

The Empowering Schools Project: Identifying the Classroom and School Characteristics That Lead to Student Empowerment

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Abstract

In an education system marred by inequity, urban schools in the United States are faced with the challenge of helping students from marginalized groups succeed. While many strategies have been tried, most are built on deficit-based models that blame students and teachers for a lack of achievement and ignore the role of power within the school setting. Building on the body of research on school climate, critical pedagogy, and empowering settings, the present study developed a model of student empowerment using a case study of an ethnically diverse urban high school in the midwestern United States. Participant observation, focus groups, and interviews were utilized to identify classroom and school characteristics related to student empowerment. Students reported equitable teacher–student relationships, integrated student leadership, and shared decision making. Similarly, school staff reported high staff empowerment and sense of community. The Student Empowerment Model is a useful framework for school improvement, adding

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“power” to the broader literature on school climate and extending the work on empowering settings to schools.

Keywords

urban context, education, qualitative methods

In 1848, Horace Mann wrote that education, “beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men [*sic*]” and asserted that public education had the power to prevent poverty (p. 154). More than 160 years after Mann advocated for the creation of public schools in the United States, dramatic disparities and academic underachievement still characterize the U.S. education system. Despite spending more money per student on education than all other top nations, the U.S. ranks far behind other countries on most academic indicators (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009). The achievement gap between the privileged and the marginalized is large (Kao & Thompson, 2003) and continuing to grow (Reardon, 2011).

Although countless reforms, policies, and programs have been deployed to reduce these disparities, most of these efforts have ignored the role of power in the school setting, instead adopting a “deficit paradigm” that blames students for their lack of achievement and holds schools accountable for the behavior of their students on a set of pre-determined criteria (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). From this viewpoint, dominant groups control the educational process in such a way that “condemns both poor students and public schools to failure” (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004). The present study addresses this gap in literature by presenting a model of student empowerment that describes key characteristics within classrooms and schools that contribute to the empowerment of students and providing a useful framework for including a discussion of power in the discourse on school improvement.

School Climate

For more than a century, educational researchers have studied school characteristics and their effects on student attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. These studies have been loosely grouped under the title of “school climate,” defined as the “impressions, beliefs, and expectations held by members of the school community about their school as a learning environment, their associated behavior, and the symbols and institutions that represent the patterned expressions of behavior” (Homana, Barber, & Torney-Purta, 2006, p. 5). In a review

of the literature, Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) identified four common elements of a positive school climate: (a) physical and social-emotional safety, (b) positive relationships, (c) quality teaching and learning, and (d) adequate environmental structures and resources. Research has consistently demonstrated that schools with a positive “climate” have better outcomes, including increased motivation, academic success (Brand, Felner, Seitsinger, Burns, & Bolton, 2008; Wang & Holcombe, 2010), better attendance, and fewer behavioral problems (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011; Welsh, 2000).

Student Empowerment

While the school climate literature has much to offer, the exclusion of power dynamics limits its applicability to a critical understanding of the role of schools in maintaining or reducing educational disparities. Empowerment has been defined as a domain-specific and iterative process in which people gain mastery and control over issues that concern them (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Holden, Messeri, Evans, Crankshaw, & Ben-Davies, 2004; Maton, 2008; Zimmerman, 1995). Many students come to school “disempowered,” lacking the capability and experience to control the outcomes of their educational journey and finding an education system that promotes passivity and disengagement. Student empowerment is a process by which students gain the power needed to meet their individual needs (e.g., learning, social relationships, diploma) and work with others (e.g., students, teachers, administrators) to achieve collective goals (e.g., a safe and positive school environment; Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Pierson, 2001).

