



The Role of Educators in Cultivating Self-Efficacy Among School-Leaver Enabling students: Perspectives and Practices

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Abstract

In Australia, government-funded Enabling programs provide equitable pathways to higher education for students from diverse backgrounds, including increasing numbers of recent school-leavers. This collaborative autoethnographic study explores six Enabling educators' lived experiences across five universities to understand how they perceive and cultivate self-efficacy among school-leaver students. Thematic analysis revealed three overarching areas: educators' perceptions of students' readiness for higher education, strategies used to develop self-efficacy, and barriers that constrain this work. Findings highlight the complexity of fostering self-efficacy in younger cohorts, who often display both overconfidence and low academic self-belief. Educators identified the importance of pedagogies of care, growth mindset, scaffolded mastery experiences, and supportive learning communities. However, their efforts are challenged by limited time, high workloads, and significant emotional labour. The study underscores the need for institutional recognition, professional development, and systemic support to sustain educators' capacity to build student self-efficacy within Enabling education.

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Practitioner Notes

1. The time and emotional labour associated with raising self-efficacy among diverse student cohorts should be recognised by universities and factored into educators' workloads.
2. Educators should be provided with opportunities for training and professional development regarding student self-efficacy and pedagogies of care.
3. Educators should engage in regular reflective practice to continually develop their understanding of their student's self-efficacy, strengths and barriers or constraints.
4. Educators should not underestimate the importance building rapport and a supportive learning environment to improve students' self-efficacy.
5. Educators should be mindful of their emotional energy required to support diverse students and engage in self-care practices.

Keywords

Self-efficacy, preparatory programs, enabling education, school-leaver, equity.

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Introduction

The development of self-efficacy is pivotal to student retention, engagement, and success, particularly for school-leavers transitioning into higher education. Across global higher-education systems, school-leavers face increasing challenges as they transition from secondary schooling into university environments. Research from the United Kingdom, United States, Europe, and Aotearoa New Zealand highlights similar patterns: younger students often experience uncertainty about academic expectations, difficulty exercising independent learning behaviours, and reduced confidence in their capacity to succeed at university (Briggs et al., 2012; Kift, 2015; Tinto, 2017). These challenges are compounded by rapid shifts in curriculum design, assessment literacy, and the growing complexity of university systems, all of which school-leavers may be underprepared to navigate. Low academic self-efficacy has been repeatedly linked to attrition, disengagement, and poor student wellbeing during this transitional period (Bandura, 1997; Larsen & James, 2022, 2025; Putwain et al., 2021). Thus, addressing the self-efficacy development of school-leavers is not only an Australian concern but an internationally recognised priority for supporting student retention, equity, and success. This broader context underscores the need to examine how Enabling programs, both in Australia and internationally, can better support young transitioning students.

Previous research (James, 2016; Larsen & James, 2022, 2025; Stokes, 2024) highlights the potential of Enabling programs to enhance self-efficacy; however, this work has predominantly focused on mature-age learners, leaving a notable gap in understanding how younger school-leavers experience these programs. In response to this gap, the present study was conducted by members of the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) Self-Efficacy Special Interest Group (SIG). Since its inception, the group has recognised commonalities in pedagogical approaches despite differences in the structure and delivery of various programs. The SIG intentionally refers to itself as a community of practice, defined by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) as a group who “share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). This study emerged from a collective recognition that, while literature in the field attests to an ongoing need to foster self-efficacy among mature-age students, far less is known about the younger cohort of high school students transitioning through an Enabling program. These students, their experiences transitioning to higher education, and the observations of educators have increasingly become the focus of SIG discussions. This shift in cohort demographics presents a new tension and a corresponding gap in Enabling literature, prompting an investigation into how to develop self-efficacy in school-leavers undertaking an Enabling program.

This study adopts an autoethnographic approach to explore educator perspectives within Enabling education programs. These programs are specifically designed to support students, who are historically from equity groups, in their transition to university. This paper proposes that the school-leaver cohort has complex factors, distinct from mature aged cohorts, that shape levels of self-efficacy and effective supports are needed to foster the development of self-efficacy during their time in an Enabling program. A collaborative autoethnography was chosen to centre the voices of Enabling educators, who teach at the coal face (Chang et al., 2013), to respond to the research question: how do Enabling educators perceive and implement strategies to enhance school-leavers’ self-efficacy within an Enabling program? Through autoethnographic reflections

and thematic analysis, this study explores the community's perceptions of school-leavers' readiness for higher education and identifies shared practices that foster student self-efficacy. It is differentiated from other studies that focus on Enabling generally, as previous studies have not considered this unique demographic, their cognitive capacity and cultural factors affecting school-leaver aged Enabling students development of self-efficacy. The study is structured around three key themes: educators' perceptions of school-leavers' readiness for higher education; insights into strategies for cultivating self-efficacy; and the constraints and barriers educators face in helping students to develop self-efficacy. By examining the cultures and practices within Enabling education, this research aims to inform teaching strategies and improve outcomes for school-leavers, particularly those from equity backgrounds.

In Australia, like in most economically advanced nations, there is a political drive to widen participation in higher education. In 2024, an expert panel was established to review the Higher Education system providing a roadmap for reform. The resulting Universities Accord (O'Kane et al., 2023) identified key investments designed to increase the number of skilled professionals, including under-represented groups: low SES, regional and remote areas, First Nations communities, and people with disabilities. This initiative aims to meet the growing demand driven by a population boom and to improve the quality of life for all Australians (O'Kane et al., 2024). This effort is not solely about access to higher education; it also emphasises retention and student success. Enabling programs, as an equity initiative, are designed to address these inequities by preparing students for university (Agosti & Bernat, 2018; James et al., 2024). These programs help students gain the necessary skills and confidence for academic success (Baker et al., 2021; James, 2024). Diverse students, particularly school-leavers who lack the grades required for traditional university entry, often participate in these programs (Hodges et al., 2013; James 2024; Li et al., 2022). These students have commonly had negative experiences with education in the past, impacting their self-efficacy and confidence (Baker et al., 2021; James, 2016; Sanagavarapu et al., 2022).

