

# Developing Collective Classroom Efficacy: The Teacher's Role as Community Organizer

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## Abstract

Collective efficacy reveals how well group members relate to one another while working toward common goals. It also reveals group resilience and the willingness of group members to continue working through difficult situations. The purpose of this study is to explore collective efficacy at the classroom level, using Vygotsky's view of individual and collective development to examine how it could be developed and facilitated by fifth-grade classroom participants. By examining collective efficacy in this way, the authors offer a sense of what teachers can do to promote collective classroom efficacy through their instructional practice. Results indicate that the sense of collective classroom efficacy developed by the fifth graders was initiated and nurtured by the teacher in the role of classroom community organizer.

## Keywords

efficacy, teacher role, instructional practices, collaboration, student centered

Scenario of a fifth-grade classroom:

As a university researcher who became the resident classroom ethnographer in Ms. Falls's fifth-grade classroom, I entered the classroom on a day in mid-October with a visiting faculty candidate who was interested in seeing the classroom in action. The students were in reading groups, pouring over their assigned novels. After introducing the visitor to Ms. Falls, we went to sit in the back of the room, just to observe.

We were approached by Bethany who offered to introduce us to the class, and who asked Ms. Falls if it was ok to tell the visitor about their reading response activities. Ms. Falls agreed, and the students began to talk about the various kinds of reading response formats. What was common to all of these students was that they had to become the characters and perform the ideas from the novels they were reading. As they were trying to explain, Beto exclaimed, "This is too hard to explain, we need to just do it!" Bethany agreed and called for "Fishbowl" with the group reading *Pedro's Journal*.

Immediately the group sprang into action, moving chairs to the center of the room. Beto assigned students to sit in close as they were the "evaluators" of the performance. Ms. Falls reminded the others that they were to get ready to ask "probing questions." Jaz said, "You know, the kind of questions that make us say 'why' something happened." As the students continued into

their performance, I caught the look from our visitor that indicated something special was happening here. On our way out of the school, she asked, "How did that group of kids get to be so independent that they could just take control of their learning in that way?"

The question posed by the visitor to this classroom creates an interesting area of inquiry related to classroom instruction and learning. As part of an ongoing ethnographic study with this classroom teacher, we noted that in each of the four years studied the participants constructed a community in which student responsibility appeared to be central to the learning environment. At the same time, this was not the first person visiting the classroom who expressed admiration for the way the "class runs itself."

In sifting through the research journals of the resident classroom ethnographer, we read such comments anecdotally from other visitors she had taken into the classroom, from other classroom teachers at the same school, from the principal of the school, from substitute teachers who left notes to the teacher, and in interviews with preservice teachers. The bigger questions for us as researchers at that moment became,

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how did this sense of collective responsibility develop over time, and how was it promoted through participation in classroom activities? Was the sense of responsibility and belonging also related in any way to collective efficacy?

The central tenets of collective efficacy relate to how well group members respond and relate to one another as they work toward common goals. They also relate to the resilience of a group and the willingness of group members to continue to work through difficult situations (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004). Knowing these central tenets led us to question whether collective efficacy could be examined through a sociocultural lens, which focuses on the learning and development of individuals through their participation in a cultural collective. Could using a Vygotskian (1986) approach provide a means to demonstrate how teachers and students establish a cohesive sense of responsibility toward their learning and toward each other that result in performance capability?

Our intention is to examine collective classroom efficacy as a construct that is socially constructed and that develops over time between members in a classroom context. To do so we needed to combine the initial construct of student self-efficacy and collective efficacy from Bandura's (1997) work with a perspective that allows us to examine collective functioning from its genesis to its realization, which Vygotsky provides. It is as if we were shining two spotlights from different angles onto the same stage to better illuminate what the classroom participants are playing out through their dialogic interactions.

## Sociocultural Theory

A Vygotskian perspective allows us to understand learning and development of the individual as part of a collective. One goal of a sociocultural approach is to make visible relationships between human mental functioning and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this functioning occurs (Wertsch, del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). Hence, the individual is as much part of the collective as the collective is made up of individuals.

Vygotsky's representation of development presumes "two dimensions of development: one that resides in the individual and the other in the collectivity" (Souza-Lima, 1995, pp. 447-448). Thus, development is not linear, nor is it totally predictable. Learning and development are in a reflexive relationship that is recursive, transformational, and primarily socially enacted. In other words, it involves a transformation of people and the world as they know it through productive activity. In this sense, knowing means to purposefully change the world and oneself, whereas knowledge is the practice of change rather than merely a discrete body of facts, concepts, or rules that can be transferred from one situation to another (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Neo-Vygotskian scholars have examined the notion of distributed cognition to suggest that "human thinking is not

reducible to individual properties or traits. Instead, it is always mediated and distributed among persons, artifacts, activities, and settings" (Moll, 2000, p. 265). Along with the construct of distributed cognition, the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) examined how learners in a community of practice shared in the learning process. From their framework of legitimate peripheral participation, learning occurs as newcomers participate in various peripheral roles alongside more experienced or competent members in community practice. In their work together, the less experienced members gradually become able to fully participate in such contexts. As related by Mercer (2000), sociocultural psychologists have primarily examined the shared thinking of adults and children to determine its influence on individual children's development. He suggests that "we should also try to explain children's development as *interthinkers*" by examining how experienced community members act as "discourse guides" as they guide novices into "ways of using language for thinking collectively" (Mercer, 2000, p. 170).

