

Making the Connection between Increased Student Learning and Reflective Practice

by Betsy Chase, Richard Germundsen, Joan Cady Brownstein, and Linda Schaak Distad

Reflective Practice Groups



High Teacher Efficacy



Increased Student Learning

Teacher efficacy, or teachers' belief in their effectiveness, is an essential but often overlooked component of the student-performance equation. Studies of teacher efficacy commissioned by the Rand Corporation in the 1970s show a clear link between teacher efficacy and student achievement.¹ Other studies that followed confirmed the findings of the Rand study.² We will explain in this article how sustained teacher reflection can be a route to increased teacher efficacy.

When teachers engage in reflective practice, they improve their teaching effectiveness, leading to increased student performance. In our work with reflective practice groups (RPGs), teachers pointed to changes in their teaching and labeled five specific areas as beneficial to student learning.³ These areas include classroom management, getting students organized, teacher confidence, expanded teaching repertoire, and professional reflection. This article explains the reflective process these teachers used and how participation in reflective practice groups increased teachers' sense of efficacy.

What is teacher efficacy?

Efficacy is a teacher's belief that he or she has the skills necessary to effect positive changes in student learning. These skills include both maintaining a classroom climate conducive to learning and choosing the most appropriate strategies to

teach the various subjects. Recent studies indicate that a teacher's sense of efficacy makes the greatest difference with low-achieving students.⁴ A teacher's confident disposition toward learning is transferred to students.

Why is teacher efficacy important?

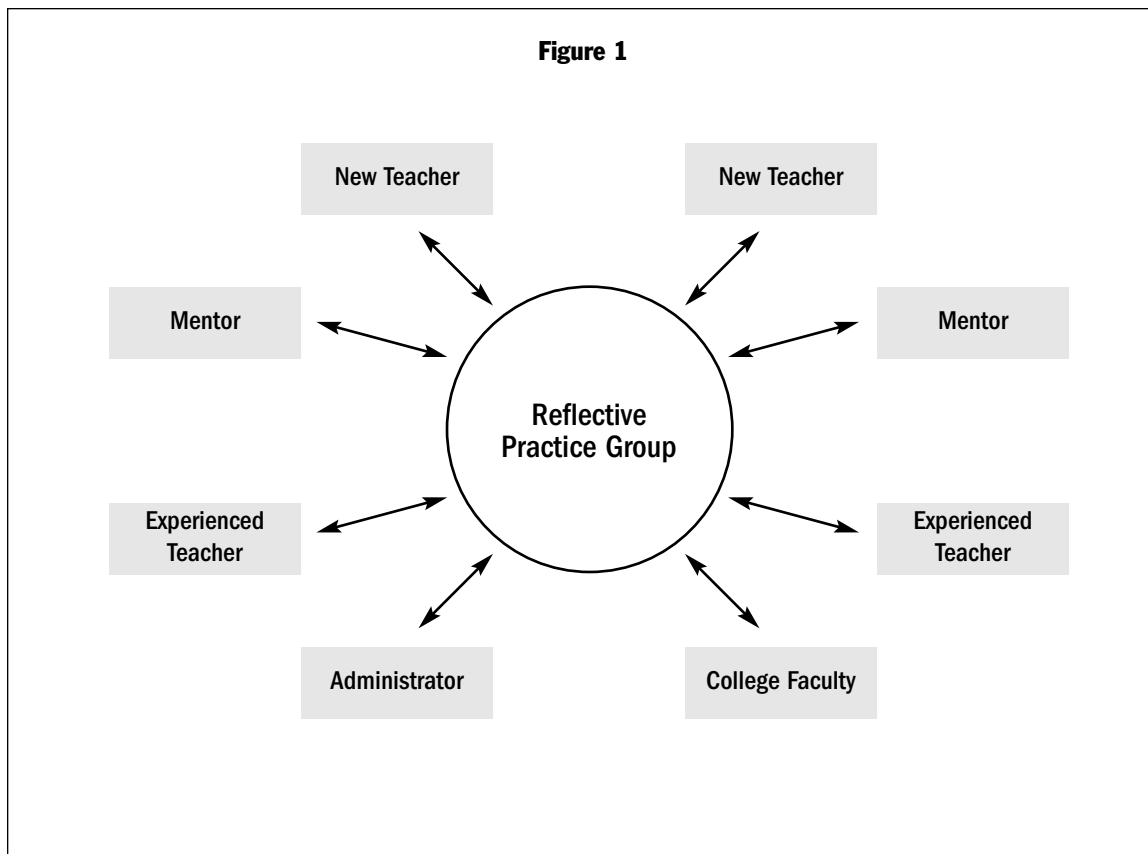
Teachers with a high sense of efficacy communicate high expectations for performance to students, put greater emphasis on instruction and learning with students, are aware of student accomplishments, are less likely to give up on low-achieving students, and are more likely to work harder on their behalf. Additionally, teachers with high efficacy are more open to implementing and experimenting with new teaching strategies because they do not view change as an affront to their own abilities as teachers. In contrast, teachers with low efficacy tend to doubt that any amount of effort by teachers, or schools in general, will affect achievement of low-performing students. These teachers are much less likely to persist in their problem-solving efforts with low-performing students. In sum, high teacher efficacy creates direct and predictable

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links to increased student achievement, especially for low-performing students.