This study aimed to understand Enabling educators' perceptions regarding school-leavers' self-efficacy in an Enabling program. It is recognised that many of these students belong to one or more equity groups. A secondary aim of the project was to highlight the more specific learning and teaching strategies educators use which they believe assists in raising self-efficacy. These aims formed the research questions:

Research Question 1. What are the factors that Enabling educators perceive to impact the self-efficacy levels of school-leaver Enabling students?

Research Question 2. What factors do Enabling educators encounter as they endeavour to increase the self-efficacy of school-leaver Enabling students?

Research Question 3. What learning and teaching strategies do Enabling educators use to increase self-efficacy among school-leavers?

This manuscript offers several significant contributions to theory, research, and practice in Enabling education and the broader field of student transitions. Theoretically, it extends existing understandings of self-efficacy development by focusing on school-leavers, a cohort largely overlooked in prior Enabling scholarship of learning and teaching, and by demonstrating how educator perspectives can illuminate the cognitive, affective, and contextual factors shaping young students' confidence in their ability to succeed at university. From a research perspective,

this work advances the field methodologically by employing collaborative autoethnography to capture the collective expertise of a community of practice, providing insight that would not be accessible through student-only or quantitative approaches. Practically, the study identifies concrete strategies enacted by experienced Enabling educators, offering evidence-informed guidance for teaching teams responding to an increasingly school-leaver-dominated cohort. Together, these contributions help address a growing international concern regarding the preparedness and retention of younger university entrants and position this manuscript as a timely and valuable addition to Enabling literature.

Literature

School-leavers

This paper uses the term 'school leavers' to describe students entering higher education immediately after completing high school, which may include those who take a gap year before returning to study. The paper proposes that this cohort is unique in terms of their existing levels of self-efficacy and the specific supports that effectively foster the development of it during their time in an Enabling program. Li et al. (2022) note that the successful forms and styles of student support for mature-age students may not be as effective for school leavers. This younger cohort faces significant latent variables, such as affective and cognitive considerations, as well as barriers to entering higher education specific to their age. Ramage (2024) further underscores this point by exploring the perceptions of 16 school leavers who chose not to enter university. Through interviews, Ramage (2024) identified recurring themes, including the perception of university as 'risky' and the 'limits of personal agency,' both of which influence their readiness and confidence in pursuing higher education. These findings highlight the complex factors that shape the self-efficacy of school-leavers, suggesting that targeted supports are necessary to help navigate these challenges and build the confidence required for academic success.

Analysis reveals approximately 53% of students who completed Year 12 in 2022 enrolled in an undergraduate higher education course in 2023. This marks an increase from around 51% commencing undergraduate studies in 2022 and 50% in 2019 (Department of Education, 2023). However, this still indicates that a significant proportion of students either choose alternative pathways, such as paid employment, or are unable to meet the ATAR requirements for university entry. Hare (2024) noted a growing reticence among school-leavers to apply for university for the first time in decades, attributing this trend to factors such as a strong job market and the high cost of living, which may deter equity students. While a considerable percentage of school leavers qualify for direct entry into bachelor's programs, others are compelled to utilise Enabling programs as a pathway to higher education. There is varying anecdotal evidence, often influenced by personal or affective factors, as to why students choose Enabling programs. For example, Connolly (2023) highlighted that many students experience overwhelming pressure to achieve a high ATAR, with some describing the "inevitable comparison between students" as having a lasting negative impact on their self-confidence and sense of wellbeing. Additionally, students expressed that Year 12 often left them feeling ill-equipped to navigate life post-school, with insufficient attention given to student wellbeing.

This is further compounded by data from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2022), revealing significant regional disparities in the proportion of Year 12

students meeting Senior Secondary Certificate requirements: 55.5% in remote/very remote areas, 69.2% in outer regional areas, 67.2% in inner regional areas, and 79.4% in major cities. These disparities highlight the critical role Enabling programs play in bridging gaps for students from diverse demographics. Stokes (2021) also emphasised that anxiety and low self-efficacy, often carried over from prior educational experiences, are common challenges for many new university students. Stokes (2021) explains that these challenges "can be mitigated through Enabling pedagogical approaches designed to support participation" (p. 133). Together, these insights underscore the necessity of understanding and addressing the diverse needs of younger cohorts, particularly those who voluntarily opt for Enabling programs to build confidence, manage affective challenges, and prepare more holistically for their academic and personal futures.

