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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined the relationship between teachers' perceptions of school climate and their perceptions of empowerment are presented in this paper. Questionnaires were completed by 257 teachers, in 6 states from 8 schools, who participated in nationwide school empowerment projects. Findings indicate that school climate, age, and experience were significant predictors of the dependent variable, empowerment. This suggests that greater empowerment may result in increased organizational conflict and lowered school climate. As teachers become empowered, they become more critical of school functioning and need organizational problem-solving skills and an awareness of group processes. One table is included. (25 references) (LMI)

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Teacher Empowerment and School Climate

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### Abstract

Teachers (N=257) from six states and eight schools participating in an empowerment project responded to a measure of empowerment and a measure of school climate. Demographic information (age, experience, gender, etc.) was also collected for each teacher. Using the empowerment measure as the dependent variable, school climate, age, and experience were found to be significant predictors of empowerment. A negative correlation existed between the empowerment measure and the school climate measure. This finding suggests that as teachers are empowered they should also be sensitized to conflict resolution and group processes. It also suggests that as teachers become more empowered, they assume ownership of problem framing and problem solving making them more critical of school functioning and school processes.

### Abstract

Teachers (N=257) from six states and eight schools participating in an empowerment project responded to a measure of empowerment and a measure of school climate. Demographic information (age, experience, gender, etc.) was also collected for each teacher. Using the empowerment measure as the dependent variable, school climate, age, and experience were found to be significant predictors of empowerment. A negative correlation existed between the empowerment measure and the school climate measure. This finding suggests that as teachers are empowered they should also be sensitized to conflict resolution and group processes. It also suggests that as teachers become more empowered, they assume ownership of problem framing and problem solving making them more critical of school functioning and school processes.

## Teacher Empowerment and School Climate

Empowerment is a dominant theme in all types of organizations including business, industry, and service organizations. Current interest in empowerment has filtered to school organizations and school participants (Maeroff, 1988; Lightfoot, 1986; Short; Greer; Michael, 1991). Researchers as well as educational, political, and other public groups have advocated the restructuring of public education and the empowerment of school staff members (Cuban, 1990; Farber & Miller, 1981; Frymier, 1987; Maeroff, 1988). Empowerment is defined as the opportunities an individual has for autonomy, choice, responsibility, and participation, in decision making in organizations (Lightfoot, 1986). Jenkins (1988) states that "To empower other is to give a stakeholder share in the movement and direction of the enterprise" (p. 149). Staff members who are able to initiate and carry out new ideas by involvement in decision making should, in turn, create enhanced learning opportunities for students (Lieberman & Miller, 1984; Mertz, 1983; Short & Greer, 1989). Traditionally, school-level personnel are excluded from critical decisions including personnel allocation and hiring, curriculum, budget allocations, and scheduling of teaching time (Zielinski, 1983).

School restructuring has, as one of its components, the empowerment of teachers, administrators, and students (Murphy & Evertson, 1990; Short et al, 1991). In fact, the restructuring paradigm of Murphy and Evertson includes empowerment as a

integral part of reform. Lortie (1975) depicts teachers as working in isolation from other teachers. Little collegial contact is ever realized as teachers perform their craft in separate rooms. In addition to working in isolation, teachers are expected to complete reports and maintain orderly classrooms. These around the clock tasks tend to utilize available time for collegial interaction and contribute to the isolation of teachers.

#### Conceptual Framework

Research supports the assumption that teacher empowerment relates to greater organizational effectiveness (Lawler, 1986). A recent study of school factors that may encourage students to drop out of school reported in Teachers College Record discussed characteristics of schools with high drop out rates pointing to overcrowding in schools, fiscal arrangements that encourage early dismissal of dropouts, an underachieving student body, and a high level of disempowerment experienced by the staff. It appears that school participants who influence the work of the organization feel a greater commitment to creatively and effectively address the problems and opportunities teachers face each day educating young people.

In searching for avenues for creating a collaborative school environment where teachers have the autonomy and competence to act to affect the outcomes of schooling and where students become independent learners and problem-solvers, there is increasing interest in "self-managing work groups." Hackman (1986)

characterized self-managing work groups as collections of people who take personal responsibility for the outcomes of their work, monitor their own performance and seek ways to improve it, seek needed resources from the organization, and take the initiative to help others improve.