In his construct of the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky (1978) theorized that participants working together to solve a problem are able to accomplish collaboratively what they would not yet be able to do on their own. It is through their dialogic work that classroom participants provide opportunity for students to reformulate problems and possible solutions in their own words. What began as a collective work has the potential to be transformed as students actively internalize the common language and knowledge of the collective. In other words, students who are working together on a shared text in an inquiry-based situation have the opportunity to construct knowledge that has potential for becoming both collective knowledge as well as individual knowledge (Edwards & Mercer, 1987; John-Steiner & Meehan, 2000; Mercer, 2000; Putney, Green, Dixon, Duran, & Yeager, 2000). This pedagogical stance offers opportunities for education to be an avenue for creating a classroom culture in which all students can contribute to the collective knowledge and development (Bruner, 1986). Likewise, this pedagogical stance offers opportunities for a classroom culture in which students can develop self- and collective efficacy. As suggested by Wheatley (2005), researchers can more closely examine this process through direct observation and dialogic interpretation as opposed to self-report surveys.

## Self- and Collective Efficacy

Researchers have studied at length the influence of self-efficacy on academic achievement (Bandura, 1993; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000; Schunk, 1990), including math and reading achievement (Pajares, 2001; Pajares & Valiante, 2006). In addition, efficacy researchers have focused on the efficacious beliefs of a group and how those beliefs affect performance (cf. Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Much of this research at the

collective level has investigated teacher beliefs for school-wide student achievement.

However, as noted by Wheatley (2005), several gaps exist in the literature on teacher and collective efficacy. One area that has not yet been closely examined, but is of importance to the present study, is the view that efficacy is a continuous variable, developing over time, rather than a dichotomous, all-or-nothing variable. Another gap is the focus on how to use the efficacy literature in a way that enhances teacher education and the subsequent impact on classroom pedagogy. Also missing from the efficacy research is the opportunity for more democratic teaching practices to be understood. Wheatley (2005) asserted,

As it is currently operationalized, collective teacher efficacy measures do not clearly assess the co-construction of teaching and learning. Thus, while many “democratic” approaches to education portray some social distribution of agency in teaching, neither teacher efficacy nor collective teacher efficacy measures explicitly assess such agency. (p. 754)

By focusing on how the teacher helps students develop a sense of collective responsibility and belief in their accomplishments, we may begin to help fill one gap in the literature on how collective classroom efficacy can be developed and enhanced through collective action on the part of the classroom members.

In what follows we briefly describe some of the seminal work on self-efficacy in academic settings as well as the more contemporary research on teacher and collective efficacy at the school level. What has been less well defined is the construct of collective efficacy at the micro level of the classroom, which we are calling collective classroom efficacy. The purpose of this study is to begin to explore collective classroom efficacy and how it can be developed and facilitated by the classroom participants. By examining discursive classroom interactions, we will make visible how teachers’ instructional practice can promote collective classroom efficacy.

### *Self-Efficacy*

Self-efficacy, as conceptualized by Bandura (1997), is a belief in one’s capabilities to organize and accomplish a given task. Students possessing high levels of perceived self-efficacy are more likely to persevere through challenging activities, demonstrate resilience to adversity, have high aspirations, and believe they can accomplish a task (Bandura, 1993; Schunk, 1995). Thus, self-efficacy is task specific and is based in part on past experience. In addition, self-efficacy is linked closely to initial task engagement, persistence, analytical thinking, and successful performance (Bandura, 1993; Pajares, 1996). Compared with less efficacious students, those higher in self-efficacy are more likely to select challenging tasks,

expend more effort, and persist when encountering difficulties (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996).

Schunk (2003) cautions that self-efficacy is one of multiple factors influencing academic achievement. When students lack the requisite skills and knowledge, high self-efficacy will not necessarily result in academic achievement. In addition, motivation researchers have found that students who view ability as being changeable with effort and who focus on learning goals rather than on proving their ability to others do not rely on confidence (Dweck, 2000). In other words, students with low efficacy beliefs who also believe that ability can be changed with effort are often just as persistent as those with more confidence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

### *Sources of Self-Efficacy*

Bandura (1997) illustrated four sources of self-efficacy: enactive mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and psychological and affective states. First, enactive mastery experiences are those that provide the most authentic evidence of individual success that then build the belief in personal efficacy. Mastery does not presume that all experiences are immediately successful. Rather, facing some difficulties, enactive mastery experiences can result in resilience with opportunities to learn how to exercise better control over events by encouraging perseverance.

As a second source, vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1997) are those in which individuals may rely on modeling from more proficient others to improve their own capabilities. Although individuals attempt to maintain a sense of efficacy during a struggle with difficulties, it may be easier to do so if others use the third source, verbal persuasion, to encourage the individual to continue in the task. Through verbal persuasion, individuals may try harder to succeed if the positive appraisal is realistic and they believe that they will be able to produce positive effects through their efforts.

The fourth source of self-efficacy, physiological and affective states, recognizes that people can actually produce a negative performance through their stress reactions to a situation (Bandura, 1997). For example, if students can be persuaded to control emotional reactions through mastery experiences that demonstrate their capabilities, they will be less likely to feel vulnerable in a testing situation. These four sources relate to self-efficacy on an individual basis; however, researchers have expanded their investigations of self-efficacy to examine efficacy as a group construct. In what follows we unfold the definition of collective efficacy as it has been identified currently by researchers.

