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## The effects of teacher empowerment on student achievement

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## The effects of teacher empowerment on student achievement

### Abstract

Today a major topic of conversation with administrators and teachers is teacher empowerment. Many people have their own beliefs on what constitutes teacher empowerment. one basic definition is that teacher empowerment is placing greater responsibility in the hands of teachers for the designs and delivery of educational strategies (Erlandson & Bifano, 1987). In one attempt to define empowerment in terms of a projected outcome, Gore (1989) indicated that empowerment was an end state hence he implied that empowerment is a goal or vision. Lightfoot (1985) on the other hand views empowerment as a process. He indicated that empowerment consists of a practice and expression, a more fluid state, a negotiable organizational structure, and relationships that are fundamentally symmetrical.

THE EFFECTS OF TEACHER EMPOWERMENT  
ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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by  
Michael Dean Sawyer

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Today a major topic of conversation with administrators and teachers is teacher empowerment. Many people have their own beliefs on what constitutes teacher empowerment. One basic definition is that teacher empowerment is placing greater responsibility in the hands of teachers for the designs and delivery of educational strategies (Erlandson & Bifano, 1987). In one attempt to define empowerment in terms of a projected outcome, Gore (1989) indicated that empowerment was an end state hence he implied that empowerment is a goal or vision. Lightfoot (1985) on the other hand views empowerment as a process. He indicated that empowerment consists of a practice and expression, a more fluid state, a negotiable organizational structure, and relationships that are fundamentally symmetrical. Another important aspect of empowerment comes from Maeroff (1988) who claimed that empowering teachers required that they are raised in status, made more professional at their craft, and given entry into the decision-making process. He also equates empowerment with professionalization and emphasizes the need for teachers to act and be treated as professionals. Finally, Stimson (1988) applied a less complicated definition to empowerment by indicating it is the giving of real or imagined ability

of one person to influence the behavior of another. Stimson continued by adding a new and more complicated term power-sharing. According to this view, power-sharing encourages people at all levels of the organization to be involved in decision making without feeling manipulated. Whichever definition one prefers to utilize, if change is to come to education that change must come from within. Goodlad (1984) suggested the school must be largely self-directing. The people within it must develop a capacity for effecting renewal and establishing the mechanism for renewal.

#### Empowerment Activities

To better understand empowerment, it is necessary to identify specifically the procedures or activities utilized by empowered teachers and contrast those activities with the actions of non-empowered teachers. After surveying 8,500 teachers, the following activities were determined to denote empowered teachers (Here's what, 1986). Teachers felt empowered when they made important decisions relating to: (a) curriculum of student, (b) text and supplementary material, (c) instructional methods, (d) text selection, (e) inservice training in school, (f) developing a sense of collegiality, (g) observing other teachers at

work, (h) hiring of teachers, (i) choosing subjects and levels taught, and (j) professional growth.

One of the problems in describing specific activities in which empowered teachers participate is the shared-power concept utilized by many educators. Empowered teachers and administrators use a team approach (educator, administrator, specialist, and parents) in solving many of their schools' problems. This makes it difficult to describe specific areas of teacher empowerment. Pugh (1989) illustrated this problem as it occurred in the Philadelphia School District. Typically this team approach focused on broad problems such as drop-out rate, violence in the school, or community relations. This approach affords little opportunity for individual teachers to experience specific empowerment activities.

#### Effects of Empowerment on Teachers

To determine the effects of teacher empowerment on students you must examine the impact of empowerment on teachers. O'Loughlin (1988) argued that, a teachers' beliefs are likely to have a profound influence on their activities. In particular, Darling-Hammond (1987) pointed out that as teachers begin to feel empowered they define and enforce professional standards of practice. The traditional values of both

management and labor were significantly reshaped by these same teachers. These studies suggested that as teachers became empowered they began to have an impact on the evaluation procedures of a school. They set standards of continuing education requirements and had a voice in inservice training programs. Empowered teachers established professional mentoring programs for new and at-risk staff.

McClure (1988) described empowered teachers in terms of group beliefs or feelings. Faculties saw themselves as a powerful force that could effect the quality of their schools. Empowered teachers described themselves as more action oriented, more able to learn from mistakes, and more passionate about the values they hold for their schools. Perhaps most important, they became more collegial and were better able to share ideas, to solve problems together, and to contribute to the knowledge base.

Garmstom and Pahre (1988), like McClure (1988), attempted to describe the effects of empowerment upon teachers. However, Garmstom is more specific in his descriptions. Based on Garmstom's research, empowered teachers possessed the following characteristics. They: (a) were motivated; (b) were productively engaged in improving learning inside their classroom



and in the schools; (c) sought to understand causes of instructional problems, found alternate solutions and took action; (d) made commitments; (e) took responsibility; (f) invited the administration into their classrooms; (g) volunteered; (h) experienced less stress; (i) enjoyed teaching each other and themselves; (j) were critically reflective of their own teaching; (k) believed their ideas were listened to and their energies made a difference; and (l) believed it was worthwhile for them to contribute to the organization because something happened as a result of their participation.

Most research indicates, as expected, that empowering teachers has a positive impact upon the teachers and their efforts in teaching. Erlandson and Bifano (1987) noted that research on empowered teachers clearly demonstrated that empowerment of teachers had a positive impact on their professional image, on their commitment to the mission of the school, and on their decision to remain in teaching.