Enabling student cohort

Enabling students often enter higher education with lower levels of cultural capital which are evident through a person's cultural competencies that are embodied in a person's social class (James, 2024; Jarvis, 2018). This can be due to negative experiences with schooling, lack of access to resources and support, and the perception of not belonging in academic environments (Brett & Pitman, 2018; James 2024; Marginson et al., 2013). Enabling programs, also known as bridging, foundational, access, or pathway programs, are specifically designed to support students who do not meet traditional entry requirements, particularly those from equity groups including low socioeconomic status, Indigenous backgrounds, and non-English speaking backgrounds (Agosti & Bernat, 2018). These programs aim to dismantle the systemic barriers that hinder students from accessing higher education (James, 2024), providing the skills needed to gain entry and be successful in higher education. However, while Enabling programs provide a valuable resource in developing a student's academic capital, that is the "social processes that build family knowledge of education and career options and support navigation through education systems and professional organisations" (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2011, p.1). Willans and Seary (2007) propose that Enabling programs need to provide both academic core skilling and self-skilling to set strong foundations for academic discourse. Seary and Willans (2020) further support Crane's (1990) preposition that in addition to focussing on the intellectual and academic elements of study, universities should include the physical, emotional, social and psychological elements. Motta and Bennett (2018) refer to this as a Pedagogy of Care and they emphasise creating a holistic educational environment that nurtures all aspects of students' well-being, thereby enhancing their overall academic and personal development. Despite these efforts, many students from equity groups enter with deep-seated misgivings about their capacity to handle academic study. As James (2024) contends, "this scepticism feeds the student's inner critic and can create a maelstrom of emotions that can negate the development of a student's sense of wellbeing and self-belief" (p. 44). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the unique nature of Enabling students and the barriers they face due to past educational experiences.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a core component of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Bandura to explain the intricate connection between the environment, the individual and their behaviour (Bandura, 1986). Bandura's conceptualisation of self-efficacy highlights the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a specific goal or task, which significantly influences motivation, learning, and performance (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 1991; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2014). Within

education, SCT and Bandura's self-efficacy theory have been extensively utilised to understand and enhance academic outcomes. Academic self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's ability to succeed in academic tasks, is strongly linked to academic success (Talsma et al., 2018; Yokoyama, 2019; Zimmerman, 2000). Students with high academic self-efficacy are more likely to engage in challenging tasks, persist in the face of difficulties, and achieve higher academic performance (Talsma et al., 2018; Yokoyama, 2019; Zimmerman, 2000).

Bandura (1997) identifies four sources of information that individuals use to evaluate their self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and affective state (see Figure 1). These sources can significantly benefit equity students by offering diverse and supportive learning experiences that enhance their self-efficacy and academic success (Larsen & James, 2025).

Figure 1

Four sources of self-efficacy



Mastery experiences are an individual's direct personal experiences of success or accomplishment in a specific task or domain. These experiences contribute to self-efficacy beliefs by providing evidence of necessary skills and abilities to achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Larsen & James, 2025). Vicarious experiences involve observing others' successes or failures undertaking a similar task or experience. These observations influence self-efficacy beliefs by allowing individuals to compare their own abilities and potential for success (Bandura, 1997; Larsen & James, 2025). Verbal persuasion, or social persuasion, involves receiving feedback, encouragement, or criticism about one's abilities or potential for success. This feedback can either boost confidence through positive reinforcement or undermine it through negative feedback (Bandura, 1997; Larsen & James, 2025). A person's affective state includes their emotional and physiological responses to a task or activity. Positive emotions and states can enhance self-efficacy by providing energy and motivation, while negative states can diminish it (Bandura, 1997; Larsen & James, 2025). Each of these factors can alter an individual's self-assessment and self-efficacy. Although often discussed in literature separately, self-efficacy beliefs are typically formed by integrating information from multiple sources, reflecting a complex cognitive process.

Method

This study employs collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013) to examine Enabling educators' experiences in fostering student self-efficacy. Autoethnography, as defined by Ellis et al. (2011), is an analysis of the self to understand culture, allowing for the exploration of personal narratives within socio-cultural contexts. By using this methodology, the research draws on educators' subjective experiences to gain insights into the development of student self-efficacy in Enabling education. Collaborative autoethnography allows for a shared analysis of the phenomenon, revealing policy and practice gaps, as noted by Gannon (2020). This approach is particularly suited to understanding the dynamics of self-efficacy in equity group students and how educators' strategies may either support or hinder it. The integration of SCT with autoethnography provides a deeper understanding of how personal and environmental factors interact to shape self-efficacy beliefs and their impact on student outcomes. Previous research has used autoethnographic methods in the Enabling context (Jones et al., 2023; Olds et al., 2023) to explore the complexities of educator and student experiences. This methodology enriches the understanding of how self-efficacy is developed in students through the lens of the educators in the Enabling programs.

Data Collection

The SIG formalised discussions by developing the project's aims and scope, opting for collective autoethnography to explore individual team member experiences. A guide was created outlining instructions, research questions, and participant questions about student self-efficacy. Each educator-researcher wrote a personal reflection in response to the questions posed. These were de-identified and compiled by the lead author. Reflections varied widely in length, from 978 to 3181 words, with an average of 2303 words and a median of 2514 words. Educators

Participants

The six educator-researchers in this study were educators in Enabling programs spanning five Australian regional universities. These six participants were chosen from interested members from the self-efficacy SIG of the National Association of Enabling Educators Australia. To maintain confidentiality, educators were de-identified and assigned pseudonyms. Among the six educators, five were female and one male, reflecting the gender diversity present within the Enabling sector. Each educator-researcher serves as an educator within the Enabling sector and represents various stages of academic careers.

Data Analysis

A six-phase thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was conducted. In phase one, all educators-researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading the combined document containing seven reflections, noting initial reactions. A discussion of first impressions fostered a shared understanding. Phase two involved initial coding by three educator-researchers using inductive coding to align findings with the research questions. Educators reflected on challenges and enablers affecting Enabling students' self-efficacy. Observations highlighted individual characteristics, such as resilience, alongside external factors like health or family concerns. Additionally, Bandura's (1997) four sources of self-efficacy, mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and affective states, served as an organising framework

for practical strategies. The data was manually coded line by line into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, resulting in eight codes. Phase three focused on theme identification. Four researchers examined data from each code, collaboratively noting identified themes and sharing findings for feedback. In phases five and six, themes were defined, named, and reported. The development and identification of themes is more than using a subheading to unit disparate topics. Braun & Clarke (2022) lament the inconsistent understanding and application of their 2006 paper and encourage 'knowing practice' (p.1). Thus here we have ensured, through rigorous and inter-rater reliability of the codebook, that Big Q non-positivist and reflective Thematic Analysis is presented as 'researcher subjectivity...a resource of research, rather than a threat to be contained, and meaning and knowledge is contextually situated' (p.2) The three key topics that framed the research questions were: perceived readiness, cultivating student self-efficacy and Constraints and Barriers.