### *Collective Efficacy*

The construct of self-efficacy has expanded to include individual teacher efficacy and collective efficacy, which focuses on “the performance capability of a social system as a whole”

(Bandura, 1997, p. 469). Similar to self-efficacy, collective efficacy relates to the goals of a group and how well members of the group work together toward those goals (Goddard et al., 2004). Collective efficacy also has been associated with the group's resilience and willingness to persist in difficult situations (Goddard, 2002; Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990).

Since collective efficacy has been translated at a school level to individual teachers' judgments concerning the faculty's ability to plan effectively and implement lessons that result in positive student achievement (Goddard, 2001), we now refer to this construct as teacher collective efficacy beliefs. The emphasis of that research has been to identify characteristics and resulting relationships of teachers and schools with high levels of collective efficacy. Although these studies examined teachers' beliefs about their ability to have a positive impact on student academic achievement at a schoolwide level, the measures did not examine whether teachers worked together in a synergistic effort to accomplish that goal (Wheatley, 2005). An additional gap in the teacher collective efficacy beliefs literature is that these studies did not include an examination of the synergistic relationship of teachers and students in classrooms. In general, these sources of self-efficacy relate to the individual and the individual's responses in particular situations according to Bandura's perspective.

Analogous to this rich body of research on teacher collective efficacy beliefs at the macro or school level is the potential of examining how individuals at the micro or classroom level operate both personally and collectively in terms of these sources of self-efficacy. As asserted by Bandura (1993) in studying Vygotsky (1962), "Children's intellectual development cannot be isolated from the social relations within which it is embedded and from its interpersonal effects. It must be analyzed from a social perspective" (p. 120). Therefore, in this research we explore the genesis of collective classroom efficacy through dialogic activities among classroom participants in their social setting.

### **Teacher as Guide and Community Organizer**

To understand the synergistic relationship among teachers and students as it relates to collective classroom efficacy, we need to make visible the role of the teacher in setting expectations for classroom interactions. Vygotsky advocated for the role of the teacher to be one of instructional guide in a classroom in which the teacher and students are active with one another through the curriculum (Vygotsky, 1997). In a similar fashion, Goddard and Goddard (2001) described the role of highly efficacious teachers as one of helping students arrive at appropriate answers without giving them the answer directly. In addition, highly efficacious teachers utilize activities that foster positive affect while promoting high

expectations for achievement (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Bandura (1997) noted the role of community organizer in terms of collective efficacy, stating,

The role of a community organizer is not to solve people's problems for them but to help develop their capabilities to operate as a continuing potent force for bettering their lives and upholding their sense of self-worth and dignity. The organizer serves as the community enabler rather than as the implementer of action plans. (p. 501)

The initial task of community organizer is to select and develop local leaders to unite the collective for a common cause. In the case of democratic classrooms, students serve as local leaders, and the common cause is overall academic achievement and responsibility for self and others. The collective establishes a social community that shapes its efforts to achieve its common academic and personal goals. One primary task of the classroom community organizer is to construct a self-directing collective that unifies, enables, and motivates its participants to recognize that many of their academic issues are shared issues that can be alleviated primarily by working together. Also important is the ability of the classroom community organizer to establish a learning environment where warm interpersonal relationships are constructed throughout the academic and social activities (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Our goal is to illustrate ways in which the classroom teacher becomes classroom community organizer, especially as relating to the development of collective classroom efficacy.

### **Research Questions**

In this article, our purpose is to examine collective classroom efficacy during the classroom collaborative activities and through the interactional discourse, with the teacher in the role of community organizer. As indicated by Moll (2000) normative research often does not capture all of the diversity of life. Indeed, Vygotsky (1986) argued,

Psychology cannot limit itself to direct evidence. . . . Psychological inquiry is investigation, and like the criminal investigator, the psychologist must take into account indirect evidence and circumstantial clues—which in practice means that works of art, philosophical arguments and anthropological data are no less important for psychology than direct evidence. (pp. xv-xvi)

Furthermore, Gumperz (2003) argued that survey research attempts to measure objectively constructs such as self- and collective efficacy. However, survey research produces self-report data and does not allow for understanding the dynamic and interactive classroom context surrounding those individuals.

In examining classroom key events, we make visible what participants place in the public sphere through their talk and actions. When examined through focused ethnographic inquiry, across events and over time, we begin to build “replicable information on relevant beliefs and values” (Gumperz, 2003, p. 215). These interactions among classroom participants have the potential to make visible a classroom version of collective efficacy as a construct associated with how classroom members view themselves within their classroom collective and in relation to their learning and development with one another.

Our research question to unfold the social construction of collective classroom efficacy was, in what ways can collective classroom efficacy be evidenced through an ethnographic inquiry of interactional discourse? More specifically, how does collective classroom efficacy develop with the teacher as classroom community organizer and students as local leaders?

## Method

### *Participants and Setting*

The data for this exploration were culled from an extensive ethnographic data set from one teacher’s fifth-grade classroom over four years. The orienting approach of interactional ethnography was selected to frame the study and to make visible the constructed patterns of beliefs and practices over the length of the academic year (Castanheira, Crawford, Green, & Dixon, 2000; Putney et al., 2000). Interactional ethnography also contains a component of sociolinguistic and critical discourse analysis, which makes it possible to examine how these beliefs and practices were constructed in particular moments by members.

