

## **Introduction**

### *Description of the General Research Area of Interest*

Children with learning disabilities often experience significant academic and social-emotional difficulties (Lackaye, Margalit, Ziv, & Ziman, 2006). As they struggle—and sometimes fail—to meet academic expectations, children may acquire negative beliefs about their academic capabilities (Lackaye et. al., Levine, 2002). These personal beliefs interact with children's preexisting skills and abilities to influence learning and motivation (Schunk, 2003).

One type of personal belief that influences scholastic and social-emotional functioning is academic self-efficacy (Lackaye et al., 2006; Schunk, 2003). Research has consistently suggested that children with learning disabilities have lower levels of academic self-efficacy (Frederickson & Jacobs, 2001 as cited by Lackaye et. al). Compared to children with high self-efficacy, children with low self-efficacy are less likely to participate in school, work hard, and persist with challenging tasks (Lackaye et. al).

In the last two decades, the body of research supporting self-efficacy has grown (Jinks & Lorschach, 2003). Research now suggests that self-efficacy can be protected, built, or modified in the classroom (Jinks et. al.). In order to foster academic achievement and motivation, academic self-efficacy should be promoted in all children, and especially vulnerable children, like those with learning disabilities.

### *Research Question*

#### *Hypothesis.*

The purpose of the proposed study is to investigate how children with learning disabilities can be supported in developing academic self-efficacy. It is hypothesized that teaching goal setting techniques to a fourth-grade girl with a specific learning disability will

influence the child's perceived sense of academic self-efficacy as measured by the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale.

*Research Design.*

This study has been designed to inform the practice of the researcher, who seeks to improve the quality of literacy remediation instruction she provides to children with learning disabilities. The study is designed as mixed-methods action-research which will begin with a case study of a student at the San Mateo Reading Clinic and proceed to a single-subject action-research study with the same student.

*Operational Definitions.*

*Self-efficacy* is defined as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (Bandura, 1986). Academic self-efficacy refers to “children’s perceived capability to manage learning behavior, master academic subjects, and fulfill academic expectations” (Lackaye et. al., p. 112). Self-efficacy beliefs are specific and situational (Linnenbrink, 2003). Examples of academic self-efficacy include believing that one can successfully read a chapter or correctly answer comprehension questions. Self-efficacy is distinct from self-esteem and self-concept. Self-esteem refers to the emotional feelings that arise from one’s accomplishments (Linnenbrink), and self-concept, in contrast, refers to a broad, evaluative belief about one’s competence. Self-efficacy in reading may be expressed as, “I am confident that I can read and understand this chapter” while self-concept might be expressed as, “I am a good reader,” and self-esteem might be, “I feel so good that I read that chapter well.” Self-efficacy can also be differentiated from self-concept and self-esteem because it is used in reference to a goal (Schunk, 2003).

A learning goal is any knowledge or skill that an individual is consciously trying to achieve. Goals can have characteristics such as: proximity, specificity, and difficulty. Proximity of goals refers to how far into the future goals extend. For example, short-term goals can be accomplished quickly. Specificity of goals refers to the specific performance standards that are included in a goal. A specific goal might be to “read a page of text with 98% accuracy,” while a general goal might be to “read well.” Difficulty of goals refers to how easy a goal is to accomplish.

A specific learning disability, as defined by IDEA 2004, refers to a “disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations” (20 U.S.C. §1401 [30]). A child with a specific learning disability has persistent difficulties in learning in at least one area despite the presence of high-quality, research-based instruction.

*Statement of Ethical Considerations.*

It is a primary concern of this proposed study that the participant be protected from harm, that research data be kept confidential, and that any deception be dealt with ethically. Before any observation or intervention can begin, the parents must provide informed consent.

One potential source of harm is that other individuals, particularly the girl’s classmates, may learn the identity of the participant. To mitigate this danger, it will not be revealed during classroom observations that a particular child is being observed. Also, if the study is published or shared, all of the participant’s identifying details will be removed.

Another potential source of harm is that the goal-setting intervention will *decrease* academic self-efficacy. Margolis argues the likelihood of doing harm while attempting to bolster

self-efficacy is “virtually non-existent” (2005, p. 223). Though the risks are minimal, in order to protect against any possible harm, research recommendations on self-efficacy interventions will be meticulously followed, and the participant’s responses will be monitored through observation and formative evaluations. Intervention will cease at any time if there is good reason to believe that the child is not receiving benefit. The child and her guardians will also be appraised, in writing and clear spoken language, of their right to cease the intervention at any point.

