

The power of student empowerment: Measuring classroom predictors and individual indicators

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ABSTRACT

Despite spending more money per student than almost all developed nations, the United States lags behind in educational indicators with persistent disparities between privileged and marginalized students. Most approaches have ignored the role of power dynamics in predicting student performance. Building on the existing literature in school climate and empowering settings, this study explored the construct of student empowerment to identify both environmental factors that predict increased empowerment and outcomes associated with empowerment. A survey was administered to 381 students from five urban high schools. Results suggest that intrapersonal student empowerment is predicted by equitable power use by teachers, positive teacher–student relationships and a sense of community in the classroom. Highly empowered students reported better grades, fewer behavioral incidents, increased extracurricular participation and higher educational aspirations than students who were less empowered. Limitations are discussed alongside implications for educational practice and future research.

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The United States is in the midst of an educational crisis. Despite spending more money per student than all other developed nations, U.S. students rank far behind most of the same countries on key education indicators (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009). At the same time, educational disparities between racial–ethnic and socioeconomic groups continue to leave students of color and lower socioeconomic status behind (Children’s Defense Fund, 2010). Many students enter the school environment having little control over their educational process and future goals. This problem was highlighted more than four decades ago by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. He described the power of an educational system to either liberate marginalized students or maintain systems of oppression that fail to give students a voice and opportunity to control their educational destiny (Freire, 1970).

Freire argued against a “banking” form of education in which the student is considered an ignorant vessel into which the teacher deposits information. In contrast, he proposed a more equitable, problem-posing education system in which the teachers become “teacher-students” and the students become “student-teachers” (Freire, 1970, pp. 72–74). Building on Freire’s work, the purpose of this study was to explore the construct of student empowerment and identify both environmental factors that predict increased empowerment in students and outcomes associated with an intrapersonal sense of empowerment. Specifically, two research questions were considered: (a) Can intrapersonal student empowerment be predicted by empowering characteristics of classrooms after controlling for demographic indicators? and (b) Are there differences between

empowered and disempowered students on academic and behavioral outcomes?

Student empowerment

Empowerment has been defined as a process by which people gain mastery over issues of concern to them (Zimmerman, 1995). In schools, this process occurs as disempowered 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, empowered outcomes include intrapersonal, interactional and behavioral components (Zimmerman, 1995). Intrapersonal outcomes for students include an individual’s sense of (a) impact (or voice), (b) competence, (c) meaningfulness, and (d) choice or self-determination (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Empowerment processes are domain-specific (e.g., empowerment at school may not equate with empowerment at home; Zimmerman, 1995) and iterative, with increased power feeding into subsequent empowerment processes with no clear beginning or end (McWhirter, 1991)

The school as empowering setting

The school setting plays an important role in creating empowered students. While individual characteristics (e.g., learning disabilities) and ecological factors (e.g., socioeconomic status) affect students’ orientation toward school, the school setting is

uniquely positioned to influence empowerment within the academic domain. The concept of the school as an influential setting for students is not new. For more than 100 years, the climate of schools has been assessed in relation to student attitudes and outcomes (for a review, see Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). More recently, researchers have explored the potential of settings to generate empowerment in their members (Maton, 2008).

The growing literature on these empowering settings demonstrates that settings that create empowerment in youth are characterized by shared power and decision-making, positive sense of community, quality activities, and mutual goals (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Maton, 2008). Building on this work, Kirk et al. (2015) developed a Student Empowerment Model in an urban, public high school. This model identified characteristics of classrooms and schools that influence a process of student empowerment that is evidenced by empowered outcomes. Among these characteristics, the present study tests three specific indicators at the classroom level: positive teacher–student relationships, equitable teacher–student roles, and a sense of community in the classroom.

Teacher–student relationships

A great deal of literature supports the concept that teacher relationships are related to student outcomes. In a review of the school climate literature, Cohen et al. (2009) identified positive relationships as a key component of the socioemotional safety of schools. Other studies have identified the positive role of teacher–student relationships on school climate and school connectedness (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Nation et al., 2010; Zullig, Kooperman, Patton, & Ubbes, 2010). Research with younger students showed that trust between teachers and students was correlated with student life satisfaction, school engagement, and positive behaviors (Murray & Zvoch, 2011). Kirk et al. (2015) linked teacher–student relationships to student empowerment, demonstrating that teachers who believed in their students' success and allowed students to see them as human were more successful at creating empowering environments for students.