The first author was the resident university ethnographer during those four years. The classroom in which this study took place was in an elementary (K–5) public school in partnership with, and located at, an urban university in the southwestern United States. At the time of the data collection, the school was conducted as a year-round school, meaning that the school calendar started the fourth week of August and ran until the second week of August of the next year. Students and teachers were assigned to one of five calendar-based tracks (time periods) that were scheduled to run with periodic three-week breaks scheduled throughout the year.

Of the school’s nearly 900 students, 85% were participating in the free and/or reduced lunch program. The official transience rate was 65%, with a school population of 50% Hispanic, 29% Anglo-American, 14% African American, 6% Asian, 1% Native American, 15% special education, and 46% limited English proficient. The particular classroom selected also reflected these demographics. The teacher in this classroom, Ms. Falls, had more than 10 years of experience in urban elementary classroom settings and was well known by her colleagues as a teacher who incorporated inclusive practices with excellent classroom management techniques.

### *Data Analysis*

The classroom events in the four year data set had been videotaped on a regular basis: daily for the first three weeks of the school year then at least twice monthly thereafter. At the teacher’s request, additional videotaping, interviewing, and data sessions took place to capture particular classroom activities. Anecdotal evidence across the four years suggested that this classroom teacher was consistently successful in fostering a strong sense of interdependence among students as an avenue in building a democratic classroom. For example, we encountered comments about how well the “class ran itself” from classroom visitors, other classroom teachers at the same school, the principal, and substitute teachers who left notes to the classroom teacher and in interviews with pre-service teachers.

In examining the entire data set, we looked for evidence beyond the anecdotal data that could theoretically illustrate the construct of interest to us, collective classroom efficacy. After selecting the data set from Year 4 as a telling case, or one that makes visible a theoretical construct (Mitchell, 1984), we further examined that data set for examples that illustrated different elements of collective classroom efficacy. We selected the classroom as the unit of analysis because from a Vygotskian perspective, development takes place both as an individual as well as collective process. In addition, we were examining interactions among teacher and students that added to the knowledge base of both individuals and the collective unit as suggested by Edwards and Mercer (1987).

We examined field notes, interview transcripts, and video data to construct the telling case of developing collective classroom efficacy. We relied on various formats of triangulation. In one aspect of triangulation, the data analysis consisted of utilizing both primary and secondary researchers (Putney & Broughton, 2007). The first author as classroom ethnographer could bring forward the context of the classroom because of her past experience of researching with the classroom teacher. The secondary researcher brought forward her expertise as a former classroom teacher as well as her researcher lens in examining data that she did not collect but with which she became highly familiar. Bringing together these distinct yet complementary angles of vision allowed us to validate the findings and co-construct the telling case through our dialogic interactions about the data.

A second aspect of triangulation involved juxtaposing different forms of data from the data set. For example, we purposefully selected an interview with the teacher that revealed her teaching philosophy. We then chose a segment of classroom interaction from the first days of school involving the teacher and students discussing the construction of the classroom norms that reflected her democratic teaching philosophy. To examine more closely the democratic interdependence among classroom participants, we chose a particular activity, *Visible and Invisible Walls*, as a series of

**Table 1.** Domain Analysis: X Is What Teacher Holds Constant in the Classroom Setting

Classroom management	Class election of executive council
Personal accountability	Constructing a class constitution Constructing norms Authentic class jobs Team and individual responsibilities Work ethic rubric Role models for the school Really getting to know each other Goal setting and extending Bottomliners—respect, responsibility, caring, collaboration
Teacher role	Guide Leader Facilitator Initiator
Student role	Problem solving Asking probing questions Clarifying for each other Supporting ideas with evidence Negotiating meaning Valuing and supporting each other Responsibly governing

discursive events in one related content area of social studies. This multileveled analysis demonstrates the format of instruction, the teacher role and expectations, and participant interactions as a form of triangulation.

The field notes and transcripts were coded for evidence of the co-construction of collective classroom efficacy through both interpersonal and academic events. Juxtaposing the social skill building against the academic knowledge building within key classroom events becomes what we are calling dialogic triangulation. This micro analysis makes visible the potential for co-construction of the interdependence and shared academic knowledge among classroom participants.

The ethnographic data across four years with this classroom teacher indicate that she held certain classroom values constant as cornerstones of her curriculum and classroom management. At the same time the particular content changed each year as students jointly constructed knowledge together in the classroom. The domain analysis (Table 1) illustrates the values related to classroom management, personal accountability, teacher role, and student role that the teacher held in common across the four years.

As part of her role as community organizer, the teacher gradually shifted the classroom management over time from teacher-driven to a student-led governance system in which they jointly constructed their norms for living and working together. Although the community each year began to solidify by the third week of school, they continually reviewed their norms and assessed their behavior and their academic work on a regular basis using a “work ethic rubric” scale from zero to four (Putney, 2007). By keeping these classroom values

constant, the teacher maintained a classroom style that supported a strong community identity through personal and academic accountability.

Although the value of student governance stayed relatively constant across the four years, what changed year by year was the curricular focus of the major classroom project. These projects consisted of conducting classroom businesses in Years 1 and 2, with a shift in focus to an interest apprenticeship program in Year 3 in which students worked with local community mentors to improve their artistic skills. The focus in Year 4, illustrated in this article, was *Visible and Invisible Walls: Examining Tolerance*, to examine the use of walls throughout history to oppress people. Across the four years, even though the curricular focus changed, what did not change was the teacher’s insistence that students work together responsibly to construct their learning.