During the case study, a class of students may be deceived. To protect the participant’s confidentiality, the researcher may (untruthfully) state that she is observing the class. The classroom teacher will be informed of the research goals. If possible, the observer’s presence will be minimized, so that the children’s curiosity is not aroused and no announcement is needed.

*Justification.*

Academic self-efficacy can play a vital role in academic and social-emotional functioning. Research has suggested that strong self-efficacy beliefs are tied to academic achievement (Marsh & Hau, 2004) and that, in fact, self-efficacy beliefs can play a primary role in predicting academic achievement (Klassen, 2002, as cited in Lackaye et. al, 2006). Children who feel capable of achieving their goals, not only feel differently about themselves (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2003), but are more likely to engage in and display persistence on challenging tasks (Linnenbrin & Pintrich, 2003). Social-cognitive theorists have hypothesized that self-efficacy beliefs are built and modified from four separate sources. The most powerful source of self-efficacy is mastery experiences, or, experiences in which a learner succeeds on specific tasks. (Margolis, 2005). The other sources of self efficacy are listed in order of descending power: (2) “exposure to and identification of efficacious models, (3) access to verbal persuasion and support

from others, and (4) experiences of emotional or physiological arousal in the context of task performance” (Lackaye et. al., p. 112).

Since children with learning disabilities typically have lower levels of self-efficacy, interventions that boost academic self-efficacy can promote these children’s learning and motivation (Lackaye et. al., 2006). Since mastery experiences are the most powerful sources of self-efficacy beliefs, it follows that intervention should focus on bolstering children’s perception of mastery (Schunk, 1991, as cited by Margolis, 2005).

Supporting students in establishing goals is an “important aspect” in helping children create mastery experiences (Walker, 2003, p. 175). Additionally, “goals are integral components of motivation and learning,” and achieving specific goals increases and promotes self-efficacy (Schunk, 2003, p. 163). When children set and attain goals, they have more “raw data” to reflect on, and this these “raw data” contain a larger percentage of mastery experiences (Linnenbrink et. al., 2003). For example, a student with LD may believe that he or she fails most of the time. However, after setting specific goals and measuring outcomes, the student may learn that his or her success ratio is, in fact, much higher. In other words, setting and achieving goals can result in children having more experiences of success. A consequence is higher academic self-efficacy (Schunk, 2003).

While there is a moderately large body of evidence suggesting that goal-setting can promote academic self-efficacy, many of the current “recommendations have not been directly validated by an extensive body of related research on self-efficacy and learning” (Margolis, 2005, p. 223). The proposed study, particularly the non-reductionist case study, seeks to delve more deeply into the expression of academic self-efficacy of a child with learning disabilities. This study seeks to attain information to how to promote academic self-efficacy in one student

who has a very strong work ethic, who nonetheless expresses concern about her ability to succeed at school.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

A sizable body of research assesses levels of self-efficacy in children with learning disabilities. However, there is limited research on interventions designed to modify and promote academic self-efficacy. The research in this annotated bibliography spans three decades and includes qualitative and quantitative research studies. This annotated bibliography will briefly discuss some of the research demonstrating differences in academic self-efficacy in children with learning disabilities, the association between goal setting and self-efficacy, and a small body of intervention studies on goal-setting interventions with typical and non-typical learners.

#### *Self-efficacy*

Lackaye, T., Margalit, M. M., Ziv, O., & Ziman, T. (2006). Comparisons of self-efficacy, mood, effort, and hope between students with learning disabilities and their non-LD-matched peers. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 21*(2), 111-121.

In an Israeli study of 246 adolescents, researchers sought to compare differences in self-efficacy, mood, effort, and hope between adolescents with learning disabilities and those without (Lackaye et. al., 2006). The researchers administered Hebrew versions of the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale, a modified version of the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children, and the Meltzer scale for effort. The results suggest that children with LD reported lower levels of academic and social self-efficacy, though there was no significant difference in emotional self-efficacy. The adolescents with learning disabilities were also more likely to report their mood more negatively, report lower levels of hope, and were less likely to invest effort in their school work.

From this study, it appears that academic self-efficacy is lower in children with learning disabilities. The current proposed study seeks to test ways of ameliorating this problem. The scales used by Lackaye et. al. will be used in the proposed study.

#### *Goal-setting with individuals with learning disabilities*

Goldberg, R. J., Higgins, E. L., Raskind, M. H., & Herman, K. L. (2003). Predictors of success in individuals with learning disabilities: A qualitative analysis of a 20-year longitudinal