Results

The findings below contextualises this specific school-leaver cohort, by elucidating the educators' perceptions of the self-efficacy students possess upon entering the Enabling program under the theme of *Diversity of Cohort*. The factors that educators identify as effective for cultivating student self-efficacy in school-leavers is then explored. This analysis highlights themes of *Cultivating Self-Efficacy, Mindsets, Scaffolding Mastery, Supportive Learning Community, Peer Relationships and Self-Reflection*. Finally, the barriers that hinder educators' capacity to foster students' self-efficacy is scrutinised. This final section unpacks themes of *external pressures and emotional labour* faced by Enabling educators as well as well as perceptions of *overconfidence, prior experience, social-emotional challenges, class attendance and engagement, family commitments, as well as health and financial concerns* that may impact self-efficacy (see Figure 1). The overarching themes and nuances found in sub-themes are elaborated upon in detail below.

Perceived Readiness and Diversity of Cohort

Educators highlighted the complexity of school-leavers transitioning into Enabling programs, noting that "there is no such thing as a typical high school Enabling student due to each student's unique nature and characteristics." This diversity in backgrounds and experiences underscores the importance of understanding the different challenges students face. Educators categorised these students into two primary groups: 1. High school completers who, due to personal circumstances, did not achieve the required ATAR. 2. Non-completers who enter with lower academic skills and fewer educational achievements.

Within these two groups student motivations vary widely. Some students are driven by a strong desire to improve academically, while others are influenced by external pressures, such as parental expectations, which can negatively affect their attitude towards studying. In some cases, these pressures lead to students viewing their academic journey as a means to meet family expectations rather than a path toward personal growth. Adolescence, with its emotional and developmental complexities, further complicates the transition. As one educator observed, "Hormones play psyche with their emotions," making it difficult for students to view challenges as opportunities for growth. Many of these younger students may also lack the maturity and life skills typically associated with older, more independent adult students.

Given these varied and complex challenges, the educators all shared approaches that they use to address the unique needs of each student. Fostering self-efficacy becomes paramount as educators help students develop the skills, confidence, and mindset necessary for success in university and beyond. By recognising and supporting the diverse ways students learn and grow, educators can better equip them to overcome the obstacles they face in their education.

Cultivating Self-Efficacy

The main factor that empowered educators was their intrinsic motivation to support the students and help them to succeed alongside what they term the rewarding nature of their role. One educator noted that “the truth is, students are only one part of everything I do, but they are central to everything else that I do. They are what motivates me.” Another educator discussed how rewarding the teaching role was saying “the transformation of the students is amazing to see, so rewarding.” All educators acknowledged facing challenges in their roles but balanced these difficulties with a strong sense of motivation and genuine care for their students. One educator highlighted the complexity of their responsibilities, stating, “Juggling multiple roles at the university, multiple deadlines, and priorities. And I’ll do it again tomorrow with a smile on my face because I wouldn’t have it any other way.” This connection with students and the fulfilment of contributing to their success appears to empower and inspire educators. It drives them to overcome ordinary barriers, fostering a deep sense of student connectedness and commitment to their work.

Mindsets

Several educators discussed the importance of students having a positive mindset to foster self-efficacy. One educator stated, “a realistic and positive mindset synergises with newly developed ‘hard’ skills providing students with a toolbox of strategies to cope with a diverse range of potential academic challenges”. Educators admired comments that students were typically “willing to put in the effort to overcome their challenges”. Another educator stated, “the choice to take the ‘long way round’, when it is the only way round, is admirable.” It was clear from the responses that the positive mindset exhibited by students was perceived as a strength that improved their motivation, self-efficacy and success at university and should be fostered.

The importance of avoiding deficit thinking was evident in educators’ statements, including: “I use positive and affirming language when communicating with students to promote a sense of confidence and self-worth.” Another educator emphasised maintaining high expectations for students, explaining, “This higher expectation empowers them to embrace a more mature mindset and take responsibility for their actions and learning.” These sentiments align with comments from educators who focus on encouraging students and normalising their struggles. For instance, one educator shared, “I make sure I tell them how normal it is to feel out of place at university, that everyone has similar struggles,” while another noted, “I use multiple strategies to get them engaged, to verbally encourage them, to be flexible and make their lives as easy as possible.” Finally, one educator underlined the importance of celebrating achievements: “Acknowledge students’ accomplishments, no matter how small, to show that their efforts are recognised and valued.”

Fostering a growth mindset was identified as another key strategy for boosting self-efficacy. Educators emphasised the importance of encouraging students to view challenges not as

obstacles, but as opportunities for growth. One educator captured this sentiment: “It is vital to cultivate a growth mindset among the cohort. School leavers often view challenges as barriers because they are emotional and lack the maturity to see the long-term potential for growth.” The use of positive language, particularly in feedback, was also noted as a tool for reinforcing this mindset. “I provide feedback using growth mindset language to help build the learner,” one educator explained.