In self-managing teams, employees take personal responsibility for the outcomes of their work, manage and monitor their own performance, seek needed resources, and take the initiative to help others improve (Hackman, 1986). Lawler (1986) noted that two kinds of training are essential for members of self-managing work groups, training in the task and training in interpersonal skills.

Researchers have also been interested in the functions of leaders in organizations with self-managing teams. Most writers on the subject have concluded that leadership is at least as important in organizations with self-managing work groups as it is in traditionally structured organizations (Cummings, 1978; Hackman, 1986; Lawler, 1986; Manz & Sims, 1987). Leadership, is however, different. Manz and Sims (1984) describe the leader in an organization with self-managing work groups as an "unleaders," "one who leads others to lead themselves" (p. 411). Hackman (1986) noted that "leadership is both more important and a more demanding undertaking in self-managing units than in traditional organizations" (p. 119). These findings should inform the facilitative leadership in an empowered school.

In any attempt to improve schools, attention must be given to roles in decision making and increased opportunities for meaningful, collective participation in the critical areas of activity in the organization which focus on organizational goals. In addition, students must be part of this change. Variables critical in creating empowered schools identified by the "Empowered School District Project" (Short et al., 1991) include (1) the need for the process of empowerment to be evolutionary, (2) the need for a knowledge base and specific school structures for empowerment to evolve, (3) the need for an environment supportive of risk taking and innovation, (4) the need for trust building at a number of levels, (5) the powerful impact of an outside facilitator and contact with other schools involved in empowerment to help in the change process, (6) the restructuring of the role of the principal to enabler and "conscious," (7) the role of critical incidents in the creation of evolutionary shifts in the empowerment process.

Research by Gruber and Trickett (1987) conducted in an alternative school identified the importance of control over decision making in empowering participants in school organizations. Rinehart and Short (1991), in a study of empowerment of teacher leaders in the national program called Reading Recovery, found that teacher leaders saw opportunities for decision making, control over their daily schedule, high level of teaching competency, and opportunities for growth and development, as empowering aspects of their work.

Rappaport and his colleagues have described empowerment as a construct that ties personal competencies and abilities to environments that provide opportunities for choice and autonomy in demonstrating those competencies (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Dunst (1991) has suggested that empowerment consists of two issues (1) enabling experiences, provided within an organization that fosters autonomy, choice, control, and responsibility, which (2) allow the individual to display existing competencies as well as learn new competencies that support and strengthen functioning.

Howard (1987) identified certain elements of the school environment that relate to the school's climate. Those include continuous academic and social growth, trust and integrity, high morale, respect among all participants, school renewal, cohesiveness, caring and opportunities for input. Rutter, Maugham, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith (1979) reported that teachers in schools with positive school climate tended to have positive relations. Howard (1987) identified effective communication as well as positive approaches to handling conflict as relating to positive school climate. Finally, Wilson, Pentcoste, and Railey (1984) indicated that age and sex of the teacher are two main influences on teacher perceptions of school climate.

#### Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship of participant perceptions of school climate and certain participant characteristics to participant perceptions of

empowerment. Little research exists on teacher perceptions of empowerment, especially as it relates to how teachers perceive the climate of the school where they teach. In addition, little research has investigated the relationship of teacher characteristics and teacher perception of empowerment.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants in the study were 257 teachers from eight schools in six states representing geographical regions of the west, southwest, south, and midwest. These schools have been participating in a nationwide project to create empowered schools. Approximately two thirds of the participants were female. The participants were evenly distributed relative to educational level with one third obtaining the bachelors degree, one third with the masters degree and one third with a degree above the masters. A majority of the participants were Caucasian. The participants represented the following school settings: 18.3% urban, 55.3% suburban, 7.4% rural, 5.1% small school and 14% failed to respond to this item.

#### Instruments

The School Participant Empowerment Scale (SPES), developed by the authors of this paper, was used to measure teacher perceptions of empowerment. The SPES focuses on the extent to which teachers perceive a sense of self-efficacy in the workplace, perceive that they have impact within the school, enjoy collaborative relationships, perceive that they have high

status, and believe that they function with a strong knowledge base about teaching and learning. The 32-item instrument contains statements about empowerment. Responses were reported on a 5-point scale: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), undecided (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5). Factor analysis revealed six dimensions of empowerment: self-efficacy, professional growth, impact, collaboration, status, and knowledge base. Content validity was established through the use of a panel of experts who rated each item's general representativeness of the construct of empowerment. Because participant level of empowerment may fluctuate and not remain stable, test-retest reliability was deemed inappropriate for measures of reliability. Split-half reliability coefficient was .75 corrected to .86 by the Spearman-Brown formula.