While empowerment processes differ greatly by individual and context, Zimmerman (1995) identified three foundational outcomes that indicate that empowerment has incurred. Intrapersonal outcomes include an individual’s sense of (a) impact (or voice), (b) competence (related to student efficacy), (c) meaningfulness, and (d) choice or self-determination (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Interactional empowered outcomes include critical awareness and access to the skills and resources that students need to have their goals met within the setting. Finally, behavioral empowered outcomes are specific behaviors that provide overt evidence of empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995). In the school domain, these behaviors may include (a) attendance and compliance, (b) student-initiated dialogue, (c) extracurricular participation, and (d) school governance (Finn, 1989). The “Ladder of Student Involvement” describes how student participation may range from pure “decoration” and “tokenization” to “student-initiated, shared decisions with adults” (Fletcher, 2005; Hart, 1994).

Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, was one of the first to assert that systems of education have the power to serve either as tools for maintaining oppression of marginalized groups or as liberating settings that can empower students to control their own lives (Freire, 1970). He argued against a “banking” form of education in which students are seen as ignorant vessels into which information is deposited by “knowledgeable” and “superior” teachers and instead proposed a system in which students become “student–teachers” and teachers become “teacher–students” (Freire, 1970, pp. 72–74). Since Freire, a body of research has focused on pedagogical processes that “situate schools within societies and considers structural force that influence and shape schools” (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 10).

Empowering Settings

Building on the theoretical understanding of empowerment and the educational practices of critical pedagogy, an increasing amount of literature has focused on the conditions and characteristics that facilitate the development of empowerment. These “empowering settings” are defined as environments in which empowering processes take place and empowered outcomes are achieved among members of the setting (Maton, 2008). The literature on empowering settings and adolescent empowerment has shown that empowering settings for youth are characterized by shared power and decision making, positive sense of community, quality activities, and mutual goal achievement. In empowering settings, youth are valued as assets not just recipients, structures are modified to allow positive relationships, and decision-making power is shared between youth and adults (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Maton, 2008). In addition, Maton (2008) identified two external characteristics that dynamically influence the setting as a whole: leadership and the process of setting maintenance and change. While the literature on empowering settings for youth has much to offer, much of the work has focused outside the critical setting of the school.

Study Rationale and Research Questions

The present study was designed to add the concept of “power” to literature on school climate and extend the literature on empowering settings for youth into the school setting. Building on the existing literature, a Student Empowerment Model was developed to serve as a framework for student and school success. The study used a case study approach to (a) identify characteristics of the school that were linked to student empowerment and (b)

explore the mechanisms by which these characteristics create empowering environments for students.

Method

A single case study approach was used to gather and analyze the data from one public school setting. Case studies are particularly appropriate in settings where the “phenomenon” is not readily distinguishable from its context (Yin, 2009). Using a variety of methods, this case study explored the phenomenon of student empowerment within an urban, ethnically diverse high school in the Midwest. A research team was formed that consisted of undergraduate and graduate college students and two high school students from the school, with several school staff members serving as key informants throughout the process. Using a triangulation approach to explore the setting (Yin, 2009), the study was conducted with three overlapping phases of data collection. Student interviews and focus groups with students and staff were preceded by participant observation in various settings within the school. The process was iterative with early data informing subsequent inquiries (e.g., focus groups, interviews).

Participant Observation

Participant observation allows researchers to connect with the community of interest and is a particularly useful method for exploratory research. To grasp the underlying culture of the school, more than 100 hours of participant observation were conducted by the research team in classrooms, hallways, and school events. Observations were done using ethnographic methods in which the individual participated as appropriate (Creswell, 2007; Jorgensen, 1989), creating jottings which were later expanded into lengthy reflections. These reflections were shared with the research team and guided subsequent data collection.

Focus Groups

Purposive sampling was used to select diverse groups of students and staff with the goal of obtaining as broad a perspective as possible. Five student groups were conducted with 71 total participants. These groups were chosen from existing organizations including student leadership teams, the Hispanic American Leadership Organization (HALO), and students in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program. The participants were diverse in gender and ethnicity, representative of the overall demographic makeup of the school and different grade levels (i.e., freshmen, sophomores, etc.). In

addition, five staff focus groups were conducted with 39 total participants from various teaching disciplines (science, math, social studies, and foreign language) and non-teaching school staff roles (counselors, administrators, library staff, etc.).