Mastery

Educators identified high expectations as a cornerstone of fostering student self-efficacy. One educator explained that setting high standards from the outset is essential for encouraging responsibility and ownership of learning: “A crucial aspect of building confidence is treating younger students as responsible and capable adults from the very beginning of the term. By doing so, students are empowered to adopt a more mature mindset and take responsibility for their actions.” Another educator emphasised that holding high expectations helps build confidence through consistent positive reinforcement: “Educators always hold high expectations for their students, and through feedback, positive reinforcement and encouragement can progressively advance students’ self-efficacy.”

Scaffolded learning was frequently discussed as an essential strategy for building mastery experiences, contributing to increased self-efficacy. Educators underscored the importance of helping students establish realistic goals and acknowledging even small achievements. One educator described the process: “It is important for educators to encourage school-leaver Enabling students to establish realistic goals and commemorate insignificant achievements while breaking down the end goal into practicable steps. This reinforces students’ belief in their abilities and provides positive experiences towards completing tasks.” Through transparent communication and setting achievable targets, educators provide clear expectations, which contributes towards boosting students’ confidence to meet their study goals.

Educators consistently identified the first assessment task as a pivotal moment in the development of student self-efficacy. It was viewed as an essential milestone that allows students to experience their first success in the academic setting, which can significantly influence their motivation and confidence moving forward. As one educator put it, “The first assessment is very important; there is the highest drop-out rate after unsuccessful completion of the first assessment task.” This highlights the critical role the initial assessment plays in shaping students’ perceptions of their academic abilities and their willingness to continue in the course.

A key aspect of the first assessment is the feedback provided, as it serves as an opportunity for students to understand their progress and areas for improvement. Educators highlighted the importance of constructive and timely feedback, noting that it can foster a sense of accomplishment and reinforce students’ belief in their capabilities. However, the way feedback is delivered and received can also affect its impact. Educators observed a range of reactions from students when receiving feedback, which underscores the complexity of the feedback process. One educator shared that students may react in different ways, from “hypersensitivity to feedback” to “immunity to feedback” or even “aversion to feedback”. These varied responses emphasise the need for thoughtful and empathetic approaches to feedback, particularly for students who are still building their self-efficacy.

Supportive Learning Community

A safe and supportive learning environment, both in-person and online, was highlighted as a critical factor for Enabling students to feel comfortable engaging and participating in class. Educators shared a variety of approaches to foster such an environment. One educator explained:

I design interactive class activities that provide a safe and supportive space for students to participate without fear of judgment. As they gradually engage in these activities and see others doing the same, they begin to gain trust in their abilities and become more willing to share their thoughts.

Another educator discussed normalising student concerns, saying, “Helping them realise that they are not alone in feeling like imposters in this new academic setting” contributes to a more secure learning environment. Additionally, one educator stressed the importance of giving students “permission to fail,” explaining, “without being given permission to fail, a student cannot succeed.”

The need for individualised and holistic support was a common theme in educators' reflections. Tailored support not only helps students address specific academic gaps but ensures that they feel understood and valued. One educator noted,

Understanding the manifestations of low self-efficacy and what this means for Enabling students' ability to engage with and acculturate to university is important. Enabling students may not have the educational background or knowledge to navigate the system, so it's crucial that both educators and the wider institution offer tailored support.

Another educator reinforced this point, stating, “I provide one-on-one or small group tutoring sessions to address individual learning gaps. This tailors the support to each student's needs, allowing them to progress at their own pace.” This personalised approach, combined with ongoing guidance and support, was identified as a key component in boosting student self-efficacy.

Peer Relationships

The role of positive relationships, both between students and educators, and among peers, was emphasised as enhancing self-efficacy. Educators discussed the importance of being approachable, listening to students, and understanding their unique goals, strengths, and challenges. One educator noted, “The availability of educators and mentors for personal guidance and consultations can reinforce students' capabilities, as positive role models inspire students to believe in their own potential.” This approach was viewed as particularly beneficial when educators share their own stories, showing vulnerability and becoming more relatable to students: “Students benefit from identifying with the educator as being ‘human,’ so that they can envisage themselves as not being ‘different’ in some way.”

Additionally, the importance of peer interaction was highlighted. One educator observed, “It is natural for school leavers to identify with, accept, and listen to someone in their own age group. Peer leaders and programs that facilitate peer group learning can have a significant, positive impact on students' self-efficacy.” Another educator praised the value of active learning strategies and teamwork: “Use interactive and engaging teaching methods that encourage participation and active learning. Collaborative activities help students build confidence through teamwork and shared learning experiences.”

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection is a common practice within the Enabling curriculum, and educators noted that it plays a pivotal role in improving students' self-efficacy. Educators note that when students reflect on their progress, this allows them to recognise areas of strength and growth, fostering a sense of achievement. One educator shared their approach: "I often ask students if they feel like university students, or if they feel like successful university students – I like to think that helps them too – getting them to reflect on how far they've come already." Another educator echoed this sentiment, stating, "I put a lot of energy into encouraging self-reflection. I constantly give them examples of how important it will be when they graduate. But it's more than that; I want them to see how far they've come and be proud – confident that they can keep going."

Navigating External Pressures

Precarity imbues the work of Enabling practitioners with a sense of insecurity, as acutely expressed by one educator: "I started teaching in Enabling as a casual and then on a short-term contract when the person I was covering for passed away following elective surgery." This real or perceived precarity often compels educators to accept any work available, as reflected in another response: "I spent 5 years as a sessional at another university where I would teach anything and everything that they offered me so that I could pay my bills."

Time and energy emerged as critical yet constrained resources in educators' efforts to help students develop self-efficacy. One educator highlighted the additional guidance required by younger students:

Younger students require more guidance and scaffolding to help them adapt to the demands of university-level education. They need to build confidence to share their thoughts aloud and feel that they don't have anything of value to contribute.