We selected Year 4 because of the richness of the data set in relation to the construct of classroom collective efficacy. We surveyed data across the year and initially constructed domains of activity that related to the following themes: developing classroom community, establishing norms, teacher role, student role, life skills (respect, responsibility, caring, and collaboration), types of learning activities, and developing tolerance. From the initial domains, we further analyzed the data to see what the elements within the domains had in common. The common elements formed into subsets that we placed into tree diagrams or taxonomies, in particular one related to participant roles that subsumed both domains of teacher and student roles.

As we examined the teacher role in more detail, we began to notice a trend supporting Bandura’s notion of the role of community organizer as part of collective classroom efficacy. These roles included developing self-improvement capabilities, upholding sense of self-worth and dignity, serving as the community facilitator, constructing a self-directing collective, promoting unity, and motivating interdependence in solving shared issues. Although Bandura initiated the construct of community organizer in a more global sense, we could see the application of such at the classroom level. In the results section, we illustrate how the teacher in the classroom was enacting the characteristics of community organizer while promoting individual and collective learning and development (Putney et al., 2000; Vygotsky, 1986). We further examined the synergistic effort among classroom participants in co-constructing an interdependent classroom community.

## Results

We examined the role of teacher as community organizer because this role is central to fostering a sense of collective among the individual members of the group (Bandura, 1997). Data from an interview with the teacher about her teaching philosophy illustrated her role as a classroom community organizer. As detailed by Bandura, a community organizer is

one who does not seek to solve people's problems. What the community organizer does is to foster capabilities of the members by promoting self-worth and dignity. The community organizer must also foster local leaders who can unite the collective for a common cause. In the case of Ms. Falls, we quickly recognized her take-up of the role of community organizer, as will be made visible in the following excerpt from her interview:

This is my definition, based on what I do. My classroom is one that develops, nurtures, and extends the social and academic potentials and interests of all members within the class. It is a place that encourages autonomy, respect, and accountability through active participation with our diverse environment. [My classroom] values what one thinks, cares how one feels, and supports student learning experiences. . . . Let the children develop the life skills authentically. Respect is giving it, expecting it, not about writing a poem. You can write a poem, yes, but live it! The ones I really insist they have from day one are *respect, responsibility, cooperation, and caring*.

This excerpt reveals the primary emphasis on social and academic success of the individuals within the classroom as well as for the collective in general, which is a central tenet of the construct of collective classroom efficacy. In addition, this construct consists of a goal orientation, which Ms. Falls facilitates among the students in the collective by encouraging autonomy, building respect, and expecting accountability at both the individual and collective levels. The way in which she claims to promote achievement of these goals is by having students actively participating in authentic activities that foster life skills. This is brought forward in her statement that respect is not just talked about and enacted but actually lived throughout their school experience. Expectations are that students will live this within her classroom as well as in other academic and social contexts. Ms. Falls's claims and expectations that emanate from her philosophy are evidenced throughout the following analytic segments.

### **Norms and Work Ethic Rubric**

From a prior ethnographic study of this classroom (Putney, 2007), we recognize that Ms. Falls commonly established a social structure in which students made responsible choices about how they would work to become productive classroom citizens. Through the norms and work ethic rubric, she established a social framework or set of practices that required students to demonstrate responsibility toward self and others while becoming academically proficient.

Following her own philosophy and as the classroom community organizer, Ms. Falls co-constructed classroom norms with her students beginning the first day of the school year.

As she stated to students at the onset of the norm construction activity, "We don't have rules, boys and girls, we have norms. Norms are ways that people live and work together. These become our guidelines for how we will act in this classroom community" (Field notes, Day 2 of school). When she began the discussion about what the norms might be, she reminded students of her "bottomliners" of respect, responsibility, caring, and collaboration. They constructed norms related to listening with respect; being responsible, organized, and persevering; and respecting opinions of others and believing that you can do whatever you need to do if you follow through (Putney, 2007).

The norms constructed by the students in this case highlighted the notion of continuing to work toward their goals by emphasizing "persevere at all times" to Norm 2 that related to being responsible and organized from the previous year. Recall that a central tenet of efficacy is one's belief in the ability to attain a goal, no matter how challenging. By emphasizing the notion of perseverance, the students were establishing the foundation for developing academic efficacy through their everyday work together. Although the norms were individually directed, they also became collectively oriented as students used them to encourage one another to respect everyone's opinions and to carry on when the work was difficult. The following excerpts make visible how the teacher continued in her role of community organizer to foster a sense of collective efficacy among the individual members of the group.

### **Self-Worth, Unity, and Interdependence**

"Take an intelligent risk . . . we should learn and stretch ourselves. Is that what I hear you saying?" (Ms. Falls, field notes, Day 2 of class). Ms. Falls consistently encouraged her students to take academic risks as a central feature of building collective efficacy in this classroom. In her role of classroom community organizer, Ms. Falls set the expectation that students would take an intelligent risk when participating in learning activities. At the same time, she held the expectation that students would contribute to the knowledge base by helping each other solve common issues.