What are reflective practice groups?

The teachers in this study worked in a suburban school district that was implementing a new teacher-induction program. One component of the induction process was placing all new teachers into reflective practice groups (RPGs). These groups of ten to twelve people included several new teachers, their mentors, several veteran teachers, administrators, and a teacher educator from a higher education institution. (See Figure 1.)

The RPGs met monthly after school for the entire academic year. They followed a systematic and democratic process: all participants shared in facilitating the group over the course of the year. Members shared challenging teaching situations via a ten-step process. (See Table 1.)

How do reflective practice groups increase teacher efficacy?

Although we did not directly ask the teachers to link reflective practice with their sense of teaching efficacy, their responses indicate that they saw a connection. In an end-of-the-year

questionnaire, teachers said that reflective practice groups made them feel more confident, affirmed, and validated. Participants felt more capable of finding effective teaching strategies for their students because they had increased repertoires of teaching skills created by the structured sharing their RPG supported. The RPG process promoted systematic reflection on their teaching, which led to improvements in their practice. Finally, the teachers believed that their abilities to organize and manage classrooms had increased since their involvement in RPGs. Table 2 illustrates how reflective practice groups create a link to teacher efficacy.

Teachers' comments fell into five categories: 1) classroom management and student behavior; 2) facilitation of student organization; 3) teacher confidence; 4) expanded repertoire of teacher skills; and 5) increased teacher reflection. (See Figure 2.) For new teachers, in particular, classroom management and student behavior presented special challenges. They spoke of shared strategies and new approaches:

"I learned of a few discipline tricks that helped settle my class down."

Table 1
RPG TEN-STEP PROCESS

1. Convene the group.
2. Each participant takes two to three minutes to share a personal situation that occurred in the school setting and that the individual did not know how to handle.
3. The group chooses one episode for an in-depth discussion.
4. The episode is retold in detail by the originator. The person tells the objective facts as well as the personal emotions that were associated with the episode. The other participants ask for further detail when the person finishes.
5. The participants take five minutes to think and write hypotheses for the rationale behind the action the narrator took. The hypotheses are concise statements that include psychological, pedagogical, and institutional factors. The statements might begin, "A teacher in such a situation might feel frustrated because . . ."
6. The participants share the hypotheses that were written. This begins to suggest the teaching theory behind the episode.
7. The episode narrator responds to the hypotheses and attempts to relate them to the experience that was described. The narrator begins to uncover some of the internalized knowledge, practice, and self-awareness associated with the episode.
8. The group begins a discussion about the effects a teacher in such an episode had on students. The group asks, "What did the students learn from this?"
9. The group discusses how things could have been handled differently. What benefits would result from an alternative approach? Why am I doing things the way I do?
10. The group summarizes and debriefs.

Figure 2
TEACHER EFFICACY INDICATORS

- Teacher feels confident, affirmed, validated
- Teacher has increased repertoire of teaching skills.
- Teacher regularly reflects on teaching.
- Teacher believes s/he is skilled at managing and organizing a classroom.

Table 2
DATA FROM REFLECTIVE PRACTICE GROUPS

	Beginning Teachers	Experienced Teachers
Did you gain any insights from your colleagues in the RPG?	100%	95%
Did the RPG help you to improve as a teacher?	73%	63%

"I've learned to hold students more accountable for their actions as well as create clearer expectations and consequences, not rules and punishments."

A second theme was teacher clarity about structures to foster student organization:

"I think student performance has improved because of my attendance at RPG meetings. My class is more organized."

"In a couple of specific cases I have seen struggling students become much more focused and improve their habits."

A larger number of teachers spoke of increased satisfaction, affirmation, validation, and confidence:

"I believe I have become more confident as a teacher and I am able to tap into my building's resources because of this"

group and the knowledge I have gained this first year."

"I think that my students have benefited from RPGs because I feel more supported in the actions I take."

"Student performance was improved because I became more confident."

"When a person is happy and feeling positive about their job and colleagues (support, warmth) they are able to really concentrate on their jobs and students. Also ... [just as] we can be open and thrive in a safe, supportive, and structured environment, so too, students need this to be successful and happy at school."