Equitable teacher–student roles

While positive relationships between teachers and students are important, power is at the center of all relationships. Equity in the teacher–student role was a key concept identified by Freire (1970) and a characteristic in the Student Empowerment Model (Kirk et al., 2015). Other models of adolescent empowerment echo this finding, emphasizing shared power (Jennings et al., 2006) and the ability of youth to control the situation (Cargo et al., 2003). The way in which teachers choose to use their power in the classroom opens the door of possibilities for students to either participate or disengage. However, few studies have explicitly measured this relationship in a youth population.

Classroom sense of community

While the relationships between teachers and students are vital, they are not the only relationships of importance in a classroom. Sense of community has been defined as the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with

others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure (Sarason, 1974)

The sense of community generated between students, their peers and the teacher is an important predictor of a positive school climate (Nation et al., 2010) and connectedness to the school (Zullig et al., 2010). Kirk et al. (2015) found that a general sense of community in the classroom was a key factor in creating an empowering setting for students.

Hypotheses

Building on existing literature, the primary hypothesis for the present study was that intrapersonal student empowerment can be predicted by classroom characteristics including positive and equitable teacher–student relationships and a sense of community in the classroom after controlling for demographic indicators (i.e., age, gender, race–ethnicity, and parent level of education). Further, it was hypothesized that empowered students would report better scores on behavioral and academic indicators including school attendance, school behavior, participation in school activities, self-reported grades, and aspirations or expectations for future educational attainment.

Methods

Participants

A total of 381 students from five high schools participated in this study. The students ranged in age from 12 to 19 years old with a median age of 16 years old. The participants were racially and ethnically diverse with 38.8% non-Hispanic White, 41.2% Hispanic or Latino, and 9.7% non-Hispanic Black. The sample was closely split by gender with 50.9% male and 49.1% female.

The participants came from five schools in an urban school district in the Midwestern United States. Each of the schools had high rates of economic disadvantage (defined as participation in the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch program). As shown in Table 1, the schools varied greatly in their racial–ethnic composition. The invited classrooms were selected at random and represented a diversity of subjects and grade levels.

Procedure

After consultation with district leadership, the principals at all five schools agreed to participate in the study. Teachers were invited by the principals to have their classes complete the survey. No incentives for participation or consequences for non-participation were included. Students read an assent form prior to completing the survey. The classroom surveys were made available using two formats based upon teacher preference and the availability of computers in the classroom. The online format utilized IBM Data Collection Interviewer (IBM, Armonk, NY). For those without access to computers, paper surveys were delivered to the school and administered by the teacher following provided instructions. Both online and paper surveys were entered into SPSS 18 for analysis.

Table 1. Demographic indicators of the participants by school.

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	Total
<i>n</i>	114	66	35	67	99	381
Median age (years)	16	16	16	15	16	16
Gender						
Male	69 (60.5%)	26 (39.4%)	16 (45.7%)	38 (56.7%)	38 (38.4%)	194 (49.1%)
Female	45 (39.5%)	40 (60.6%)	19 (54.3%)	29 (43.3%)	61 (61.6%)	187 (50.9%)
Race/ethnicity						
Non-Hispanic White	22 (19.3%)	46 (69.7%)	13 (37.1%)	32 (47.8%)	41 (41.4%)	148 (38.8%)
Non-Hispanic Black	12 (10.5%)	1 (1.5%)	6 (17.1%)	13 (19.4%)	5 (5.1%)	37 (9.7%)
Hispanic/Latino	70 (61.4%)	10 (15.2%)	15 (42.9%)	17 (25.4%)	45 (45.5%)	157 (41.2%)

Measures

The student survey consisted of 125 total items derived from previously validated instruments. The surveys were identical for both online and paper formats. All question instructions asked students to reference the class that they were in at that time of completing the survey. Thus, their perception is specific to a single class (and particular teacher) and not indicative of their entire high school experience. Four validated scales were employed alongside questions for behavioral, academic, and demographic indicators. Each scale was chosen as a measure of key constructs identified in the literature.