#### Teacher Empowerment and Student Achievement

One large problem that must be dealt with is the impact of teacher empowerment on student academic achievement. Kraus and Paleologos (1987) reported that the state of Massachusetts began a program (Project

Reach) to improve the quality of instruction and achievement in the public schools. A major trust of this effort was empowering teachers. The Reach Commission in its report supported the connection between empowerment and achievement. The commission suggested that in order to improve the achievement of its students, Massachusetts must first improve the work lives of its teachers. After conducting hearings, the special commission concluded that for learning to succeed, the teaching profession must succeed. Lightfoot (1985) also speculated about the importance of the influence of empowerment and achievement. She noted that good schools recognized the relationship between the learning and achievement of students and the development and expression of teachers. Brandt (1989), in his interview with Ann Lieberman, suggested a positive school outgrowth of teacher empowerment occurred when it becomes legitimate for teachers to work together. Teachers not only felt good about themselves as a group but also began to help each other solve problems they could not solve alone.

At this time, only limited empirical evidence for the relation of teacher empowerment and student achievement is available. Veatch and Cooter (1986) indicated that there was recent evidence that teacher

empowerment improved student achievement in reading. The Department of Education in California attempted to evaluate third grade students reading achievement. They began by assessing the materials and methods used in the various schools. To their dismay they discovered that some students reading abilities improved while others declined using the same materials and method of instruction. The researcher commented that a teacher factor seemed to be a contributing variable that caused the discrepancy. They noted that teachers with the higher achieving students seemed to have a sense of professionalism. These teachers had also experienced varying degrees of empowerment, some were given time off to improve their abilities, others were provided time to observe fellow teachers, and others were involved in decision making in scheduling and budgeting. The researchers concluded that the teacher factor needed to be considered when evaluating effectiveness of reading programs.

Not everyone is convinced of the relationship between empowerment and achievement. Imber (1983) noted that there existed numerous arguments for the empowerment of teachers and to a degree that empowerment does have a positive impact upon the teacher. However, he noted that he could not find any

evidence connecting teacher empowerment and student achievement. Erlandson and Bifano (1987) found that empowerment had three effects upon the teachers. It had a positive impact on: (a) their professionalism, (b) their commitment to the mission of the school, and (c) their decision to remain in teaching. Erlandson and Bifano noted that the impact of teacher empowerment on student outcomes is less clear. Taken together the results of these studies clearly demonstrate the need for additional research in this area. No studies, with the major objective to examine the correlation between teacher empowerment and student achievement have been completed.

#### Implementation of Empowerment

The next step and perhaps the most difficult is one of implementation. Just how does one go about empowering teachers? Garmstom and Pahre (1988) suggested five major conditions that are fundamental for the environment that supports empowerment:

1. Teachers must feel that the environment is emotionally safe. It must be a professional environment in which decision making and risk taking need to be encouraged and valued.

2. Teachers need to operate within an atmosphere of trust. Administrators need to show the individual

teachers in the daily operation of the school that they are trusted. Practices such as the locked supply closet and the signing in and out which is sometimes required of teachers, undermine the concept of empowerment.

3. Teachers need to work in an atmosphere of caring. Teachers will respond positively if they feel that someone really cares about them both personally and professionally.

4. A safety net needs to be in place and available to teachers when they encounter difficulties. A good administrator must be willing to help in the empowering process and be willing to act as a buffer when the actions taken by those empowered turn sour.

5. Finally, teachers must regularly participate with the administration in making decisions about instruction. Empowerment needs to be an ongoing process of teacher involvement.

These conditions sound easy enough but one needs to consider exactly what administrative actions support empowerment. Garmstom and Pahre (1988) indicated that administrators wanting to empower their teachers should have the following qualities or actions. They should:

- (a) be a good listener,
- (b) be willing to admit mistakes,
- (c) give credit and recognize contributions,

(d) be knowledgeable of current trends in education, (e) be a model of the skills they want their teachers to possess, (f) be accessible, (g) be ready to say thanks at the appropriate times, and (h) be willing to make the tough decisions when it is necessary.

Clearly, empowerment is not going to suddenly appear over night if an administrator provides all these supportive actions. Empowerment is a concept that takes time and effort on the part on both the administrator and teacher.

#### Summary

After reviewing the literature it becomes evident there is not a great deal of research in the area. The major difficulty rests in the fact that teacher empowerment is a complex concept and that each individual teacher may respond in a variety of ways to empowerment. The theory of empowerment proceeds like this, once empowered the teachers will feel better about themselves and their profession, consequently they will do a better job teaching thereby increasing their students' achievement level. Clearly, a break down anywhere along this process may result in no beneficial effect on student achievement. Although a number of educators believe that teacher empowerment results in higher student performance, the evidence is

mixed (Erlandson & Bifano, 1987; Imber, 1983). I find myself leaning towards the positive view of teacher empowerment. The common sense concept of feeling better about one's self and how that positively affects one's performance cannot in my opinion be ignored.

Empowerment should not be entered into just because it sounds like a good idea or because an administrator wants to appear progressive. I believe any administrator wanting to empower their staff needs to develop a comprehensive plan which includes strategies for involving teachers and support staff in the decision-making process. The plan would include discussions with staff on what they view as their role, how they want to be involved, etc. There has to be a balance--teachers can become so involved in the administrative decision-making process that they do not have adequate time for lesson design and delivery. To proceed without such a plan is only inviting disaster. As an administrator, I feel that sharing power or empowering teachers makes good sense when making administrative decisions. It also makes good sense when considering the benefits to the students academic progress.

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