The first example is one that we deemed typical of the type of interactions that took place in this classroom over the year. A common classroom practice was for students to review their norms each morning to monitor their progress in constructively working together. A new student, Jordan, had just transferred in to the school. In this excerpt the discourse reveals a common practice of students inviting each other to take a risk and participate in the learning activity with the more knowledgeable other offering assistance. The excerpt begins with the Mayor, Jaz, calling on a new student, Jordan, to explain one of the norms that they review in class each morning.

In leading the discussion, Jaz encouraged Jordan to take a risk and make sense of one of the norms (Table 2, Lines

**Table 2.** Taking a Risk

Actor	Line	Dialogue	Vygotskian construct
Jaz	105	Jordan	Personalizing the learning; invoking historicity in reviewing the norms each day; connecting learning day to day
	106	can you please explain norm number two	
	107	don't say can't	
	108	you can do it if you put your mind to it	
Jordan	109	[hesitates before attempting an answer]	New student maybe has not yet internalized completely
Jaz	110	you can ask for a lifesaver Jordan	More knowledgeable other may assist if needed
	111	but first try it on your own	
Jordan	112	if you say you can do it	Offers explanation to the extent he has made sense of the idea
	113	you can	
David	114	adding to what Jordan just said	Offers additional information to be considered; puts ideas in the intersubjective space for all to access if they choose
	115	if you say you can't do something	
	116	then you send a message to your mind	
	117	that stops you from learning	

105-108) and then offered assistance from a more experienced other in the class if he could not provide an answer (110-111). Once Jordan offered an explanation (112-113), David acknowledged Jordan's response (114) and offered additional information for the class (115-117). From a Vygotskian perspective, this is an example of intersubjectivity as classroom members offered explanations for the benefit of all in the collective to take up and use individually in making meaning from the text under discussion.

In the beginning days of constructing this classroom culture, this type of incident would have been initiated by the teacher in her role as classroom community organizer. By the time that this example occurred (six weeks into the first semester), the students were enacting the expectations established collectively during the first days of school. When the new student, Jordan, struggled to answer a question, Jaz encouraged him to ask for "a lifesaver." To be a lifesaver, you would first have to be actively listening so that you could offer a potential answer to the relevant question put before the class. As a lifesaver, it was expected that you would not say that a person was wrong because that would stop them from learning. Instead, students (as in the case of David above) were expected to build on what the other person said so that their answer added to the discussion while taking nothing away from the other students.

The concept of lifesaver utilizes three of the features of community organizers. It serves the purpose of upholding students' sense of self-worth and dignity while also promoting unity and motivating interdependence in solving shared issues (Bandura, 1997). What is evident in this interchange among Jaz, Jordan, and David is that the students have embraced the concept of lifesaver and used it themselves in their discussions. They acknowledged that a newer student might not have a complete understanding of the question posed; however, they encouraged him to take an intelligent risk while still offering the option to request assistance (lifesaver) from another student. In addition, David extended the

answer given by Jordan, thus he upheld the others' sense of trust while working interdependently in solving shared issues. The discourse suggests that taking intelligent risks and striving to establish and maintain trust during classroom activities contribute to the development of collective classroom efficacy.

The developmental aspect of collective classroom efficacy is made visible by following the concept of lifesaver throughout the academic year as a tracer unit (Putney et al., 2000). In the following excerpt, we further illustrate how the concept of lifesaver actually occurred during a classroom academic discussion (in the 10th week of school) surrounding a topic that had been introduced the day prior. In this example, a question was posed to the students related to a new word, *perpetrator*. The teacher posed the question, and when the answers given were acknowledged as approaching the appropriate answer, a female student (Tanya) suggested that a lifesaver was perhaps in order (Table 3).

As in the previous example, we recognize that the students have accepted the concept of lifesaver as being an appropriate way to answer a question when someone is searching for the meaning of the question. In this excerpt, the student, Tanisha, acknowledged that Matthew's answer is approaching the meaning of the word, *perpetrator* (Line 233). Ms. Falls encouraged Matthew (234-236) to continue his line of thinking by rephrasing the question (237-239). When he hesitated to answer, Tanya offered the possibility of using a lifesaver (240). The teacher acknowledged the request for a lifesaver and sought someone to take on the role (241). When Adriana raised her hand, Tanya called on her to offer an answer (242), with the teacher offering encouragement (246).

The interchange between Adriana and Tanya illustrates how the teacher as community organizer motivated interdependence among students as they solved the shared problem of understanding the concept of *perpetrator*. From a Vygotskian perspective, this happens in the zone of proximal development when a more experienced other provides hints or suggestions

**Table 3.** Calling for a Lifesaver in Week 10

Actor	Line	Dialogue	Research comments
Ms. Falls	225	What's a perpetrator?	Teacher linking back to prior day's discussion
Jamal	226	Is that a traitor?	Jamal attempts although absent day prior
Ms. Falls	227	Not quite, not quite	Teacher signaling need for another response, nods toward Matthew
	228	A perpetrator	
Matthew	229	What I think a perpetrator is	Matthew uses terms from prior day's discussion but not quite the
	230	is a person who crosses the	correct answer, tries to self-correct, still not quite the right answer
	231	uh his own boundary	
	232	his or her own boundary	
Tanisha	233	Almost	Tanisha encouraging Matthew
Ms. Falls	234	Almost	Teacher reiterates encouraging response of Tanisha and adds to it
	235	you're real close	
	236	you're real close	
Ms. Falls	237	What other boundary do they cross	Teacher reiterates the question with a hint about the other boundary
	238	the perpetrator?	
	239	There's another boundary they cross	
Tanya	240	Life saver	Tanya suggests that student can ask for help from another student
Ms. Falls	241	Who wants to be a lifesaver?	Teacher calling for student to help
Tanya	242	Adriana	Adriana and others with hands raised
Adriana	243	A perpetrator is somebody who	Adriana responds with her definition using the prior day's terms
	244	will cross their own boundary	
	245	plus another person's boundary	
Ms. Falls	246	Right, great	Teacher verifying response

or prompts to assist in the learning. In this case, the students were taking on the role rather than relying completely on the teacher to initiate such a form of scaffolding. This handing over of the role of more knowledgeable other by the teacher was part of her classroom management plan that stems from her value system.