Interviews

After reaching saturation (i.e., no new themes were emerging from the focus group data), a purposive sample of students was obtained for the in-depth interviews (Krueger, 1994). Seventeen students were purposively selected from key programs (AVID, ESOL, Special Education). The interviewees were diverse in gender (10 female, 7 male), race/ethnicity (4 Black, 3 White, 7 Hispanic/Latino, 3 Multiracial/Other), and grade level. Each interview consisted of open-ended questions and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Students received a gift card for participating in the interview.

Data Analysis

Coding took place via a two-step process. First, as the focus groups were being conducted, open coding was done during weekly research team meetings in which the members discussed the observations and focus group conversations. In these settings, members discussed the emerging themes, refined them, and resolved any discrepancies. Incongruent codes on which agreement could not be reached within 5 minutes were dropped from the analysis (only two themes were excluded). Data were then “checked” with select participants and key informants for verification and clarification of the emerging themes.

After open coding, selective coding was conducted on each focus group and interview transcript. Data were uploaded to the Coding Analysis Toolkit (available from the University of Pittsburg Center for Social and Urban Research). Two members of the team coded each focus group and interview transcript independently. Inter-rater agreement was calculated, with an average Cohen’s kappa score of .87, and a range from .69 to .99 (Cohen, 1968).

Results

Setting Description

The study was conducted over the course of a full semester in the designated high school. The high school of interest had a long history, first opening in the 1920s. During the year in which the study was conducted, almost 2,000 students were enrolled in the school with 177 professional staff. The school

was situated in an urban area, surrounded by diverse neighborhoods and small, locally owned businesses.

The school of interest was purposively chosen in collaboration with school district leadership because of its recent performance in the face of some striking challenges and its perception as an “empowering school.” More than three out of four students at the school were “economically disadvantaged” (i.e., qualified for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program), and almost one in four (22.8%) students were designated as “English Language Learners” (i.e., English was not their first language). The majority of students were Hispanic/Latino (58%) with significant percentages of White (26%) and Black students (10%). The percentage of Hispanic/Latino students had increased by 16 percentage points over the previous 8 years (Kansas State Department of Education, 2010).

Despite having higher rates of economic disadvantage and more students in the ESOL program compared with other area schools, the graduation rate (83%) was higher than the district average (80.1%). More importantly, this number had nearly doubled over the course of an 8-year period from 47.3% in 2002 (Kansas State Department of Education, 2010). This historical change was linked to the leadership of a former principal of the school who initiated several changes during her tenure. Key staff informants cited this leader’s optimism and clear vision for the school as a transformative force, first for staff and then for students. Under this principal’s watch, the school launched an AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program, developed extensive student leadership policies, and reformed the way that staff interacted with students. These changes had lasted through the tenure of this leader into that of her successor and, despite being nearly a decade removed from their initiation, were cited often as instrumental in making the school an “empowering” place at the time of the study.

Student Empowerment Model

Building on the existing literature, the results of the study were used to develop a Student Empowerment Model. As shown in Figure 1, this model demonstrates the process by which student empowerment, affected by individual characteristics (e.g., personality, learning abilities, etc.), ecological contexts (e.g., family, neighborhood), and the characteristics of empowering classrooms and schools, leads to empowered outcomes (intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral). As hypothesized in the literature, this model is iterative, with greater levels of empowerment feeding back into the environment (e.g., a student with an increased intrapersonal sense of competence reacts differently in class, leading to a more empowering classroom, which in