This underscores the role of time, both within and outside the classroom, as an essential resource for scaffolding tasks and building students' confidence. Another educator described the significant time investment involved:

They need extra time, I mean to do assignments but also my extra time, explaining and re-explaining things, encouraging them, cheering them on, verbal persuasion galore—just saying, 'You can do this,' or more to the point, 'This is a skill; you will get better the more you practice.'

Energy was also a recurring theme, linked directly to raising students' self-efficacy. One educator noted:

I also put a LOT of energy into encouraging them to self-reflect. I constantly give them examples of how important that will be when they graduate. But it's more than that—I want them to see how far they have come and be proud, be confident they can keep going. I mean just applying for an Enabling course takes courage.

While educators' passion and dedication are evident, there is a tension between the time and energy they wish to dedicate to their students and the constraints of their roles. As one educator commented: "I try to make sure my students always come first, but sometimes other deadlines win." These responses illustrate both the challenges and the commitment required to foster self-efficacy in students, highlighting the need for additional support to mitigate the strain on educators

Emotional Labour

Emotional labour associated with supporting students and fostering their self-efficacy was a common theme among educators. When describing Enabling students, one educator noted:

Collectively, they are different, more diverse, more challenging to teach, I think. By that, I mean there is more emotional labour involved, a pedagogy of care, a social justice lens, all 101% necessary in Enabling education.

Educators frequently highlighted the emotional labour involved in listening to students and understanding the challenges they face, particularly in efforts to raise their self-efficacy. One educator explained: "I can tell them that everyone is in the same boat, but unless I understand their circumstances, that is meaningless." Additionally, educators expressed a sense of vulnerability when sharing their own journeys through higher education. For instance, one educator shared:

Probably at times I share too much... I talk about the low points and how I got through them... I want them to see my resilience and know that they can do it too. It makes me a bit vulnerable maybe; it takes courage to share, I guess... I hope they see how far I've come, how far they might go.

These reflections demonstrate how Enabling educators connect the emotional labour of supporting students with the use of vicarious experiences, showing that these efforts can significantly impact students' self-efficacy.

Overconfidence

Navigating the transition to university, school-leavers often grapple with overconfidence and self-consciousness, impacting their academic journey. The first group often exhibits overconfidence, assuming their recent high school experiences have sufficiently prepared them for the demands of university. As one educator noted, these students can "struggle with the transition, thinking that university will be no different from school." In contrast, the second group is often more self-conscious, "with underlying specific learning challenges or disabilities that have hindered their progress," as highlighted by a participant, making them hesitant about their academic potential. These students, feeling the weight of past failures, need additional emotional and academic support to rebuild confidence. However, both groups face challenges adjusting to the adult university environment, where they often underestimate the time and cognitive skills required, such as critical thinking, time management, and self-discipline. As one educator shared, "The reality of university hits hard when students realise how much effort is needed outside the classroom."

The overconfidence that is observed in high school leavers stems from unrealistic expectations of university study or "a mechanism to mask self-doubt." One educator noted that "most [school-leavers] (70-80%) have low self-efficacy but tend to act overconfident to hide it." Another educator explained that Enabling students often display an inverse relationship with self-efficacy: "Those that have high self-efficacy often have low-level academic skills and an attitude toward their capabilities that prevents effective engagement with the learning materials." Additionally, it was noted that overconfident students may over-commit their time and underestimate the workload involved. Some students may even resent having to undertake an Enabling program, with one educator stating, "often, the reason students who are overconfident do not pass is because they

do not believe in the program, see it as beneath them, and do not put in the time and effort to do well.” This shared sentiment suggests that while overconfidence may mask low levels of self-efficacy, it remains a significant barrier to student success.

Prior experience

Educator responses highlighted the impact of negative prior experiences that hinder the development of students' self-efficacy. Many students have been told that “higher education is not for them” or that “opportunities are not available to them.” Furthermore, Enabling students come from diverse backgrounds and face intersectional, compounding challenges that as one educator put it, “carry significant personal baggage that has hindered their academic progress.” Due to previous struggles with social and learning obstacles, students can be hesitant, lacking belief in themselves and their potential.

Educators also noted that poor prior educational experiences and undiagnosed conditions can affect students' self-belief. One educator reflected on how “poor experiences with teachers who have invalidated them, undiagnosed conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, mood disorders, anxiety, and depression” have left students uncertain about their abilities, sometimes leading to feelings of “imposter syndrome.” This highlights that many Enabling students arrive at university with underdeveloped academic skills.

While it is assumed that Enabling students are seeking to improve various skills for further education, educators acknowledged the depth and breadth of the challenges they face. One educator listed a wide array of difficulties that typical Enabling students encounter when building academic skills, including “gaps in their foundational knowledge, weaker study skills, limited subject-specific proficiency, limited language proficiency, psychological learning limitations, underlying neurodevelopmental disorders, and other physical learning disabilities.” Another educator pointed out that certain higher-order academic skills, such as reflection, “may be an uncomfortable or threatening space for some.” These previous educational experiences and the varying levels of academic skills students bring with them to higher education illustrate how mastery experiences influence their self-efficacy.

Social and emotional challenges

Social and emotional challenges present substantial barriers. Many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, face issues like family pressure, mental health challenges, and lack of emotional maturity, all of which can hinder their ability to focus on academic growth. One educator remarked, “The emotional baggage some students bring with them can overwhelm their academic potential.” Adolescents, in particular, struggle with emotional regulation, making it difficult for them to view academic setbacks as growth opportunities rather than threats to their self-worth.