In addition, this example suggests that the teacher helped students maintain their sense of dignity and self-worth as they took risks, asked for a lifesaver, and then shared their ideas about this new vocabulary word. As community facilitator, the teacher kept the discussion student centered rather than teacher directed to encourage students to work together to solve the common issue. As the school year progressed, students were more willing to take intelligent risks and to ask for or offer lifesavers to help the individual and the collective reach their academic goals.

### *Self-Improving and Self-Directing Collective*

In the following excerpt we look at additional roles of the teacher as community organizer: developing self-improvement capabilities, constructing a self-directing collective, while continuing to promote unity and motivate interdependence. In addition we examine the tracer unit of lifesaver as a telling case of development of collective classroom efficacy. The classroom activity, Visible and Invisible Walls, was initiated by the teacher to have students investigate the meaning of tolerance by examining the acts of intolerance represented

by the walls. Several walls were discussed in class and chosen by the students for in-depth research projects to be presented by the citizens in February, Week 25 of the school year. Examples of the physical walls that were to be studied through use of the Internet over the course of the next month were the Berlin Wall, the Great Wall of China, and the Vietnam Memorial in D.C. The invisible walls were examples of discrimination such as the Aboriginal Wall and the Nelson Mandela Wall (see, e.g., Talking Walls Software).

For the Visible and Invisible Walls project, students were assigned to small groups and chose which particular wall they intended to study. Over the course of several weeks, they used nonfiction texts, almanacs, the Talking Walls Software, and Internet resources to construct a poster or PowerPoint presentation. Their presentation was to contain information about the wall they researched as well as the process they used to conduct the research. On the day of presentations, Ms. Falls set expectations for participation of all students during the activity. Ms. Falls had asked for students in the audience to be "critical friends." In her words, she asked them to "listen with a critical ear, not a criticizing ear, a researcher's ear." After each presentation Ms. Falls asked the other students to offer feedback in the form of helpful critique.

One group finished their presentation, answering questions about the topic from fellow students as well as the teacher. When the next group proceeded with their presentation on the Aboriginal Wall, it quickly became apparent that they were

not as well prepared with their topic knowledge. With each advancing point in their presentation, questions from fellow students went unanswered by the group members.

The teacher asked for constructive feedback from the class members who had been listening to the presentation. Given that one of the common teaching practices in this classroom was to ask "probing questions, ones that make you answer why," it was not surprising that a female student, Anna, suggested, "You should have known Ms. Falls was going to ask questions. You should have spent more time studying your notes and looking over your presentations, and you should have worked together so that everyone knew what was being talked about." Other students offered productive critiques of the group's knowledge base. For example, Tomas stated, "You needed to understand the meanings of the words you presented." Shaylon offered, "You should have helped each other with pronunciation. When one of you didn't know how to say a word, another should have helped." Another female student, Cristina, offered, "Why don't you do another presentation, so go home and study over track break."

The discussion then moved to reflection on the part of the group members who made the Aboriginal Walls presentation. As with each presentation, the students rated themselves on a rubric of zero to four, with zero meaning that they interfered with someone's learning and a four meaning that they worked together collaboratively to improve their learning. The group rated themselves a one, meaning that they were working individually with not much comprehension. One student observer gave them credit for making an attempt and suggested that a two was more appropriate; however, Barbara stated that she respected their decision to give themselves a one and praised them for not attempting to rate themselves a three. The class settled on a one and one half effort grade but suggested that the group be allowed to present again after their upcoming break from school to improve their score.

Ms. Falls restated, "You did show some effort, but you have lots of work to do, don't you? You had suggestions from the community. . . ." The Aboriginal Walls group members responded, "We need to work together and help each other," "We should help each other with the words," and "We should study over track break." In this example, the role of the classroom community organizer was to help students develop self-improvement capabilities by refocusing their efforts to improve their understanding of their particular topic and how it related to the larger focus on tolerance.

What is interesting is that the students themselves offered specific and productive input and encouraged the group to work together and try again to improve on their presentation so that all could be successful. This encouragement illustrates the development of the concept of lifesaver as well as the development of collective classroom efficacy. During the initial days of school, lifesaver took the form of taking intelligent risk and being offered help from another. Further into the school year, the use of lifesaver developed into explicitly

requesting assistance from others. Toward the end of the school year, students commonly used lifesaver implicitly as part of their interactional discourse during classroom activities.

This collaborative effort suggests that students were likely to be focused on the academic success of the entire class since they strongly encouraged their peers to achieve the academic goal of the collective. As explained previously, a central tenet of Ms. Falls's teaching philosophy was to construct a self-directed classroom collective. Ms. Falls initiated this goal by positioning students as audience members to be critical friends and offer constructive feedback to one another.