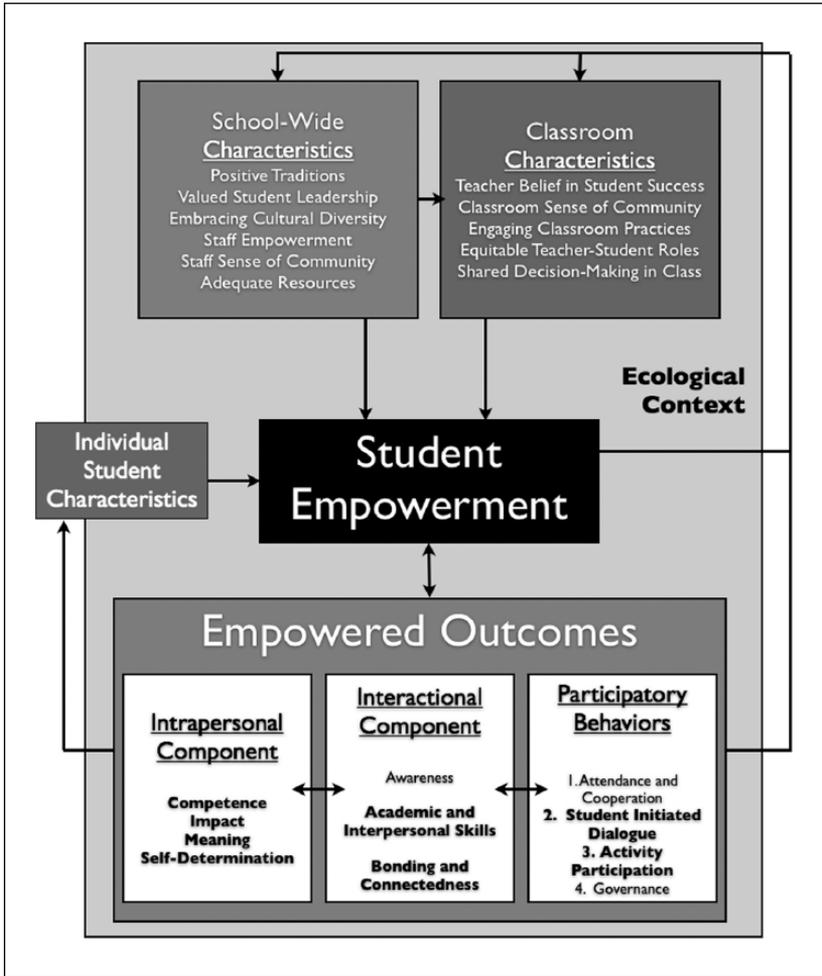


Figure 1. Student empowerment model.

turn leads to greater student empowerment). Evidence for student empowerment is discussed here, alongside key characteristics of empowering classroom and school environments.

Student empowerment and empowered outcomes. Student empowerment was found in many contexts in many different students. Students talked about

developing the competence, motivation, and self-determination they needed to succeed despite coming from challenging situations. One student shared,

I am very confident because, in my family . . . we're not very smart . . . but I've gone into honors classes and they're (the school) just pushing me to take AP . . . I've took [*sic*] my nothing and turned it into something.

Another student talked about the expectations of the school that pushed them. "It was like focus on college, focus on college . . . It's like a goal, something you have to achieve and something that you have to do . . . It's not an option."

At the same time, students talked about the many ways in which they had the opportunity to affect the direction of the school and make their voice heard. This included everything from participation in student leadership teams to asking questions of interest to them in class. Many students displayed a critical awareness of the importance of particular classes, the engagement of the teacher, and the broader sociocultural context. "I never felt that I was learning just about History," said one student. "Like, I grew so much, like because it was so hard, I knew what I was good at, and I knew what I was bad at." As shown in the model, four sets of factors were found to influence student empowerment: (a) individual characteristics, (b) ecological contexts, (c) classroom characteristics, and (d) school-wide characteristics.

Individual characteristics and ecological contexts. As displayed in the model, both the characteristics of the school environment and the development of student empowerment are affected by a myriad of individual and ecological characteristics. Individual characteristics that were observed included learning disabilities, personality types (e.g., shy, talkative), and personal interests. For example, a student with poor English language skills may find it difficult to experience empowerment regardless how empowering the environment may be. Students talked openly about these challenges and how they affected their journey.

