strategies in this article do not promise miracles. They do not always work. But often they do (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997), and they improve struggling learners' self-efficacy, which in turn helps improve their motivation to succeed academically and their academic performance.

By focusing on self-efficacy and using the strategies presented here, teachers can help struggling learners develop a more accurate, optimistic, "can do" attitude. By helping them replace the destructive pattern of low self-efficacy perceptions that cause "maladaptive academic behaviors, avoidance of courses and careers, and diminishing school interest and achievement" (Pajares, 2003, p. 153), teachers can set students on a more productive and satisfying life path: "Beliefs of personal competence ultimately become habits of thinking that serve [students] throughout their lives" (p. 153). And this is the ultimate responsibility of teachers.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Howard Margolis, EdD, is a professor of special education and reading at Queens College of the City University of New York. His research interests include student motivation, Individualized Education Program (IEP) development, reading disabilities, and conflict resolution. **Patrick P. McCabe,** PhD, is an associate professor in the Graduate Literacy Education Program at St. John's University, Queens, New York. His research interests include self-efficacy, self-regulated learning, and reader motivation. Address: Howard Margolis, 1067 Pendleton Court, Voorhees, NJ 08043; e-mail: hm08043@yahoo.com

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