

# Inviting Self-Efficacy:

## The Role of Invitations in the Development of Confidence and Competence in Writing

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Careful the things you say,

Children will listen.

Careful the spell you cast...

Sometimes the spell may last

Past what you can see.

Stephen Sondheim

*Into the Woods*

Social cognitive theorists contend that the beliefs individuals hold about their abilities powerfully influence the ways in which they will behave (Bandura, 1986). Of all beliefs, *self-efficacy*, people's judgments of their capabilities to accomplish specific tasks, is regarded the most influential arbiter in human agency and helps explain why people's behavior may differ markedly even when they have similar knowledge and skills. Bandura argued that what people do is often better predicted by their *beliefs* about their capabilities than by what they are actually capable of accomplishing. This is consistent with the view of researchers who argue that the potent nature of beliefs makes them a *filter* through which new phenomena are interpreted and evaluated (Pajares, 1992).

In the area of academic achievement, researchers agree that academic self-efficacy beliefs are strongly predictive of academic performance (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). One area that has received little attention but that

has important implications for understanding academic motivation and performance involves self-efficacy beliefs related to writing. Like reading, writing is a foundational academic skill, and understanding the role that self-efficacy may play in its development is a question of some import.

## **Rationale for the Study**

The few researchers who have explored the influence of self-efficacy beliefs on writing performance agree that the two constructs are related (McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer, 1985; Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989). For example, Pajares and Johnson (1993, in press) used multiple regression analyses to find that a model with writing self-efficacy, outcome expectations, writing apprehension, personal self-efficacy, and writing performance at beginning of term predicted the writing performance of college undergraduates at end of term and accounted for 68% of the variance in the model. Only writing self-efficacy and pre-performance, however, had significant effects.

Pajares and Johnson (in press) demonstrated that competence in an area such as writing can be informed by exploring the self-efficacy individuals bring to that competency. However, they also found that, although self-efficacy was a strong predictor of writing competence, incongruities in the interplay between the two constructs occurred. That is, some excellent writers reported low levels of confidence, and, though less frequent, some students with weak writing skills reported high levels of confidence.

Bandura (1986) suggested that self-efficacy beliefs are developed primarily through enactive attainment; that is, people's confidence grows as they attempt and complete tasks. Success increases confidence; failure diminishes it. But Bandura also acknowledged that verbal persuasions, the messages individuals receive from others, can powerfully influence the development of efficacy beliefs. The purpose of this study was to explore those messages—to investigate students' own perceptions of the evolution of their efficacy beliefs about writing and of the relationship between these beliefs and their writing competence.

## **Method**

Schunk (1991) noted that, although quantitative methods have typically been used in studying self-efficacy, qualitative methods such as case studies or oral histories are needed to gain additional insights, and Munby (1984) suggested that qualitative methodology is especially appropriate to the study of beliefs. Consequently, I used qualitative methods consistent with those outlined by Merriam (1988). I interviewed the four students from Pajares and Johnson's (in press) study who reported the highest and lowest scores

along the self-efficacy/performance dimensions: Mary reported very high writing self-efficacy and was judged the most gifted writer; Sue also reported very high self-efficacy but her writing was judged to be of poor quality; John reported low writing self-efficacy and was judged to have poor writing skills; Jane also expressed low self-efficacy in spite of being judged a gifted writer. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was semi-structured, with follow-up questions designed to clarify key issues. Each was taped and transcribed, with the protocols appropriately coded and analyzed (Spradley, 1979).

## **Results and Discussion**

One of the expectations of qualitative research is that findings ultimately "emerge" from data. In spite of this expectation, most researchers approach data interpretation from a particular theoretical perspective, and conclusions inform the basic tenets of that theory. Mixing theoretical perspectives can be dangerous, for they are normally based on incompatible assumptions. This is all to explain that, as I dove into my protocols and began coding and analysis, I did so with, I hope, an open mind, albeit one seeking to gain some understanding of the sources of self-efficacy from the perspective of social cognitive theory.