Educators observed that it was common for school-leavers to feel out of place at university, experiencing imposter syndrome. One educator linked imposter syndrome to students' past experiences and the absence of role models to guide them through the university experience, while another explained that “challenging existing mindsets of how students see themselves, such as imposters,” is crucial for the development of self-efficacy. Educators further suggested that acknowledging the challenges faced by learners through “authentic personal acknowledgment of

similar situations experienced by the educator” is important. This emphasises the value of normalising the student experience and using the educator’s own stories as a tool to achieve this.

Class attendance and engagement

One concern shared by educators was the lack of class attendance, both on-campus and online, which they viewed as a sign of disengagement that hindered their ability to effectively support students in building self-efficacy. One educator explained this issue, stating, “Unfortunately, there are many students who do not attend the online classes, so it is not possible to determine how they may have improved and developed a greater understanding of self-efficacy.” Another educator added:

They [younger students] do not speak up in class or ask questions. They often have their laptops open, but it is clear they are looking at social media or something else, as nothing going on in the class would require a document or website to be open. Or they don’t attend class at all. Just general disengagement, I guess.

Another educator linked students' complex needs and class attendance more explicitly to self-efficacy by considering mastery experiences:

Most of the mastery experiences happen in their own time as independent learners. ANY barrier that takes their time away from study is taking away their mastery experiences and impacting their self-efficacy. A barrier to study time is a barrier to self-efficacy. And there are a LOT of barriers and challenges that take away study time in the lives of Enabling students.

Educators offered various explanations for the perceived lack of attendance and class engagement. One educator noted:

I’ve had more than one student email me to say they won’t be in class because they don’t have enough petrol or money for public transport. But of course, it’s more than that. They cannot say no to extra shifts in their casual jobs because if they say no even once, they won’t be asked next time and they need the work. This eats into their study time and affects class attendance too.

Another educator suggested that time management skills might be a contributing factor: “While Enabling students tend to react very well to a structured timetable, the time management and organisation often needed outside of class time is often lacking.” These reflections highlight the complexity of factors contributing to student engagement, class attendance, and, consequently, self-efficacy.

Family commitments

Family concerns impeding self-efficacy was evident in educators' responses as one educator identified a range of family-related challenges, stating, “From Indigenous students expected to attend sorry business (funerals) and have to be away for weeks, through to separations and family breakdowns, sick children and other caring duties.” Educators also observed students struggling with their social networks. One educator recalled, “I’ve had students in tears because their high school friendship group was torn apart when they became the only one to go to university, miss social events, and ‘neglect’ their friends.” While friends and family can provide support and

confidence, educators noted that this was not always the case. One educator explained, “Family or friends who reinforce the student’s low self-efficacy could combat attempts to build it.”

Health and financial concerns

Health concerns were identified as a significant barrier to raising self-efficacy. One educator succinctly captured this challenge, saying, “Health and financial strain are also significant barriers to many Enabling students.” Another educator discussed the impact of trauma on self-efficacy more specifically: “If the student has been impacted by significant trauma or has layered conditions that impact their learning, even a course with a considered approach to building a student’s self-efficacy might not be as effective.”

Finances were a common concern for students, as perceived by educators. It was highlighted that “the financial strain is a most pressing barrier when it comes to having the basic computer requirements, especially for those who are not able to come to campus to use computers provided on-site at the library.” This financial strain can extend to other essential needs, such as internet access and transport availability. Another educator pointed out that “financial strain, especially for young adults (without life experience to draw from nor accumulated financial security), can threaten basic needs such as housing and can also impact relationships, physical health, and mental health.”

Discussion

This study captures the lived experiences and insights of Enabling educators as they navigate the complex task of fostering self-efficacy among diverse school-leaver students. Their perspective provides valuable insight into both the barriers that impede their ability to support students and the factors empowering them to make meaningful contributions. Educators expressed a deep commitment to their students’ growth and resilience, highlighting the dual challenges of addressing students’ complex needs within the constraints of their roles.

The complexity of Enabling education

Enabling educators consistently described their work as inherently complex, shaped by the diversity of students and the unique challenges they face in transitioning to higher education. High-school leavers entering Enabling programs bring a wide range of academic skills, emotional readiness, and personal circumstances. Some students mask low self-efficacy with overconfidence, while others arrive burdened by negative past educational experiences, resulting in hesitation and self-doubt (Talsma, 2023). Despite these challenges, educators noted that the emotional and holistic support provided during this transitional period is critical for helping students navigate the expectations of higher education so they can align their prior experiences with new academic demands. However, within a neoliberal structure, the time and effort required to deliver this level of support are often undervalued. Motta and Bennett’s (2018) concept of the pedagogy of care highlights the importance of providing emotional and relational support, yet the significant emotional labour involved in such practices is frequently overlooked by institutions. This gap in recognition extends to the pivotal role of what Seary and Willans (2020) term the “caring teacher,” who provides crucial pastoral care in Enabling courses. These educators create supportive learning environments that nurture students’ growth and wellbeing, fostering positive interactions and promoting both satisfaction and retention (Seary & Willans, 2020).

Recognising and valuing the contributions of Enabling educators is essential to ensuring that the complex needs of school-leavers are met. Prioritising the pedagogy of care and acknowledging the emotional labour involved, institutions can better support educators in fulfilling their transformative roles, enhancing outcomes for students navigating the challenges of higher education. The educators' own lived experiences of navigating their roles within Enabling programs amplify this complexity. Precarity, defined as an ontological position of uncertainty, insecurity or vulnerability (Olds et al., 2023) continues to influence Enabling education in Australia, and the educators who exist within it. They face high teaching workloads, competing priorities, and the emotional demands of providing holistic support (Hattam & Weiler, 2021; Olds et al. 2023). These dual layers of complexity, student and educator, were central to the educators' narratives, reinforcing the need for systemic solutions to better support both groups.

