Burnout among teachers: theoretical setting, top-down innovation, and social relations
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Chapter 1

§ 3 THE SELF-EFFICACY THEORY

3.1 The self-efficacy construct

We focus on Bandura’s self-efficacy theory in the next few sections because of its importance in the individual's behavior. The self-efficacy theory is based on the idea that the individual strives to exercise control of his own life, which is a striking human quality (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1989, 1997). The self-efficacy theory is part of the social cognitive theory that stresses the individual's pursuit of control, the cooperation with others, and the fact that man is a cognitive creature. The self-efficacy theory exclusively deals with the role played by personal factors in the individual's behavior, such as cognitions, motivations, and emotions. It is one of the solid points of the self-efficacy theory that it can provide individuals with explicit guidelines on how to exercise control over the way they live, whether that is privately, socially, or professionally.

Bandura (1997, p. 3) defines self-efficacy as “(...) the beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments”. Both the courses of action and the consequences about which a person can exercise control are manifold, they may not only be concerned with actions, but with motivation, thought, and emotions as well. The consequences are also various and concerned with someone’s resilience to cope with misfortunes, or to become aware of thought patterns obstructing or stimulating intended actions. Self-efficacy is also related to stress (Bandura, 1997; Vrugt, 1995) and depressive feelings (Kanfer & Zeiss, 1983; Kavanagh, 1992) someone experiences when dealing with taxing environmental demands.

The definition clearly shows that self-efficacy is not about someone’s skills. It is about someone’s belief in or judgment about his skills. This judgment precedes the actual performance, which in turn determines the outcome of the action that follows. Bandura (1997, p. 20) states that the individual's expectations about outcomes of his behavior (outcome expectations) or beliefs whether his actions affect outcomes (locus of control) are clearly different from his beliefs whether he can produce certain actions (self-efficacy). Another important feature is that the self-efficacy theory deals with human agency as a key factor throughout the individual's life. The word agency refers to acts done intentionally. So, accidentally spilling coffee over someone's suit is beyond the scope of the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). However, the consequences of these intentional actions may be wanted but also unintended or unwanted.
Self-efficacy beliefs are domain and task specific (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2002; Woodruff & Cashman, 1993). Implications of the self-efficacy theory can be applied to the domain of teaching. The way a teacher works is definitely influenced by his self-efficacy beliefs in a particular domain of the teaching job, e.g. instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2002).

3.2 Self-efficacy and teaching

Self-efficacy beliefs are linked to a particular domain of activities, although there is transfer of efficacy beliefs across activities or settings (Bandura, 1997, p.50). Or in other words, domain specific self-efficacies are not entirely independent, but partly based on general self-regulatory capabilities (Bandura, 1997, p. 54). The consequence is that a teacher may have strong self-efficacy beliefs in the domain of explaining subject matter, but weak self-efficacy beliefs in coping with disruptive student behavior.

Teaching efficacy has often been put forward as a general concept. Researchers of the RAND organization defined teacher efficacy as "the extent to which the teacher believes he has the capacity to affect student performance" (Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977, p.137). The self-efficacy level was measured with two items that were added to a long questionnaire. In the next few years many studies on teacher self-efficacy followed. These studies were related to important teaching variables such as student achievement and motivation (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989; Moore & Esselman, 1992), teachers' adoption of innovations (Evers, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2002; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bishop, 1992), teachers' classroom management strategies (Woolfolk et al., 1990), and teacher stress (Bliss & Finneran, 1991; Parkay et al., 1988).

Two conceptual approaches provide the foundations for the concept of teacher efficacy beliefs, i.e. Rotter's social learning theory, and Bandura's social cognitive theory, in particular the self-efficacy theory (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). The 16-item Teacher Efficacy Scale formulated by Gibson and Dembo (1984) is regarded as the standard instrument for measuring teacher efficacy beliefs (Ross, 1994, 1998). Gibson and Dembo (1984) assumed that the teacher self-efficacy construct was based on two dimensions, i.e. General Teaching Efficacy (GTE) and Personal Teaching Efficacy (PTE). The first dimension refers to the perceived capability of teachers in general to influence the students' learning process positively in the face of external restraints. The second dimension refers to
the teacher's ability to teach students something to the effect that he makes the difference in the students' learning.