As I listened to, read, and coded the students' interview responses, what "emerged" were stories whose interpretations, though not incompatible with Bandura's (1986) description of the sources of self-efficacy information (and hence interpretable within the framework of social cognitive theory), were perhaps more compatible with another theoretical perspective--that of invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 1984). These students spoke of developing their beliefs about writing not always primarily from their enactive attainments, as social cognitive theory would predict, but rather from the verbal persuasions (or dissuasions) they received as children. First, the stories.

### **Mary - Unintentionally Invited**

Mary was a 21-year-old elementary preservice teacher in her senior year. She and Jane were identified by Pajares and Johnson (in press) as the strongest writers in their study. Mary was also a confident writer, reporting the highest self-efficacy score of all participants. As she explained, she "always knew [she] was a good writer." She had grown up in a home where books abounded, and she recalled often being read to as a child. She did not believe, however, that either her parents or teachers ever "made any fuss" about her writing.

- I got good grades and all, and everybody mostly liked the stories I wrote, but nobody ever made any fuss. I was always in the high classes, and I guess my teachers expected me to do well. And my parents, they also expected me and my sisters to do well, but they never made a fuss either.

How, then, did she come to know she was a good writer?

- I always got good grades on the things I wrote. Also, my sisters and I would write plays and perform them for my parents. Sometimes for their friends too. And everybody liked them. And we'd read some of our stories to my parents. They weren't real helpful [laughing], but they listened.

Mary's parents did not explicitly encourage or praise her writing efforts, but they were attentive and supportive. They created an atmosphere in which Mary and her sisters found a patient and appreciative audience, and one that provided time and attention. Mary, however, never had the feeling that there was any intentionality to her parents' efforts. Had she ever asked her parents if they purposely encouraged her writing?

- Sort of. We got into a conversation once about bringing us up, because I was taking a child development class and we had this assignment to ask our parents their "childrearing strategies" [laughs]. They told me they didn't have any strategies and that all that psychology stuff is silly. They said they just did what came naturally.

Her teachers also took her excellence for granted, maintaining high expectations and rewarding her efforts, though they never explicitly encouraged her writing activities. Their apparent lack of intentionality sometimes resulted in what Purkey and Novak (1984) described as a lack of a "consistent stance" (p. 19).

- I don't remember my teachers ever telling me I was good. It sort of came with the territory in the high classes. I got good grades, which I guess is a way of being told you're good. Actually, I even got good grades when I wrote what I thought was pretty lousy. But you know how it is once you get a reputation.

Mary developed strong confidence in her writing partly because, as Bandura (1986) would suggest, she succeeded at it. It is also evident, however, that the unintentional invitations of parents and teachers helped create and nurture that confidence and provided the framework on which her competence was built. She was a fortunate child. One wonders, of course,

what additional boundaries Mary's confidence and competence may have exceeded had the invitations been more consistently and intentionally extended.

### **Sue - Intentionally Invited**

Sue reported a high writing self-efficacy unmatched by actual competence. Her essay was judged the weakest of the study, and her grammar, mechanics, and spelling were poor. Sue's case presented me with a most intriguing question: How does an academically weak student develop confidence in skills she does not possess? The answer was both poignant and telling.

At the age of eight, Sue suffered a brain injury in an automobile accident. After several operations and a long absence, she returned to school, where she received special education, often in one-to-one instruction with specialists. Wanting to help, Sue's parents worked with the specialists to develop strategies and techniques to use at home. She graduated from high school, was admitted to college, and was presently a senior completing her education program. During the interview she was candid, good-humored, and disarming. After she had explained about the accident and subsequent academic struggles, I asked her to explain the reason for her high confidence in her writing. She smiled.

- Because I *can* do it...eventually. I mean, I don't do it at first. Who does? Well, that's not true. My roommate does. And she helps me, too. I just redo it until it's done better. So I know I can do it.

Sue attributed this robust confidence to her parents and teachers.