Student empowerment

The Learner Empowerment Scale (LES) was used to assess intrapersonal student empowerment. This instrument was originally developed as a 29-item scale by Frymier, Shulman, & Houser (1996). Using exploratory factor analyses, Weber, Martin, and Cayanus (2005) reduced the LES to 18 items, with six loading on each of the three subscales: impact, meaning, and competence. Sample items included “I have the power to make a difference in how things are done in this class” and “My participation in this class makes no difference.” Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities in the original study ranged from .87 to .91. For the present study, the scale was summed to form a single student empowerment score with an alpha of .84.

Teacher–student relationships

The Inventory of Teacher–Student Relationships (IT–SR; Murray & Zvoch, 2011) was chosen as a measure of teacher–student relationships from the perspective of the student. Adapted from the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987), the IT–SR was modified for the school environment. Exploratory factor analysis revealed three factors: communication (8 items; e.g., “I tell my teacher about my problems and troubles”), trust (5 items; e.g., “I trust my teacher”), and alienation (4 items; e.g., “My teacher doesn’t understand what I’m going through”). Given the goals of the present study, the alienation subscale was not utilized. Reported Cronbach’s alpha reliability measures were .89 for communication and .84 for trust. In the present study, alpha reliabilities were .92 for communication and .88 for trust.

Equitable teacher–student roles

To assess equity in the teacher–student relationship, a modified version of the Teacher Use of Power Scale (TPUS) was selected (Schrod, Witt, & Turman, 2007). The original instrument was

shown to contain five subscales. Two of these subscales were applicable to the present study. Referent power is a pro-social use of power in which teachers build relationships with students that are characterized by mutual respect, authenticity, and understanding (e.g., “My teacher relates to students in an open and approachable manner”). Conversely, coercive power is an antisocial power use in which teachers bully, manipulate, and confront students who don’t meet their expectations (e.g., “My teacher says things like, ‘If you don’t like the way I do this course, you can drop this class and take a different one.’”). Alpha reliabilities for original study were .87 for referent and .84 for coercive. For the present study the alphas were .91 for referent power use and .73 for coercive power use.

Classroom sense of community

The Sense of Community Index-2 (SCI-2; Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008) was utilized as a measure of the sense of membership, identity, and relational connection students experience in their classroom. The 24-item scale contains Likert-style items and was reported to have an overall alpha of .94. The alpha for the present study was .94 as well. Sample items included “I get important needs of mine met because I am part of this school” and “Being a member of this school is part of my identity.”

Behavioral indicators

Student behavior information was collected via self-report. Students were asked, “How many times in the past month did you _____?” with seven choices ranging from none to 10 or more. The behavioral indicators were (a) missed an entire day of school, (b) late to class, (c) skipped a class, (d) got in trouble/written up, (e) placed in in-school suspension, and (f) placed in out-of-school suspension.

Participants were also asked about their level of participation in school activities. A series of 10 choices were given (e.g., band or choir, sports, student government) with an eleventh option for other activities. Responses were summed to create a continuous participation variable that ranged from 0 (no participation in any activity) to 11 (participation in all activities).

Demographic and academic indicators

In addition to the measures of student empowerment and classroom characteristics, student demographic information was collected from the survey. This included student age, gender, and race–ethnicity. Students were asked to report the level of education for their mother and father using a range from high school dropout to PhD/MD. All behavioral variables utilized

Table 2. Bivariate correlations between key variables.

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Student empowerment	—				
2 Communication	.42***	—			
3 Trust	.54***	.72***	—		
4 Referent power	.52***	.61***	.72***	—	
5 Coercive power	-.19***	.06	-.17***	.05	—
6 Sense of community	.44***	.41***	.43***	.45***	-.09*

Note. * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

questions from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).

Finally, students were asked to report their grades and future educational expectations. The grade question asked, “What type of grades do you most often receive?” with choices including As, As and Bs, Bs, and so forth. Educational aspirations (“How much education would you like to receive in the future?”) and expectations (“How much education do you realistically expect to receive in the future?”) were measured with options ranging from high school dropout to PhD/MD.

Data analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were planned to test the hypothesis that teacher–student relationships (trust, communication, and alienation), teacher use of power (referent and coercive), and classroom sense of community would predict intrapersonal student empowerment as measured by the LES after controlling for demographic indicators (age, gender, parental education, race–ethnicity). Demographic indicators were included in a first block of predictors, and the classroom characteristics were added in a second block.

