

GUEST COLUMN - December 2021

Reaching The Unseen Children Jean Gross

This is an extract from Chapter Seven of Jean Gross's recently published ['Reaching The Unseen Children'](#)

The seven secrets of self-efficacy

This is the most important chapter in this book. It is important because it introduces a concept which is relatively unfamiliar to educators, but profoundly important in improving outcomes for disadvantaged children.

Self- efficacy is the belief that you can make a difference to your own life and that of others – the belief that 'things can get better, and I can do something about it' (Gilbert, 2018). It is the inner sense of self, of being a director rather than a spectator of your own life. It is also sometimes described as having a sense of agency, or having an internal rather than an external locus of control.

People with an external locus of control tend to believe that events in their lives are out of their sphere of influence, and even that their own actions are a result of external factors, such as fate, luck, the influence of powerful others.

You can take your own self efficacy test with a simple activity. First, think of a job you got, a promotion you received, or any other success in your life – small or large. Then complete the sentence 'I succeeded in because'

If, for example, you answered 'I succeeded in getting the job because I did my homework... looked at the school's website... paid a visit... got a friend to do a practice interview with me' then it is likely that you have high self-efficacy, attributing your success to internal factors. If, on the other hand, you said 'I don't think they had many applications', 'They must have just liked my face' or 'I just had a lucky day' you were either being modest or you have low self-efficacy, attributing your success to factors outside your control.

Self-efficacy applies to failure as well as success. Those with high self-efficacy tend to believe that if they had worked harder or tried different strategies they would have done better. Those with lower self-efficacy see the failure as unavoidable.

It is easy to spot children with low self-efficacy by their responses in the classroom. Take a boy who is sent out of class, for example, because he got into an argument with the pupil sitting next to him. If he says 'It weren't me, Miss... he wound me up' that would be a sign of an external locus of control, low self-efficacy. If he thinks to himself that the other boy did wind him up but recognises that he could have chosen to ignore him, that would be a sign of high self-efficacy.

Disadvantaged children are more at risk of low self-efficacy than their more advantaged peers. There are several possible reasons for this. First, if you grow up in a family where adults did not do well at school, that will affect your own view of education and your belief in your ability to make progress through your own efforts. You may, moreover, see your family frequently powerless in the face of events. Your dad is in a low-skilled job that gives him little autonomy, your mum loses her job, then the gas gets cut off, then you get evicted.

You are always on the edge of disaster if you are part of what Michael Savage (2015) describes as 'the precariat' class: 'people living and working precariously, usually in a series of short-term jobs, without recourse to stable occupational identities or careers, social protection or relevant protective legislation.'

Schools, too, play their part in cementing low self-efficacy. If disadvantaged children experience early language, literacy and maths difficulties and do not get the right sort of teaching, they have multiple experiences of trying hard but with little success.

We also often inadvertently strip lower-achieving disadvantaged children of their sense of independence and capability through grouping practices and offering too much 'help'. I have never forgotten the boy who told one of my friends 'I'm in the bottom table group and we can't do anything by ourselves so we always have to have an adult working with us.'

Low self-efficacy both contributes to low attainment and results from it. The two factors exist in a mutually-reinforcing cycle. This is why strategies to narrow the attainment gap need to tackle both, and as early as possible, before the cycle has established.

Jean Gross CBE is a best selling author and expert on children's issues. Formerly the government's Communication Champion for children, she has led many national initiatives to improve life chances for those who struggle to succeed in our education system.