- My mom, she was great. She always said I could do anything anybody else did. "Try, try again," that was her broken record. Even when I cried or got frustrated...she wouldn't let me give up. Teachers, too. Actually, sometimes I'm not sure if it's my confidence in me or their confidence in me I'm confident in. You know what I mean?

Sue told of incidents in which either her parents or a particular teacher saw her through a rough time. For example, a fellow student once made a loud, unkind remark during class about her "really lousy spelling."

- I had spelled a word so that it turned out a nasty word, you know? I went home in tears, because everybody laughed. I think I expected my mom to hug me and make me feel better and all that, you know, that sort of thing. But she didn't. She told me it was funny. And she

and my teacher got me into the spelling bee! Can you believe it? I lost in the first round, but everybody applauded. Even the girl! [who had made the unkind remark]

With encouragement and support, Sue discovered that perseverance paid off—"Sometimes I got pretty sick of the get back on the horse bit, but I guess it's that horse that got me here." As was evident in the spelling incident, Sue's mother and teacher had "developed the ability to approach even the most difficult situation in a[n] . . . inviting manner" (Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 20). The invitations were both intentional and "artful." They did not increase competence *per se*. Instead, they set in motion a series of effects whereby, in spite of difficult circumstances, the consistent and sensitive invitations she received created and strengthened self-efficacy beliefs that, as Bandura (1986) might predict, resulted in increased effort and persistence and in lower anxiety about her disabilities that ensured adequate performance . . . "eventually."

### **John - Unintentionally Disinvited**

A senior in the teacher education program, John wanted to be an elementary school physical education teacher. He was selected for the study because he best represented a student whose low confidence in his writing ability was, unfortunately, complemented by equally low competence. He wrote poorly, believed he wrote poorly, and had little hope he could ever write well.

- I never liked writing. I was never any good at it, and I guess I never wanted to work hard on something I wasn't any good at and didn't like anyway. I remember doing a Christmas card for my parents in kindergarten, or first grade, I can't remember, and I brought it home and I had misspelled my name. I think I got the h and o backwards. And my dad laughed and said something like, you know, chip off the old block and "You better learn to throw a football, son." So I did.

John learned to throw a football and developed a keen interest in athletics, but he lost all interest in writing. He became a competent student nonetheless, dealing with his poor writing ability by "doing the least [he] had to to get by." I asked if his parents or teachers ever try to change his attitude toward writing.

- No...I don't think so. But, you know, I was sort of a jock, and I was good at that, and they liked that too. I didn't like [writing], and I wasn't good at it, and I don't think anybody thought I needed it.

John seldom read, then or now, and there were no books in the home. Most of his time was spent "watching TV, sports, or Nintendo." His parents did not express disappointment with his average grades in English ("they sort of took it for granted") and showed no interest in his written work. While in college, he dealt with his lack of interest and poor ability by avoiding courses that emphasized composition. Asked if his lack of interest, confidence, and ability hurt him during his college career, he answered

- No...well, maybe. But I still don't like [writing]. I don't really think I need it to teach PE. I mean, I gotta take these [writing] courses, but I get by. Don't get me wrong, I mean I wish I was better at it, I guess, but I don't see that you have to be.

John's is a story of benign neglect (perhaps an oxymoron in this context). Neither parents nor teachers invited him to attend to writing, but their disinventions were clearly unintentional, in a sense even well-intentioned. Contrast the response of John's father to the Christmas card with that of Sue's mother to the laughter incident. A mother's invitation encouraged increased effort and renewed pride in one child; a father's disinvention resulted in lasting disinterest and undeveloped skills in another.

### **Jane - Intentionally Disinvited**

A vivacious, humorous, and intelligent young woman in the last semester of her teacher preparation program, Jane was selected for the study because she best represented the incongruity of high competence with low self-efficacy. She represented a type of student often found in our classes--students who baffle teachers by turning in excellent work, receiving high praise and grades, but continuing to claim, come next assignment, that they still cannot do it. In Jane's case, it was a question of how a student who obviously writes well can believe that she writes poorly. Her story turned out to be a straightforward and vivid demonstration of the effects of a teacher's intentional disinventions.