Next, mean comparisons were planned for empowered and disempowered students on key academic and behavioral indicators. Empowered students were those in the upper two quartiles (LES score > 51), and disempowered students were those in the lower two quartiles (LES score < 52). Indicators included the frequency of attendance, tardiness, skipping class, getting in

trouble, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, the number of school activities participated in, and the self-reported grades and educational aspirations or expectations of students. Comparisons were made using independent samples t tests with Bonferroni corrections to control for Type I error rate ($0.05 / 9 = .006$).

Results

Predicting intrapersonal empowerment

Hierarchical linear regression was used to predict intrapersonal student empowerment as measured by the Learner Empowerment Scale (Frymier et al., 1996; Weber et al., 2005). Bivariate correlations for the variables are found in Table 2. The first block contained only demographic predictors. While this block of predictors was significant, $F(7, 359) = 3.11, p < .01$, it predicted less than 6% of the variance in intrapersonal empowerment ($r^2 = .06$, adjusted $r^2 = .04$). Among the predictors in this model, only gender was significant ($b = -2.78, p < .001$) indicating that being female was associated with greater intrapersonal empowerment.

After adding the classroom characteristics in the second block, the model was greatly improved, $F(7, 359) = 21.69, p < .001$, predicting over 40% of the variance in intrapersonal student empowerment ($r^2 = .42$, adjusted $r^2 = .40$, r^2 change = .37). Thus, the classroom characteristics predicted student empowerment above and beyond the demographic factors. As shown in Table 3, teacher–student relationships characterized by trust ($b = 0.42, p < .01$), teachers use of referent power ($b = 0.22, p < .001$), and student sense of community in class ($b = 0.13, p < .001$) were associated with higher intrapersonal empowerment. Conversely, coercive power use was associated with lower empowerment in students ($b = -0.19, p < .01$). In the final model gender ($b = -1.92, p < .01$) remained a significant predictor and self-reported racial/ethnic identify as non-Hispanic Black ($b = 3.10, p < .05$) emerged as a moderately significant factor. Teacher–student communication ($p = .70$) was the only classroom characteristic that was not a significant predictor of intrapersonal student empowerment.

Table 3. Regression analysis for intrapersonal student empowerment.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Block 1 (demographics only)			Block 2 (full model)		
			<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
			$F(7, 359) = 3.11^{**}, r^2 = .06, \text{adjusted } r^2 = .04$			$F(13, 354) = 21.69^{***}, r^2 = .42, \text{adjusted } r^2 = .40, r^2 \text{ change} = .37^{***}$		
Age	15.97	1.29	−0.06	0.31	−.01	−0.16	0.24	−.03
Gender	1.49	0.50	−2.78***	0.79	−.18	−1.92**	0.63	−.12
Non-Hispanic White	0.40	0.49	0.86	1.31	.06	−0.40	1.05	−.03
Non-Hispanic Black	0.10	0.30	3.06	1.69	.12	3.10*	1.34	.12
Hispanic/Latino	0.42	0.49	1.14	1.34	.07	−0.04	1.07	.00
Mother education	3.49	2.22	0.23	0.24	.07	0.09	0.19	.03
Father education	3.47	2.29	0.25	0.23	.08	0.07	0.18	.02
Communication	17.30	6.31	—	—	—	0.03	0.08	.02
Trust	13.74	4.08	—	—	—	0.42**	0.14	.22
Referent power	21.36	8.23	—	—	—	0.22***	0.06	.24
Coercive power	12.34	5.70	—	—	—	−0.19**	0.06	−.14
Sense of community	58.28	13.47	—	—	—	0.13***	0.03	.23

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Behavioral indicators

Behavioral indicators include a variety of behaviors that affect the students' compliance and participation in the environment (Finn, 1989). In the present study we assessed two measures of school attendance, three measures of compliance, and a scale of participation in school activities. Mean comparisons were made between empowered and disempowered students on these indicators. Results are displayed in Figure 1.

Attendance and participation

Two measures of attendance were used to assess overall attendance and skipping of class. Eighty-five percent of the respondents had missed at least one day of school in the past month with 14.2% missing seven or more days. No significant differences were found based on empowerment level for attendance ($p = .88$). However, differences were found in skipping class. More than 40% of the students reported skipping class at least once in the past month with 10.5% reporting that they skipped seven or more classes. Empowered students were less likely to skip class, $t(372.64) = 3.04, p < .006, d = .31$, than were disempowered students.