Ecological contexts refer to the multiple settings that exert influence on both the student and the school including family, neighborhood, social status, and culture. Many students in this study talked about their families (and their socioeconomic situation and parental education level) as either assets or liabilities in the pursuit of education. Culture was another context that permeated everything about the school. With a large percentage of undocumented immigrant students, the larger ecological issues of racism, discrimination, and poverty were always present in the student's responses. Teachers acknowledged this as well. One veteran with 22 years at the school said, "We

Table 1. Classroom Characteristics and Definitions.

Theme	Definition
Teacher belief in student success	Teaching staff take a positive stance toward students, emphasizing their abilities, not their faults or failures
Classroom sense of community	In the classroom, students and teachers build positive relationships, work together toward common goals, and meet mutual needs.
Equitable teacher–student roles	Teaching staff share power with students, approaching them on a personal level and allowing students to share their opinions.
Engaging classroom practices	Teaching staff use a style of instruction that keeps students interested and learning.
Shared decision making in class	Key decisions about the course are made in collaboration between the teacher and students.

probably have more kids on free and reduced lunch than I've ever seen. And we also have more non-English speakers right now than we've ever had . . . We just have more challenges to face." This salient sense of "challenge" on the part of both the teachers and students emphasizes the role of ecological contexts as an often ignored, but essential piece for understanding school and student success. Furthermore, the influence of school and district leadership set a context that affected the development of the characteristics that affected students.

Classroom characteristics. In the midst of these contexts, the model identified five empowering characteristics of individual classes. The definitions of each are listed in Table 1. Three of these characteristics are familiar to school climate literature. Students and staff identified a culture in which *teachers believed in the ability of students* to be successful, positive *sense of community* was generated among classmates, and classroom practices were *engaging*. Each of these characteristics was cited as helping students develop the motivation and self-determination to succeed. Two additional characteristics (*equitable student–teacher roles and shared decision making*) were identified that added to these and considered the role of power in the classroom. These characteristics are highlighted in the following table.

Equitable student–teacher roles. In addition to the teachers' belief in student success and the more general sense of community generated within the classroom, a degree of equity in the relationship between teachers and students was identified as a key characteristic related to student empowerment. This

stands in contrast to many of the stereotyped images of teachers lording their authority and flaunting their “superior” wisdom over students. An equitable relationship between student and teacher involved bidirectional listening and mutual respect leading to shared power for decision making.

Students talked about this role set-up by describing freedoms they had to work in a way that best fit them and to share their opinions in classes. One student shared,

all the classes I've been to, I have a voice in it . . . I don't think there's a classroom I go to where the teacher's like 'Okay guys just shut up and do what I say . . . 'all the teachers kinda [*sic*] listen to you.

This emphasis on listening led students to open up. As one shared, “I can be myself, and I'm not afraid to ask questions of the teacher cause [*sic*] he really can relate to me.”

This openness of relationship and emphasis on student voice was something that was explicitly encouraged by the administration. For example, teaching staff were required to interact with students in the hallways during passing periods. One teacher articulated the overarching philosophy as “allowing students to see us as human.” As teachers approached students on a more equal level, students noticed and responded. One shared, “I think everybody here is willing to help with something and if you need to talk to somebody there's ample opportunity.” This led students to understand that their voice was heard and increased their engagement in the school environment.

Shared decision making. With a foundation of equitable relationships, many teachers created opportunities for students to share in some of the decision making within the classroom. While the specific nature of this practice varied by teacher and subject, students identified that the classes they disliked left little room for student involvement. In contrast, in the classes where teachers allowed the students to share in the choices, the students were amazed to discover that more students made positive choices and were engaged by the subject matter. One said, “Like he always gives us worksheets, but some of them you don't have to complete, but it's surprising how many people actually do do it.” For the students and teachers, the opportunities that students had to express their opinion and adjust their coursework had a positive effect

School characteristics. In addition to the classroom-level characteristics, six school-wide characteristics were identified. As shown in Table 2, the school was full of new and long-lasting *positive traditions* that were embraced by

Table 2. School-Wide Characteristics and Definitions.