The largest number of responses addressed an increased repertoire of teacher skills. Here teachers spoke of gaining new strategies and building better relationships with peers:

"I have used some of the strategies we discussed in our RPGs and I feel they have helped my classroom atmosphere and teaching, e.g., attendance policies, discipline issues, parent-teacher conferences, and curriculum writing."

"Student performance has improved because I am a more effective teacher. It is easier for me to make my points because I am prepared for possible actions by my students. I have been able to use more techniques that I have learned through the RPG to raise student achievement."

Finally, teachers talked about becoming more reflective, commonly using "step back" terminology:

"I feel that I have taken the time to step back and look at what I am doing as an educator and make some positive adjustments. It has helped give me a fresh perspective on my classroom."

"I liked how I could stand back and look at the student behavior and actions in class ... how to self-evaluate my lessons, discipline and consequences."

"Generally, it has helped me to perhaps step back and take a fresh look at classroom situations and rethink how to deal with challenging situations. The RPG has helped me look at classroom challenges in a more objective way."



Why do reflective practice groups increase teacher efficacy?

Teachers increase their teaching efficacy because reflective practice groups allow them to discuss issues related to their practice in an environment free from evaluation. In other words, some of the barriers usually associated with seeking advice from colleagues are eliminated. The discussions of the group are completely confidential. Group members get candid feedback without the fear of reprisal or fear that the information might be included in a performance review.

Another strong component of the RPGs is their interdisciplinary nature. In education, it is customary for teachers of the same grade level or discipline to meet and plan together. But in reflective practice groups, the members represent a cross-section of schools, grades, specialties, and disciplines. Groups comprise classroom teachers, social workers, English language learner teachers, K-12 specialists, and special education teachers. Over time, the interdisciplinary structure of RPGs produces greater understanding of shared purpose among the educators and a more aligned focus on students and curriculum throughout.

The combination of a supportive environment for collegial sharing and increased understanding of the bigger picture within the school setting is important. By the end of the year in reflective practice groups, teachers were making comments such as the following:

"I have become more empathetic to other teachers—more able to look outside myself and therefore have become a better team member."

"I find myself teaming more and asking for the perspectives of others, and ultimately this pays off in improved student performance and to the collaborative effort."

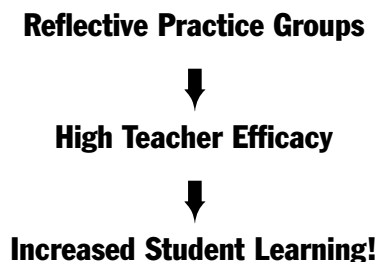
These comments correspond with measures of high teacher efficacy.⁵ Midgely, Feldhauser, and Eccles found that teachers who "strongly agreed" with the following statements scored the highest in teacher efficacy:

If I try really hard I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated student.

By trying a different teaching method, I can significantly affect a student's achievement.

I am certain I am making a difference in the lives of my students.

Bolstered by a clearly identified support system, teachers are more likely to accept challenges as a normal part of professional practice. Their confidence is affirmed by increases in their repertoires of teaching skills and their abilities to manage productive classroom environments. Systematic, collaborative reflection causes teachers to identify the links to success in the classroom. All in all, this is a powerful equation:



Notes

1. David Armor et al., "Analysis of the School Preferred Reading Program in Selected Los Angeles Minority Schools," Report No. R-2007-LAUSD (Santa Monica, Calif.: The Rand Corporation, 1976); Paul Berman, et al., "Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change," *Factors Affecting Implementation and Continuation 7* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1977).
2. Carolyn Benz et al., "Personal Teaching Efficacy: Developmental Relationships in Education," *Journal of Educational Research* 85 (1992): 274-285; M. Frank Pajares, "Teachers' Beliefs and Educational Research: Cleaning Up a Messy Construct," *Review of Educational Research* 62 (1992): 307-332.
3. Joan M. Cady, Linda Schaak Distad, and Richard Germundsen, "Reflective Practice Groups in Teacher Induction: Building Professional Community via Experiential Knowledge," *Education* 118 (1998): 459-470; Linda Schaak Distad et al., "Putting Their Heads Together," *Journal of Staff Development* 21 (2000): 49-51.
4. Rose Allinder, "An Examination of the Relationship between Teacher Efficacy and Curriculum-based Measurement and Student Achievement," *Remedial and Special Education* 16 (1995): 247-254; Megan Tschannen-Moran, Anita Woolfolk Hoy, and Wayne K. Hoy, "Teacher Efficacy: Its Meaning and Measure," *Review of Educational Research* 68 (1998): 202-248.
5. Carol Midgely, Harriet Feldhauser, and Jacquelynne Eccles, "Change in Teacher Efficacy and Student Self- and Task-Related Beliefs in Mathematics during the Transition to Junior High School," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 81 (1989): 247-258.