Students were also asked about their participation in school activities. This formed a continuous variable ranging from 0 for those who participated in no activities (21.2%) to 11 for those who participated in 11 or more activities in the past year. Empowered students were more likely to participate in activities than were disempowered students $t(323.16) = -3.78, p < .001, d = -.39$.

Compliance

Two thirds (66.6%) of students reported having no behavioral incidents in the past month, with 11.6% reporting three or more incidents. Almost one fourth of the students (23.9%) reported receiving in-school suspension and 15% reporting that they were suspended out of school. Empowered students were less likely to get in trouble, $t(352.56) = 3.48, p < .006, d = .35$; or be suspended in school, $t(344.33) = 3.15, p < .006, d = .32$; or out of school, $t(308.47) = 3.10, p < .006, d = .31$.

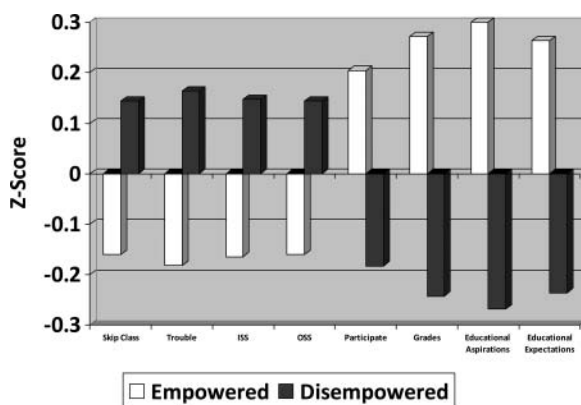


Figure 1. Mean Z-scores on key indicators by empowerment level.

Academic indicators

Mean comparisons were made between empowered and disempowered students on three self-reported academic indicators. The hypothesis was that empowered students would report better grades and higher aspirations and expectations for postsecondary education. As shown in Figure 1, this hypothesis was supported by the results. Empowered students reported better grades than did disempowered students, $t(373.85) = -0.52, p < .001, d = -.53$, with a moderately large effect size. This equated to half a letter grade difference or a grade point average of 3.0 for empowered students and 2.5 for disempowered students with greater variance in the disempowered group.

Considering future educational goals, empowered students reported higher aspirations, $t(372.15) = -0.58, p < .001, d = -.60$, and expectations, $t(379) = -5.06, p < .001, d = -.52$, for postsecondary education. On average, empowered students reported one level of education above disempowered students. This means that an empowered student was more likely to aspire to a master's degree, while disempowered students, on average, aspired only to a bachelor's degree. Expectations scores were lower for both groups.

Discussion

As Freire (1970) asserted, schools are powerful settings that can either liberate or maintain systems of oppression. Yet, in a U.S. education system that utilizes an ever-increasing array of indicators for success, measures of student empowerment have not been included to date. The results of this preliminary study suggest that intrapersonal student empowerment may be an important metric for consideration in assessing the effectiveness of classroom practices and teacher behavior and for distinguishing between students who struggle and those who thrive in economically disadvantaged, urban high schools.

The present study demonstrated that student empowerment is highly related to a variety of academic and behavioral indicators of interest. Empowered students were less likely to skip class and get in trouble. They reported higher grades (one half letter grade), greater participation in extracurricular activities, and higher expectations for future education (one level of education; e.g., bachelor's to master's degree). While future longitudinal studies should further test this finding, this relationship suggests that intrapersonal student empowerment (as measured by the LES) may be an important indicator of student success.

While the connection between student empowerment, self-reported grades, extracurricular participation and behaviors is important, the measurement of student empowerment may capture changes in students that may not show up on standardized test scores or grade point averages, but may have long-lasting effects on subsequent educational performance, aspirations and occupational success. In response to the high-stakes testing culture established by many educational reforms, an emphasis on student empowerment would shift the focus from the standardized to the personal, from a narrow view of academic success to a student-centered view that promotes holistic well-being and has far reaching implications for individual, familial, and societal improvement. As one teacher at an empowering school reported in Kirk et al. (2015) stated, "We make good

people here, not necessarily academic starlets.” This subtle, yet monumental shift to student empowerment as a key metric acknowledges the sociopolitical factors that a student brings with them to schools, holds teachers accountable for creating environments that can empower students, and suggests a bottom-up approach that includes staff, parents, and students in the creation of a better education system for all people.