Theme	Definition
Positive traditions	Participation and identification with a series of events and traditional practices in the school
Valued student leadership	Emphasis from staff on hearing and utilizing student voice in decision making
Embracing cultural diversity	Awareness of cultural differences and integration of cultural practices into school day
Adequate resources	Materials and physical structures needed to make the school effective
Teacher empowerment	Teaching staff have a sense of responsibility, ownership, and the ability to influence school outcomes.
Staff sense of community	Teaching staff work well together, report a sense of shared membership and common values/mission.

students and created identification with the school. The school had *adequate resources* compared with many urban low-income schools, and the teaching staff reported high *sense of community*. Most poignantly, the school chose to explicitly create an environment that *valued student leadership*, *embraced cultural diversity*, and *empowered teaching staff* to lead.

Valued student leadership. When the previous head principal at the school came into the job, she found a school with low morale, poor test scores, and many behavioral concerns including gang activity. One of the first efforts she made was to emphasize student leadership, establishing her own student advisory team and requiring each of her vice-principals to do the same. At the time of this study, these groups still existed and were observed as part of the data collection process. In each of these settings, it was clear that the adult staff members were keenly interested in the opinions of the students, and the students were aware that their opinion was valued, even if they were not able to transform every detail of school policy (e.g., reforming Federal nutritional guidelines for school lunches). One administrator shared with the team how they were chosen.

We pick a wide range . . . You're a huge mix of kids from all different parts of the building . . . You're all kind of different, and you run a whole wide scheme of the school . . . We have a pretty big, wide range here.

The students seemed to identify and connect with their role as leaders in the school. "I think they'll listen if you have an idea or something, they'll

definitely listen,” said one student. This openness was evident to many students across diverse groups.

Beyond listening, members of one of the advisory groups identified a positive change they had helped make in school policy.

In this group we talk about things that are going on in the school like, I remember we talked about cell phone usage and being able to use them at lunch, which now we are open to using it at lunch.

These statements illustrate the explicit value of administration on student leadership and demonstrate how creating contexts in which students have a sense of voice and ability to affect the school environment is connected to student empowerment.

Embracing cultural diversity. As described previously, the school was very diverse with growing percentages of Hispanic/Latino students. The school was working hard to embrace this culture via large events and small changes. One simple example was the morning announcements that were concluded each day with the phrases “Yes, We Can” and the corresponding “*Si, Se Puede.*” This integration of language and culture into the fabric of the school was part of a deliberate emphasis on pursuing cultural competence and creating a welcoming environment for all students.

These diverse elements had been incorporated into the curriculum as well. One student said, “A lot of people know. Like a lot of teachers know of Hispanic traditions, and they try to play that into class, like into the topic.” Another Hispanic student stated, “In my art class, one of the things that I like about art. We learn about our own traditions, like about the Suns and like the Mexican traditions, our culture.” The fact that teachers of various cultural backgrounds had integrated Hispanic/Latino cultural elements into the curriculum seemed to be a positive for most students, both those of Hispanic ethnicity and others. As one non-Hispanic teacher summed, “We embrace our neighborhood instead of wishing it was the neighborhood that it used to be. We’re in this together.”

Staff empowerment. In addition to the characteristics described above, a final school-wide theme that emerged was the empowerment of the staff. In general, this referred to the ability of the staff to feel they could influence the school environment and contribute to the overall success of the school. This was built out of the stance of the administration, emphasizing teacher voice and creating opportunities for influence.

One recent example of this was the implementation of a new program to help improve school test scores. Responding to lower scores among many sub-groups of students, representative teams of staff met during the summer to create a new period of extra instruction during the school day. The staff described this as an “innovative,” “teacher-driven” program and were keenly interested in the results of the upcoming state assessment tests. One said,

(that) process last year . . . it was directed by the Administration, but it was really also a teacher process. And we really made it, and so it helps in the follow through because you were part of planning it, so we’re going to work hard to make it work.