The feedback from the other class members provides further evidence of the developing self-directed classroom collective. For example, the classmates in the audience suggested to the small group members that they should have been better prepared to present their work and to work together over school break so that they could present again on return to school. This suggestion gave the group an opportunity to improve on their presentation and also to improve their grade for the project. Ms. Falls supported the audience members in encouraging the small group to work on their project during school break. She, in turn, supported the small group by taking up the audience suggestion of giving them a second opportunity. She reminded them that they still have work to do and that they can be successful if they follow the suggestions given.

## Discussion and Implications

Bandura's (1997) construct of collective efficacy was initialized at a global community level. As shown in our review of the literature, researchers narrowed the field to examine collective efficacy at the schoolwide level. Our intention is to extend the literature by further narrowing the field in examining collective efficacy at the classroom level by placing classroom in the center of the construct. In applying the construct in this way, the classroom teacher takes on Bandura's community organizer role, thus facilitating classroom interdependence as an avenue for developing collective classroom efficacy.

In this article, we bring forward the notion of collective classroom efficacy as a social construct that can be developed over time as opposed to being viewed as a dichotomous variable. From a Vygotskian (1986) perspective, development is not a phased phenomenon but rather a dynamic and reciprocal process in which individuals utilize thoughts and ideas placed into the intersubjective space through interactive classroom activities, thus making personal sense through interactions with others. Through her role as community organizer, the teacher paved the way for the social and academic interplay among students of various skill levels. Over time their interactions resulted in a shared sense of efficacy across the different learning activities.

Our purpose in examining this telling case of one elementary classroom is to provide an understanding of how

collective classroom efficacy evolves over time through classroom interaction and how classroom teachers may act as community organizers in actuating the developing collective classroom efficacy. From this perspective, collective classroom efficacy, much like classroom literacy, “is not a generic process or state of being but a continual expansion of practices, a continual dynamic development” (Putney, 1996, p. 130). A further goal was to provide a perspective that teachers and researchers can use to examine the local and historical practices that shape collective classroom efficacy.

Through the data analysis, in particular the dialogic triangulation of social skill building and academic knowledge building, we illustrated how the construct of collective classroom efficacy can be co-constructed as a reciprocal process. The sense of collective classroom efficacy that we illustrated went beyond the social aspect of belonging to a group because the sense of belonging was also related to academic goals. The teacher actively encouraged students to take intelligent risks as they worked to achieve their academic and interpersonal goals, which has been established as a cornerstone of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). She further fostered capabilities of the members by promoting self-worth and dignity through the use of the classroom norms. As local leaders, students took on the role of uniting the collective for a common cause of encouraging autonomy, respect, and academic accountability. This synergistic unification of academic and social accountability mirrors the synergy of teacher efficacy and student efficacy that can lead to collective classroom efficacy.

In a society steeped in the individual race to the top with proof of ability testing, the notion of collective classroom efficacy exemplifies the need for more research examining a community-oriented notion of efficacy. The existing literature on teacher efficacy and self-efficacy, and even collective efficacy, is individually oriented (Wheatley, 2005). However, it is possible that research on efficacy can involve a more inclusive approach to determine how classroom participants view themselves in relation to others in developing collective classroom efficacy. The examination of teacher as efficacious community organizer via the characteristics offered by Bandura (1997) led us to theorize the unification of teacher and student self-efficacy in dialogic reciprocal relationship as the foundation of collective classroom efficacy. More research is warranted to establish this relationship definitively and to examine the influence of collective classroom efficacy on student achievement.

A limitation of this study was that it involved data collected from one elementary classroom. As such, it could be inferred that collective classroom efficacy was the result of the work of an exemplary teacher and cannot be generalized to other classrooms. However, as we worked through the data and saw an ever-increasing example of how this teacher took up the role that Bandura (1997) recognized as community organizer, we could not help but consider that these data could be reminiscent of other classrooms as well. This

suggests that further research needs to be conducted for cases from other classroom settings, grade levels, and types of schools to investigate further the role of teachers and students in constructing collective classroom efficacy.

As Renshaw (2007) argued, in a commentary related to similar types of studies, this format of addressing teachers and practitioners in this way invites them “to draw upon their own recollections of similar voices and experiences” (p. 244). In addition, he noted that such studies “are designed to persuade teachers that it is possible to transform any classroom into a relational learning community” (p. 244). In a similar vein, we add to this commentary that this study of Ms. Falls’s classroom is designed to illustrate what it takes for classroom teachers to transform their classrooms into ones that develop a sense of collective classroom efficacy.

The implications of this study indicate that, as Bandura (1997) suggested for schoolwide collective efficacy, the role of community organizer becomes a critical aspect for development of collective classroom efficacy as well. In conjunction with Bandura’s perspective, Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986) view of individual and collective development provided the lens for us to illustrate how classroom members can develop a sense of collective classroom efficacy. They do so as they work together to construct common knowledge in the intersubjective public classroom space and to set and achieve academic goals. Based on the findings of this investigation, some ways in which teachers can serve as community organizers in pursuit of collective classroom efficacy include encouraging informed risk taking by (a) creating a sense of belonging, (b) setting and working toward personal and academic goal attainment, (c) taking responsibility for self and others’ learning, and (d) believing in individual and collective capabilities.

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