Supports that empower educators

Despite significant barriers, educators reflected on several factors that enabled them to cultivate self-efficacy in school-leaver students. A recurring theme in their accounts was the intrinsic motivation educators felt, along with the emotional satisfaction of witnessing student success. This sense of reward strengthened their commitment to their roles, sustaining their motivation in the face of challenges. Strategies to support students facing barriers to self-efficacy development included fostering positive and growth mindsets, setting high expectations, and providing scaffolded learning experiences that build mastery through early successes and constructive feedback. These approaches are supported by creating safe, supportive learning environments, that offer individualised guidance and encourage strong educator-student and peer relationships to enhance confidence and resilience. Educators highlighted the crucial role of pastoral care and the impact of supportive, caring teaching on student engagement and success. Seary and Willans (2020) highlight that educators who adopt a compassionate and attentive approach create environments where students, particularly those with past negative educational experiences, feel safe to challenge limiting beliefs about their abilities. This caring approach is often grounded in a relational pedagogy that prioritises trust, acceptance, and individual attention, as well as the commitment to supporting students on a personal level (Seary & Willans, 2020; Walker & Greaves, 2016). Such teaching practices are particularly significant in Enabling programs, where the focus is on building confidence and fostering resilience in students who may face various challenges. Educators stressed the importance of relationship-building as an essential component of their teaching approach. They recognised that a safe, supportive environment is fundamental in helping students engage with their learning without fear of judgment, which further helps to develop relationships and strengthen the sense of social connectedness (James & Seary, 2019).

Holistic support emerged as a critical enabler for fostering self-efficacy, with educators advocating for a comprehensive, university-wide approach that integrates academic, emotional, and social services to address the diverse needs of students (Kift et al., 2010). This collective model not only reduces the burden on individual educators but enhances the overall student experience, creating a more inclusive and cohesive learning environment (James & Seary, 2019). Such integrated support is essential for tackling the multifaceted challenges students face, ensuring they have the resources to thrive. Alongside this, educators consistently emphasised the importance of strengths-based teaching practices in fostering self-efficacy. Avoiding deficit thinking and maintaining high expectations for students was a central strategy (Stokes, 2021). By focusing on

students' strengths, educators empower them to recognise and build upon their abilities, fostering a positive mindset towards learning (James & Walters, 2020). Specific strategies, such as explicit teaching, verbal persuasion, and normalising the challenges of learning, were identified as effective ways to create an environment where students feel supported and confident in overcoming obstacles (Larsen & James, 2022). Together, these approaches form a holistic framework that not only addresses the practical needs of students but nurtures their confidence and resilience.

Practical implications

Based on the experiences of Enabling educators, several key recommendations emerge for enhancing the cultivation of self-efficacy in Enabling education. First, workload models need to better reflect the additional time and effort required for pastoral care and individualised support. Educators consistently highlighted the significance of these aspects yet often face challenges due to workload models that do not account for the time needed to nurture students' emotional and academic growth. Second, providing professional development opportunities on self-efficacy, strengths-based teaching, and pedagogies of care can better equip educators to meet the diverse needs of students. Training in these areas would help educators foster positive learning environments that empower students. Finally, institutions must recognise and support the emotional labour involved in Enabling education. Educators often perform emotionally demanding work to support students' well-being, and this critical aspect of their role should be valued and adequately supported by institutions.

Limitations

We would like to acknowledge the limitations of this project, which pertain particularly to the voices and perspectives that are missing. The educators, seven in total of varying ages, subject areas, and experiences from five Australian universities, may be considered representatively diverse. However, there is capacity for the research and educators' team to be further expanded to ensure there is a closer gender balance as there is currently one male educator. Some may consider this representative of Enabling educators who are predominantly women (see Jones et al, 2023; Crawford & Johns, 2018; Motta & Bennett, 2018). Finally, this paper reports solely on the educators' observations of Enabling students' self-efficacy and the barriers and supports they personally experience. Therefore, it would be prudent for further research to take into consideration the student voice and see if there is alignment between educator and student perspectives.

Conclusion

The findings of this study, grounded in the lived experiences of Enabling educators, highlight both the challenges and opportunities in fostering self-efficacy among diverse school-leaver students. Educators' commitment to their students' growth is evident, even amidst systemic barriers and personal challenges. Their reflections provide a roadmap for enhancing Enabling education, reinforcing the need for tailored, strengths-based, and relational approaches to teaching. By addressing the systemic barriers identified and investing in holistic support, universities can empower educators to continue their transformative work and ensure equitable outcomes for all students.

Building on these insights, this study makes several key contributions by directly responding to the research questions and advancing theoretical, practical, and research-based understandings of self-efficacy development among school-leavers. Responding to Research Question 1, the study identifies a pattern of factors shaping school-leaver self-efficacy, including limited academic readiness, past negative schooling experiences, developmental and psychosocial transitions, and uncertainty about university norms. Research Question 2 is addressed through highlighting the constraints educators encounter, such as institutional pressures, insufficient resourcing, and the emotional labour involved in supporting vulnerable younger learners. Finally, the study offers a detailed account of the pedagogical strategies educators employ, such as relational teaching, explicit skill-building, scaffolded learning design, and the cultivation of safe, collaborative classroom cultures, that effectively enhance school-leavers' confidence and engagement in response to Research Question 3. Combined, these contributions strengthen theoretical understandings of self-efficacy in younger transitioning students, provide a methodological model for future research in Enabling contexts, and equip practitioners with concrete strategies to better support an increasingly school-leaver-dominated cohort.

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