This general attitude of the empowered staff extended to every aspect of the school. One teacher shared, “(We’re) willing to try something else. We’re not satisfied with just being okay. We get our data and we say . . . ‘Now, what are we going to do about it?’” Students picked up on this attitude as well, citing the dedication of their teachers and their passion for educating students. As one student shared, “We have a lot of teachers that actually do like to teach . . . most of the teachers here love what they do.”

Discussion

While much has been written about the culture and climate of school settings, the exclusion of power dynamics from the discussion ignores the social, political, and cultural contexts in which schools, staff, and students are situated. This omission limits the ability of schools to operate as places of liberation, as Paulo Freire asserted, and ensures that approaches to school reform will fall short of the goal to eliminate educational disparities. Building on the existing literature, the present study added the concept of power (e.g., student voice, staff empowerment, equitable teacher–student roles) to well-documented factors like positive teacher–student relationships, sense of community, and positive expectations. The resulting Student Empowerment Model presents a contextually grounded framework for thinking about individual processes nested within contexts, and the identification of empowering characteristics of classrooms and schools suggests opportunities for further analysis and intervention.

The Student Empowerment Model developed here applies the conceptual models of empowering settings and youth empowerment explicitly to schools (Cargo et al., 2003; Jennings et al., 2006; Maton, 2008). This study confirms these models by observing and modeling safe, supportive environments (e.g., teacher belief in student success, classroom sense of community) in which

meaningful participation (e.g., engaging classroom practices) and shared power (e.g., equitable teacher–student roles, shared decision making) create the opportunity for youth to control the process of their education. In addition, Maton (2008) identified characteristics of leadership and setting maintenance and change as external forces that influenced the system as a whole. Although not explicitly stated in the model, these factors were clearly observed in the common “success story” of the school, linked to a dynamic principal who instituted change processes that had been sustained over a decade. These factors should be considered part of the ecological context in which the school resides, with an understanding that the school-wide and classroom-level factors identified here were certainly influenced by the leadership of the school and broader forces of change within the school district and community.

While it was clear that students felt that their “voices were heard” and opportunities were observed for student leadership and shared decision making in the classroom, the limitations placed on this power is less clear. “Being heard” has been identified as one of the lowest and most common practices of student involvement (Mitra & Gross, 2009) and may lead to tokenization and manipulation of students (Fletcher, 2005; Hart, 1994). Models of student involvement and participation encourage greater autonomy and student-initiated leadership at higher levels, which parallels the process of empowerment and the opportunity to create empowering settings for youth (Fletcher, 2005; Hart, 1994; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Thus, the characteristics identified in the Student Empowerment Model should be considered as fluid and dynamic ranges rather than static traits.

Limitations

The model developed by the present study represents a significant addition to the literature with implications for future research and practice. The “trustworthiness” of the study was validated by the use of a triangulation approach to data collection, 5 months of time spent in the setting by a team of researchers and extensive member checking with various stakeholders (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). While the purpose of this qualitative study was not to generalize to all contexts, there may have been unique characteristics (e.g., architecture, history) of this urban school that would not be witnessed in other settings. Expansion of this protocol to other schools, particularly those in other regions and/or with different demographic composition and history, would add to the transferability of the characteristics to other contexts.

The sampling of staff and students was purposive with an attempt made to represent the diversity of the school. However, certain voices may have been

unintentionally excluded that may have modified the results. Also, attempting to paint a picture of the breadth of the school may have limited the depth within certain sub-populations. Future research could focus on unique communities within the school (e.g., special education students) to achieve a deeper understanding of the school experience within one sub-population. The Student Empowerment Model could be used as a framework for this work, identifying key process elements and salient environmental characteristics that are most powerful within the selected sub-populations.