Research revealed that the Teacher Efficacy Scale, in spite of Gibson and Dembo's assumption, does not assess teacher efficacy in specific domains of activities as Bandura posits (1997), for instance in the task domain, the interpersonal domain, and the organizational domain (Cherniss, 1993). To obviate the drawback of the Teacher Efficacy Scale a new instrument was devised by Brouwers & Tomic (2001). This tripartite instrument appears to support the self-efficacy theory, which posits that self-efficacy beliefs are linked to specific activities. In our empirical studies we used (parts of) this instrument to assess the teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in a number of specific domains.

Some studies will be discussed briefly in the next few paragraphs to show the importance of the self-efficacy theory, especially concentrated on self-efficacy beliefs in the educational domain.

In research concerning the introduction and implementation of innovative educational programs a relation was found between self-efficacy beliefs and the successful and actual implementation of these programs (De Mesquita & Drake, 1994; Guskey, 1988; Sparks, 1988; Stein & Wang, 1988). The high efficacy teachers valued the innovations more than the teachers with weak self-efficacy beliefs did.

Self-efficacy is also important for the relation between teachers and ill-behaved pupils. Research reveals that teachers having strong self-efficacy beliefs are prepared to accept a higher degree of responsibility for disruptive pupil behavior (Kauffman et al., 1989; Meyer & Foster, 1988). Teachers having weak self-efficacy beliefs seem to shun challenges and reduce their attempts or even stop trying to help pupils with behavioral disorders (Kauffman & Wong, 1991).

It was also shown that teachers trained to help pupils with alcohol and drugs problems benefited from strong self-efficacy beliefs. Because of this they were quite confident they could recognize pupils having these problems and they were actually prepared to do something about it (Kaufman Kantor, Caudill, & Ungerleider, 1992).

Lee, Dedrick and Smith (1991) found a relation between self-efficacy beliefs and the type of classroom control used by the teacher. Non-cooperative pupils will weaken the teacher's self-efficacy beliefs. In this case teachers will often fall back on strategies and skills pertaining to the domain of discipline in stead of the educational domain.

Although the predictability of teacher behavior is partly decided by self-efficacy
beliefs, the brief discussion of the studies mentioned before once more stress the basic principle that the strength of self-efficacy has to be measured separately for each domain of activities.

3.3 Self-efficacy beliefs: variety and development

Bandura (1997) posits that someone’s self-efficacy beliefs vary along three dimensions. First, they differ in level. Sometimes an individual believes he is able to tackle difficult tasks, other tasks, however, will be performed on a simple level. Second, efficacy beliefs differ in strength. Strong efficacy beliefs will cause someone to persevere in his attempts to finish a task successfully, and difficult tasks are considered to be challenges instead of obstacles to be evaded. A teacher with strong self-efficacy beliefs will for example do anything to influence pupils’ motivations to do their best at school (Weber & Omotani, 1994). Third, the generality of the efficacy beliefs is the judgment of someone in how many domains he will be efficacious. Some people have strong efficacy beliefs in many domains whereas others judge themselves to be efficacious in only a few domains (Bandura, 1997).

When outcome control and self-efficacy control are compared, the difference is the following. Self-efficacy control takes place before the action is started. Outcome control offers physical, social and self-evaluative information after the action has been completed.

The self-efficacy theory posits that human behavior can be attributed to the self, and self-efficacy adherents therefore reject a deterministic look on people’s lives. This view offers important understandings in how to deal with environmental stressors.