This study also highlighted three specific classroom characteristics that are strongly associated with student empowerment, even after controlling for demographic factors. Students whose teachers used power in an equitable way (referent, not coercive) reported a greater sense of empowerment as did those who trusted their teachers and had a positive sense of community with their classmates. While the cross-sectional nature of this study limits the ability to assume causation, the strong relationship between the classroom characteristics and student empowerment scores suggests that the way in which teachers create the classroom environment may create changes in student empowerment with correlated links to academic and behavioral indicators.

These findings support over a century of literature on school climate that has identified characteristics of classrooms that are related to student success (Cohen et al., 2009). However, most of this literature has ignored the role of power, failing to adopt a critical understanding of the school environment as nested within socioeconomic, political and cultural contexts. The recent literature on empowering settings (Maton, 2008) and adolescent empowerment (Jennings et al., 2006) has identified characteristics that match those uncovered here including an emphasis on equitable, shared decision-making. The primary contribution of the present study is presenting a set of measures, when taken together that can assess student empowerment and key classroom indicators that predict student empowerment.

Limitations

While the results of this preliminary study raise important questions, a number of limitations are identified. The sample size was moderate ($N = 381$) and the voluntary sampling strategy may have excluded classrooms from the analysis that could have changed the results. However, the study was able to assess a diverse array of students across five different schools and provide results that suggest the justification for expanded studies in the future. Despite attempts to emphasize anonymity and encourage honesty, student responses may have been subject to bias including social desirability (i.e., teaching staff administered the surveys which may have influenced student response) and self-report (i.e., students may have inflated grades and deflated behavioral troubles).

Implications for practice and future research

While rigorous measurement of common core standards is important to assess student learning, this study offers student empowerment as a complimentary measure that should be considered alongside the standardized test score or letter grade. While holding teachers accountable for test scores and grades is problematic, teachers should be held accountable for the

classroom environment that they create. This study suggests that teachers have the ability to affect student empowerment by setting up environments that support equitable power sharing and positive relationships. As others have suggested, a shift to include student and parent feedback in teacher evaluations would go a long way toward setting up this dynamic and sharing the power (and responsibility) for change more equitably (Bragg, 2007; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

As a preliminary study, the goal of this work was to highlight the need and opportunity for expanded research. Having established the validity of the measures and the power of the predictors, future studies should explore three lines of research. First, surveys should be administered to a larger sample on a broader selection of schools (urban, rural, high income, low income). This will allow for the creation of multilevel, nested models, demonstrating the relative impact of school characteristics and classroom characteristics on student empowerment. In these studies, greater access to school records will be required to use actual grades, test scores, attendance, and behavioral reports as outcome measures to adjust for limitations in student self-reports.

Second, longitudinal studies should be adopted with school districts to measure student empowerment periodically at different time points in a student’s educational journey. It would be very interesting to see how student empowerment in Grade 9, for example, predicts graduation rate, high school grade point average, or college enrollment. These studies could be used to map the trajectory of student experience, acknowledging that the typical student will participate in many classrooms throughout their education, some of which are more empowering than others. Anecdotal reports of the inspiring teacher could be measured using real longitudinal data on student empowerment and related outcomes. Longitudinal analyses could also include indicators of subjective well-being, life satisfaction, and mental health to explore the extension of student empowerment to nonacademic areas of life.

Finally, future researchers should focus on building empowering classrooms in urban schools. This could incorporate teacher training programs, parent–teacher dialogue opportunities, or participant action research involving students in and outside of the classroom. These interventions, built on existing best practices (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2010), could be explicitly evaluated to demonstrate what specific changes in teacher behavior could influence the empowering nature of the classroom environment.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, student empowerment is predicted by positive and equitable classroom characteristics and is a distinguishing factor in academic and behavioral outcomes. Building on the literature on school climate and empowering settings, this research presents student empowerment as a metric to be considered alongside standardized test scores and letter grades in assessing student, teacher and school success. By explicitly measuring power dynamics in the school environment, schools can make greater progress in addressing the educational disparities that have plagued marginalized groups for over a century in the United States.

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