Implications for School Reform

The Student Empowerment Model provides an actionable framework for educators to think about shaping classrooms and schools in ways that put more control in the hands of students. The results suggest that classrooms in which teachers shared power with students, setting up equitable relationships and inviting students to participate in decision making, were connected to student empowerment. While many of these characteristics have been discussed elsewhere (Turman & Schrodt, 2006), the combination of factors gives educators a set of criteria on which to evaluate their classroom practices. While the present study did not explicitly explore the educational practices within classrooms, the results suggest that teachers who practiced the core principles of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2004) were able to create more empowering settings for youth. Much has been written to support educators in the creation of critical reflection in the classroom (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2010), and these practices should be explored and tested further.

To accomplish this, teachers must be empowered themselves with appropriate training and more control over their classrooms. This study demonstrated that when teachers are empowered to be “agents of change” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), they create more empowering environments for youth. Results suggest that school leadership has the power to develop a school-wide value system that embraces student leadership and cultural diversity, while simultaneously creating an empowering atmosphere for staff. Many tools are available to guide this journey (e.g., Komives et al., 2011).

Finally, the Student Empowerment Model may be a helpful framework for policy makers working toward educational reform. One clear implication is a modification of the way in which schools are evaluated. In contrast to test-based school reform efforts (i.e., No Child Left Behind), this study presents student empowerment as a process that begins to address educational disparities and provides an additional measure of how schools are performing with students from marginalized populations. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell

(2008) suggest a threefold strategy that considers (a) qualitative feedback from “clients” (students, parents, and the larger community), (b) quantitative measures of academic performance and behavior, and (c) qualitative feedback from school staff. By expanding school evaluation to include this vital information, power for school accountability would be more equally shared with all parties, and the motivation of teachers and administrators would be modified to not only pursue greater test scores but also incorporate the opinions, needs, and desires of students, parents, and larger communities into their practice.

Future Research

The present study added to the research literature on school climate and empowering settings, but many questions remain available for future research. First, mixed-methods approaches could be utilized to measure student empowerment across settings in relation to the classroom- and school-level characteristics identified here. Nested models would allow for identification of which variables have the greatest impact on student empowerment and the control of demographic variables.

Second, it is important to consider how student empowerment is related to academic, behavioral, and psychosocial outcomes. Critics of empowerment have long asserted that, unless it translates into actual action and increased power, empowerment is just another mental attitude divorced from the real world (Riger, 1993). While the qualitative evidence suggests that there is a connection between student empowerment and academic outcomes, quantitative measures should be used to determine the relationship between empowered outcomes and traditional outcomes related to school success. A range of other outcomes may also be considered including high school graduation, college preparation, enrollment, persistence, future income, civic engagement behaviors, and mental health symptomology. It may be hypothesized that the relationship between student empowerment and these outcomes will be stronger among marginalized groups (e.g., students of color, low socioeconomic status students). This hypothesis should be explicitly tested in connection to persistent educational disparities.

Finally, future research might also work to identify practices and policies that are designed to promote student empowerment among marginalized groups including English Language Learners and Special Education students. This could include shared decision making, critical pedagogy, and action research or service learning projects. Rigorous evaluations of all such efforts would be conducted to demonstrate the efficacy of these interventions in promoting student empowerment and school change.

Conclusion

The model of Student Empowerment developed by this study added power to the literature on school climate and extended the literature on empowering settings into one of the most critical environments for youth. This model can be used as a tool to inform future research and educational practice in a movement toward educational equity and empowering school settings for all students. As policy makers and educators grasp for the next steps of school reform, the empowering characteristics of the school environment identified here may be incorporated into educational policy and practice.

The time has come to move beyond “blaming the victim” mentalities and test-based efforts at school reform. It is time to realize the historical and contextual factors that contribute to the achievement gap and to do so alongside youth, supporting them as they take action to address these disparities. We need to work toward creating schools that empower, engage, and excite students to learn and teachers to teach. It is only in environments such as these that we will see an increase in educational outcomes and a decrease in the disparities that have long haunted the U.S. education system.

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