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Effects of a memory strategy on second-graders' performance and self-efficacy

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Abstract

This study investigated the mediating effects of learning a memory strategy on second-graders' performance of a memory task and their self-efficacy for the task. Specifically, second graders were taught a strategy for organizing words into categories to increase their ability to remember lists of words. Their predictions of how many words they would subsequently remember were taken as a measure of self-efficacy for the task. The trained students not only outperformed their untrained counterparts on the memory task, but also predicted higher levels of future performance, indicating that their efficacy for the task had increased. Quantitative data were collected to measure students' predictions and performance, while qualitative data provided insight into students' strategy use and ability to articulate their actions.

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1. Introduction

Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs about one's capabilities to execute a particular performance (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy judgments are made as people acquire information through their own mastery attainments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological indices (Schunk, 1984). Information from these sources does not automatically influence efficacy, but is weighed and used to cognitively appraise personal and situational factors influencing ability to perform a task

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(Schunk, 1990). Recent research has shown that efficacy beliefs significantly influence academic achievement. Essentially, highly efficacious students select more challenging tasks, put forth more effort, and persist longer when tackling difficult tasks (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 1990).

Although the powerful role of self-efficacy in academic achievement has now been substantiated by decades of research, most of this work has focused on older students from the intermediate grades through college (e.g., Pajares, 1996; Tuckman & Sexton, 1991). Little research has addressed what might be done earlier in school careers to promote positive efficacy beliefs. Some researchers have questioned whether children under nine years of age have the cognitive capacity to make the kind of judgments necessary for deriving self-efficacy information or the ability to articulate the judgments they do make (Deutsch & Pechmann, 1982). Yet, clearly children are beginning to develop conceptions of themselves as students during the primary school years. Given that efficacy is most malleable early in the learning experience (Bandura, 1977), what happens to young children in the first few years of school will lead them to develop self-beliefs that will become increasingly stabilized.

Finding concrete ways for parents and teachers to facilitate the development of positive self-efficacy beliefs early on is an important step. Teaching strategies that have the potential for improving performance is a tool that may also boost children's judgments that they are more efficacious for performing a task in the future.

1.1. Factors contributing to limited research

Among the more potent reasons for the paucity of research at earlier ages are young children's limited cognitive and verbal skills. Some believe children under nine years of age simply have not developed the necessary level of cognitive and reflective skills to make self-efficacy a viable concept (Kaley & Cloutier, 1984; Nicholls, 1978; Paris & Newman, 1990). They are often unable to attend simultaneously to multiple sources of information or distinguish between important or minor points, causing their self-appraisals to be relatively unstable (Bandura, 1986). Their ability to think in an organized logical fashion deteriorates when applied to abstract ideas (Berk, 2000), such as those necessary for making efficacy judgments. Limited semantic language development causes children of this age to have difficulty articulating their cognitive activities even when they are aware of them, exacerbating measurement difficulties (Berk, 2000; Deutsch & Pechmann, 1982). In addition, young children aged 5–7 have many misconceptions regarding competence. Examples of misconceptions include: a hugged student is smarter than an unhugged student (Lord, Umezaki, & Darley, 1990); children who stay in their seat, obey the teacher, and do not tease others are smart (Stipek & Tannatt, 1984); children with good work habits such as following directions, are also considered smart (Stipek, 1981). Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) found that classroom conditions influence children's ability formations whether they are realistic or not. These confounding factors combine to discourage or preclude self-efficacy research in children younger than third grade.

Nonetheless, a few promising studies of early self-efficacy lend support to additional study in this area. Collins (1985) found that lack of efficacy to use acquired

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