Teacher perceptions of school climate were measured by the School Climate Questionnaire. The 94-item instrument contains items designed to assess strong leadership, dedicated staff, high expectations, frequent monitoring of students, early identification of student learning characteristics, positive learning climate, curriculum continuity, multicultural education, and sex equity. Internal consistency reliability coefficients for the mixed sample in the norming group ranged from .71 to .94 on each of the subtests. Content validity was established using ideas of teachers, administrators, students, and parents relative to school operations and a review of the literature on climate. Predictive validity was established by relating assessment

results to student achievement. Overall teacher perceptions of effective school characteristics predicted reading and math achievement in students from low SES backgrounds.

Finally, participants completed a demographics sheet. The demographics sheet contained the following items: age, gender, years of experience, and educational level. Included on the demographics sheet was an item to measure job satisfaction. This item was measured on a 5 point Likert-type scale with 1 corresponding to strongly disagree and 5 corresponding to strongly agree.

#### Analysis

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted with empowerment as the criterion variable and climate, job satisfaction, certain teacher characteristics (age, educational level, gender, years of experience) and type of school served as the predictor variables. An evaluation of assumptions yielded no gross violations of assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity of residuals.

#### Results

Results of the analysis, presented in Table 1, indicated that for the three significant predictor variables the multiple R was .61.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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For the overall equation, climate, experience, and age were statistically significant predictors of teacher perception of empowerment [ $F(3,156) = 31.96, p = .000$ ].

### Discussion

Study findings indicate that the level of teacher empowerment that teachers perceive relates to their perceptions of school climate, their age, and their years of experience in education. Interestingly, empowerment was negatively correlated to school climate suggesting that as level of empowerment increases, teachers perceive a less positive climate in the school. However, studies conducted in schools who are restructuring to create greater teacher empowerment (Short et al., 1991) found that when teachers' involvement in school decision making increases, the opportunities for conflict increase due to disclosure of ideologies and perceptions that usually are not disclosed in the traditional school structure. In addition, the more teachers have input and involvement in critical decisions about the direction of the school organization and increased autonomy, the more complex the communication and the greater the need for substantive change that may precipitate organizational conflict.

Also, teachers who perceive a greater sense of empowerment believe that they impact the work of the organization. They recognize that they have the power to identify problems, institute change efforts, and, ultimately, be responsible for organizational outcomes. It is reasonable to expect empowered

teachers to assume ownership of organizational problems and their solutions. Thus, teachers may more openly and readily evaluate, both positively and negatively, the work of the organization. As in self-managing teams (Lawler, 1986), teachers assume the role of evaluator, monitor, rewarder, and manager. With problem ownership, teachers feel more open to identification of problems and areas of weaknesses in the teaching-learning environment and other aspects of school climate.

#### Implications

The study suggests that creating organizations where participants feel greater empowerment (teacher shared decision making, greater teacher autonomy and status, etc.) may result in greater organizational conflict and lowered school climate. Awareness of this relationship suggests that as teachers are empowered, they should also be sensitive to conflict resolution. As a starting point, teachers should be taught effective communication skills and positive approaches to handling conflict (Howard, 1986).

In addition, as teachers become more empowered in school organizations, they assume the role of problem finder and problem solver. Therefore, teachers should have organizational problem-solving skills as well as planning and implementation skills. As teachers become empowered, they should also master problem-solving skills. If teachers are to be an integral part of the problem-solving process in empowered schools, then a systematic plan to teach these skills should be implemented.

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Table 1

Regression weights, multiple correlation coefficients and F test value

| <u>Variables Entered</u> | <u>Regression Coefficients</u> | <u>Standardized Regression Coefficients</u> | <u>F</u>          | <u>R</u> |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|---|-------------------|----------|
| Climate                  | -.206                          | -.538                                       | 31.96<br>(p=.000) | .61      |
| Experience               | .727                           | .364  |                   |          |
| Age                      | -.478                          | -.264                                       |                   |          |

Variables not entered

Educational degree  
Gender  
Job Satisfaction

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Type of School