



Contemporary attitudes prevent people from experiencing self-efficacy. Unfortunately, children are particularly affected. Doctors show us the psychological healing power of self-efficacy.

Reading time: 11 minutes

For many years, I have been observing a phenomenon with great concern. For me, it is a form of affluence neglect. As Germany has been economically successful as the world's leading exporter in recent decades, voices criticising excessive pressure to perform have increasingly gained the upper hand, claiming that our lives would function better if the work-life balance shifted more strongly away from work in favour of other activities.

One proposal at the beginning of the new millennium, for example, was a basic income without any requirement to work. Today, the citizen's income has implemented this idea through the back door. Of the more than 5 million recipients, over 4 million are considered fit for work. This nestling in state welfare was considered unlikely by the advocates of the citizen's income. Politicians are probably not the better behavioural scientists after all.

It is trendy to want to remove all kinds of obstacles from people's lives. This is well-intentioned. Really. But it has fatal consequences, and that is my topic today. It is especially the experiments with children and young people that concern me. A few examples to illustrate this:

- **Abolition of grades** in primary schools: In some federal states, there are plans or practices to no longer give grades in the interests of "learning without pressure to perform".

- **Abolition of rankings** and award ceremonies in school sports: To avoid feelings of failure, many sports festivals no longer hold award ceremonies or rankings.



- **Abolition of final examinations:** Particularly during and after the coronavirus pandemic, there have been calls to abolish or replace final examinations in schools and vocational training (e.g. with grade point averages).
- **Equalisation in selection procedures** (e.g. universities): Selection procedures are increasingly being replaced by quotas, waiting lists or random procedures, which devalues individual effort and preparation.



We live in a postmodern world in which objective reason has given way to scepticism about universal truths and different perspectives are postulated as equal. Theses are put forward, but unlike in the modern era, they are not empirically tested, but sold as alternative moral truths.

Of course, most kids would welcome this development. Who likes to prepare for tests? I certainly don't. But is it really about giving kids the most pleasant and 'fair' upbringing possible, or is it about preparing them for an independent, free and self-determined life?

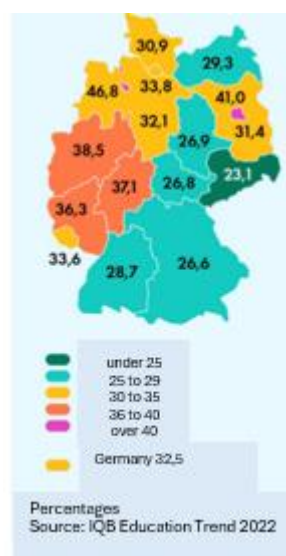
The concept of **self-efficacy**, i.e. the belief that one can overcome challenges through one's own efforts, is considered central to mental well-being and psychological health in psychology. Scientific discussion emphasises the importance of experienced self-efficacy for well-being. Self-efficacy influences how people think, feel and act. High self-efficacy is associated with greater perseverance, goal orientation and the ability to cope with setbacks. Studies show that self-efficacy is one of the most important personal resources for mental well-being and coping with stress.

Current data shows that both students' skills and mental health have declined significantly. A DAK study from 2024 shows that weekly sleep problems and headaches/stomach aches have increased by a quarter to 46%. Three-quarters of schoolchildren have crisis fears. This is the opposite of experiencing self-efficacy.

The moralised focus on weaker pupils earns bonus points for fairness, but has fatal consequences.

Because we are not promoting the potential that is the key success factor for our resource-poor economy, namely excellent education and high-performing individuals.

A graph that makes you shudder. Subject: German. Percentage of ninth-graders who do not meet the minimum standard in reading. The city of Bremen, which has been governed by a red-green-red coalition since 2019, brings up the rear. Nearly 50% do not meet the minimum standard in reading German texts. But even the data from the model state of Bavaria is completely inadequate.



What do our kids need? Of course, not just practice-oriented tests, but targeted support to experience self-efficacy. This includes, for example:

Enabling experiences of success: Young people should be given the opportunity to gain experience in overcoming challenges independently. Small, achievable goals lead to quick experiences of success.