3.4 Change of self-efficacy: behavioral plasticity

It is very important for completely burned out or almost burned out teachers to show some degree of flexibility in their willingness to change their working habits and attitudes. Persons who are low in self-esteem, often found in burnout individuals, are more susceptible to external influence than those of high self-esteem. This faculty is called behavioral plasticity (Brockner, 1988; Eden & Aviram, 1993; Eden & Kinnar, 1991).

As self-efficacy is characterized by its malleability (Eden, 1988; Eden & Zuk, 1995; Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Ross, 1995, 1998; Ross, McKeifer, & Hogaboam, 1997) persons with higher levels of behavioral plasticity stand a good chance that their greater willingness to accept external help will strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs.
A group of teachers got the opportunity to take part in an intervention program to enhance their career self-efficacy feelings, which had deteriorated owing to feelings of disappointment because of not having been able to realize the expectations they originally had about their jobs. It appeared that by strengthening self-efficacy beliefs in this domain the negative effects were repelled (Bush, Powel, & Herzberg, 1993). Similar results were found in cases in which self-efficacy strengthening was used to speed up unemployed workers to find new jobs (Eden & Aviram, 1993). Remarkably, workers having weak self-efficacy beliefs appeared to have the strongest behavioral plasticity attitudes and they could therefore be very much influenced in the matter of strengthening self-efficacy beliefs concerning particular skills.

Maddux and Lewis (1995) tried to find out whether an intervention program could help people boost their self-efficacy beliefs. They posit that the self-efficacy beliefs can be strengthened by interventions, or that interventions offer possibilities to experience successes in domains where people have experienced feelings of despair and demoralization.

Soodak and Podell (1996) stress the importance of a correct diagnosis before deciding on someone's participation in a self-efficacy intervention program. Interventions should be linked in with the domain in which self-efficacy beliefs prove to be weak.

The main sources of information self-efficacy beliefs are constructed from are successfully performed actions (Bandura, 1997). As successes depend on internal performance standards it is important for teachers not to set unrealistically ambitious goals (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980). Training's programs should therefore first test, and if necessary train and develop someone's competence in a specific task domain, before his self-efficacy level is likely to increase.

3.5 Burnout related to weak self-efficacy beliefs

As the present work studies burnout among teachers in a theoretical framework, it belongs to the conceptual phase of research on burnout (see section 2.1). This approach helps unify burnout research so that social scientists may work out better instruments to diagnose the onset and development of the syndrome. Moreover, the development of prevention and intervention programs will be facilitated (Brouwers, 2000).

There are many studies on negative stress in relation to self-efficacy (Bliss & Finneran, 1991; Greenwood, Olejnik, & Parkay, 1990; Punch & Tuettemann, 1990; Vrugt, 1995). The main outcome is that teachers having strong self-efficacy beliefs view difficult
tasks as a challenge and will consequently experience positive stress instead of negative stress that is believed to be related to burnout in the long term (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993).

Leiter (1992) views burnout as a crisis in self-efficacy. He asserts that burnout can be considered as "... a breakdown in the occupational domain of a person's efficacy feelings" (p.110). It was found that teachers who are professionally satisfied, so who are not burned out, have strong self-efficacy beliefs (Wu & Short, 1996). In a study on German teachers Schmitz (2001) presented results showing the protective function of self-efficacy beliefs within the burnout process. Cherniss (1993) worded the importance of self-efficacy very aptly "... one must feel efficacious in areas that are meaningful and significant in order to escape burnout" (p.141).

The conclusion is that the teacher's observation of his self-efficacy beliefs plays a significant role in the possible development of burnout. Already at an early stage, self-efficacy beliefs may function as a buffer against negative stress coming from non-realizable personal expectations (Jayaratne & Chess, 1986).

As self-efficacy is about the beliefs in one's competence to successfully perform actions, teachers first of all need competencies that can serve as a barrier to burnout. Van Dierendonck et al. (2001) posit that primary prevention of burnout should be focused on the increase of someone's competence. However, according to the self-efficacy theory strong beliefs in one's own capabilities will add to an optimum performance of tasks.