Jane began her educational career in a Montessori school, and she recalled happy experiences and wonderful teachers. The school went only through third grade, however, after which she transferred to a public elementary school. She did not recall the adjustment from the open Montessorian atmosphere to the more structured environment of the public school as being overly difficult, for she had been warned to expect it. What she did not expect was the ridicule that she would come under at the hands of her new fourth grade teacher.

- I guess she thought that if you came from [the Montessori school] you were automatically dumb and wild. The first thing she told me was that she'd have to teach me manners and self-control, and she told me in front of everybody, in class. I sat there thinking, "What did I do?" I wasn't a trouble maker. I was a nice little kid. Trust me on this. I felt like Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz" and I'd just met the wicked witch of the west.

Jane's next shock came when the teacher graded and returned the first set of written assignments. She had expected a high grade, for, she strongly believed, she "had always done well at writing in Montessori."

- I don't even remember what it was on, so don't ask me. All I remember was that it was covered in red. Red everywhere, and a great big "F" circled at the top. But you know what the worst part was? She gave them out one by one, and when she came to me she gave it to me so everybody could see it. She didn't say anything. She just waited there holding up the paper, making sure everybody saw it.

Things went from bad to worse. Jane recalled a steady stream of papers "covered in red," most of them F's. During a conference, the teacher explained to her parents that the Montessori school had clearly done a poor job of academic instruction and that it would be an uphill struggle for Jane to catch up and learn to write properly. Interestingly, she was at the top of the class in reading.

Throughout the year, the teacher found many opportunities to criticize Jane's writing efforts, often publicly. By year's end Jane was still receiving failing grades. Suddenly, during fifth grade and with a new teacher, the problem vanished. She received excellent grades and often saw her papers placed on the classroom wall. But it was all to no avail. She approached every writing assignment with trepidation and "panic."

Jane does not understand why her teacher was so critical and unkind about her writing, or why she chose to belittle rather than instruct. Fortunately, there are few such teachers. Jane suspected that the problem may have been a deep-seated prejudice against children from private schools, and she thought she remembered other little girls from the Montessori school having the same problems with that teacher. Whatever the reason, the insensitive and intentional disinvitations of one teacher during a student's fourth grade destroyed a budding self-confidence that had not yet been repaired by her senior year in college. In spite of subsequent successes, Jane's confidence never returned, and she continued to approach writing assignments with anxiety. When possible, she avoided classes where writing was emphasized.



## Summary

The clear finding to emerge from this study was that the verbal persuasions that influenced the development of self-efficacy took the form of invitations or disinvitations the students had received as children. A model also emerged—one in which the relationship between self-efficacy and invitations showed that the invitational levels of functioning identified by Purkey and Novak (1984) influenced the creation and development of self-efficacy and the relationship between that confidence and subsequent competence (see Figure 1). Invitations created and increased self-efficacy beliefs; disinvitations destroyed or diminished them. The development of competence itself did not seem as directly influenced by the invitations, a finding consistent with Bandura's (1986) explanation of the *mediational* role of self-efficacy.

It is at this point wise to caution the reader to the uneasy alliance between generalizability and case study findings. Clearly, the students in this study are not representative of all students in all contexts. As such, the model represents an effort to put the stories of these four students in a perspective that may inform subsequent research and theory. If the oral histories ring universal, and if the interpretations sound plausible and reasonable, then my confidence is well-founded on the reliability and validity of both the model and my conclusions.

Invitational theory traces its parentage to the perceptual tradition and to self-concept theory. Although self-efficacy and self-concept represent different theoretical perspectives and involve different theoretical assumptions, Gorrell (1990) argued that findings related to self-efficacy will ultimately strengthen the self-concept/achievement relationship. This exploratory study may represent a first step in that direction. Clearly, both self-efficacy theory and invitational theory offer promising directions that may help educators and researchers understand some of the ways by which they might go about the important business of helping students increase competence through confidence.

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