Giving them room to manoeuvre: Young people need freedom to take responsibility and solve tasks independently. Too much support or too much control can hinder the experience of self-efficacy.

Targeted, constructive feedback: Appreciation for effort and progress (not just for the result) and a constructive approach to mistakes help young people to learn from setbacks and develop self-confidence.

Role of role models: Observing peers or adults who overcome challenges promotes the belief that one can be successful oneself (vicarious experiences).

If we cannot achieve this, we will have more and more young adults who prefer the citizen's income of the nanny state to the efforts of working life. Because they are not aware that they lack self-efficacy. They have not experienced it.

Why did I write that doctors have shown me the importance of self-efficacy? I need to back up a bit to explain this. We conduct a great many studies with doctors, from general practitioners to specialists in rare diseases. Internationally. Doctors have one of the most challenging professions.

They are confronted with many new patients every day. They have to make diagnoses and decide on therapies very quickly. Doctors experience a rollercoaster of emotions every day. Motivating self-efficacy when the therapy works. Helplessness when there are no promising therapies. When we work with doctors to examine the chances of success of our customers' innovative therapeutic approaches, the improvements for patients are a key factor. But only when the doctor feels that the new therapy helps to increase his self-efficacy do we have his undivided attention.

Of course, various contextual factors influence this experience of self-efficacy, and understanding them is the jackpot.

The regular experience of self-efficacy is therefore also a turbocharger for well-being in adults. Unfortunately, we have been focusing on the wrong issues for years. Moralisation and justice, or 'wokeness' for short, obscure the fact that prosperity comes from growth and performance, not redistribution.

Economic success comes when something is produced that millions of people love. It is a narcissistic blow to the philosophers and sociologists on talk shows when they realise that they don't actually earn any money, but Heidi Klum rakes in millions with pretty superficialities.

The accusatory promises of redistribution made by the left particularly appeal to people with reduced self-efficacy. But Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady, had already recognised that the problem with socialism is that at some point, other people's money runs out.

Germany has not grown in real terms since 2017. In terms of international competitiveness, Germany now ranks a miserable 24th place in international competitiveness. Denmark is in 3rd place and the Netherlands in 9th. Organisations seem to be only slowly becoming aware of the situation. In August 2019, IG Metall (workers union) called for *joint pressure to be exerted* – for social, ecological and democratic change. Not for economic success! Now, in August 2025, there are complaints that "tens of thousands of jobs in Bavaria's automotive industry are at risk in the second wave."

Losing one's job is a severe blow to one's sense of self-efficacy.



But those who have experienced sufficient self-efficacy have a choice. More and more young people with excellent education and a stable self-image are emigrating and seeking success elsewhere. In 2010, the figure was 141,000. By 2024, it had risen to 270,000, and in July 2025, it will already be 300,000.

What is behind this? Too little of the success remains in their own pockets. Renowned economics professor Lars Feld: "Labour costs are too high. Energy costs are too high. The tax burden is too high, and we have a level of regulation that is strangling businesses. All four areas need to be addressed in parallel."

Finance Minister Lars Klingbeil prefers to complain that high earners are not contributing enough. Perhaps he is not yet aware of the figures: the top 1% of taxpayers contribute 23.6% of total wage and income tax revenue. The top 10% contribute 56.3% and almost 100% of the solidarity surcharge.

After less than 10 years in my profession, I was able to build a house with three children's rooms in Hamburg in 1990. Exclusively with money I had earned myself and a bank loan.

That would be impossible in today's context. No wonder mobile elites are fleeing the metastasising German state and seeking more prosperous contexts far away to enjoy the fruits of their hard work.

I am deliberately arguing in black and white terms. Self-efficacy is not the only factor – but it is the one that is not yet being discussed.

I'll finish with a quote from physicist and comedian Vince Ebert from the title of his new book: "Our feelings have lost their minds". Many readers probably still have their wits about them. The book immediately rose to number 1 on the Spiegel bestseller list. I recommend the audiobook, read by the author. An expert observer of human behaviour gives us a good overview of the forces at work in society, all served up with a good dose of humour.



Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



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