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# Power and Empowerment in Schools

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.76483>

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## Abstract

This chapter sets out to discuss the tenants of power and empowerment as features of teachers' professional knowledge. At the root of empowerment is power and this power works to shape the experiences of every individual within the school institution. While teachers may not have the ability to control some aspects of how power is operationalized within the school institution, teachers do have control over how they perceive and operationalize power in the classroom. As such, it is argued that the effective and conscious operationalization of this power is a key aspect of the professional development of teachers. This chapter explores the concepts of power and empowerment, their various conceptualizations and their implications on classroom teaching and learning processes. Through embracing empowerment as an educational philosophy, an account of how teachers can generate empowering learning environments for their students will be provided.

**Keywords:** empowerment, power, teacher education, classroom management, student learning

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## 1. Introduction

Power and empowerment are intricately connected, yet, complex concepts which can have profound implications on the experiences of both teachers and students in the classroom. Being recognized as authoritative individuals with expertise in subject areas qualifies teachers to assume a power. A crucial aspect of teachers' professional knowledge is perceiving and operationalizing their power in a manner that does not oppress or inhibit students' creativity, critical thinking or independent thought but rather, they use their power to empower students. Beginning with a brief exploration of the concept of power in terms of its various conceptualizations and influences on school life, an account of how teachers can embrace their power in classrooms to empower students will be offered.

## 2. Power

At the root of empowerment is power and according to Nyberg, *“The idea of power has lain more completely neglected in education studies than in any other discipline that is of fundamental social interest”* ([1], p. 63). Tauber contends that if teachers desire to educate students to the degree which they are capable of successfully coping with an ever-changing and demanding world, they must exercise their power effectively [2]. However, the effective use of power is widely misunderstood by educators [3]. In order to begin to consider the effective use of power, educators need to firstly understand the concept of power but as Common informs, we all know perfectly well what power is—until someone asks us [4]. As a multi-faceted concept that is fundamental to understanding people, their motives, their goals and their actions [4], many scholars have postulated the meaning of power. According to Lukes, having power means that one has the ability to make a difference to the world [5]. Many other conceptualizations of power allude to the ability it affords an individual to have an influence on agenda setting and decision making [6, 7]. Ashcroft considers power as a fundamental personal construct that *“develops or stagnates in a social environment, and it functions in a social as well as a personal sphere; yet it is fundamentally a personal construct”* ([8], p. 148). Here, power is deemed to be intrinsic to individuals however, Arendt contends that *“Power is never the property of an individual, it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together”* ([9], p. 44). This follows on from interpretations of how power exists and functions in society. Foucault considers power as an inherently latent phenomenon that sees *“individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation”* ([10], p. 98). Foucault presents power as a mysterious system that ebbs and flows among individuals who are perceived as vehicles of power. As vehicles of power, these individual fuels the ebbs and flows of power. In stark contrast, Giddens interprets power to be intrinsic to human agency. Giddens ([11], p. 9) describes the concept of agency in concerning *“events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened”*. As such, for an individual to have power, they would have the capability to act in a way that would *“make a difference”*. An individual who ceases or loses this capability to *“make a difference”* nullifies their agency and ability to exercise power. Unlike Foucault who considers power as an all-inclusive but latent phenomenon, Giddens acknowledges individuals as conscious and knowledgeable beings with the ability to create, influence, and limit power [11]. In the context of the school institution, if teachers and students akin are viewed as conscious and knowledgeable beings with the agency to act within their own desires, it is essential for teachers to understand how power manifests to influence teaching and learning experiences in their classrooms.

## 3. Power in schools

Power exists and functions in different ways in schools, both inside and outside the classroom. Outside the classroom, research describes how principals influence teachers through their use

of power [12]. By granting authority to principals, due to either their ability to distribute rewards or because of their knowledge and expertise, teachers qualify the power of principals [12]. While teachers may not have full control of how principals operationalize their power, teachers have full control of the power that they operationalize in their classrooms. Being recognized as authoritative individuals with expert knowledge and expertise in the classroom qualifies teachers' power. However, since gaining and exerting power is considered as a basic human need and within the classroom, this can implicate the learning environment [13]. For example, conflict can arise if needs for power by either teachers or students are unmet [14]. Teachers can exercise their power in different ways as described throughout Tauber's five bases of teacher power. Tauber [2] adapted the five bases of power conceived within the business world by French et al. [15] to purport the five bases of power that teachers wield in the classroom. These five bases of power include (i) coercive power, (ii) reward power, (iii) legitimate power, (iv) referent power and (v) expert power.

- Coercive power derives from the student belief that the teacher possesses the ability to punish or refrain from punishing. Some of the characteristics of this type of power include continuous and exhaustive teacher monitoring, emphasizing compliance rather than cooperation, student rebellion, retaliation, lying, cheating and withdrawing from learning.
- Reward power derives from the student belief that the teacher possesses the ability to distribute or withhold rewards not obtainable elsewhere. Such reward power involves introducing stimulants that students perceive to be pleasant such as recognition and privileges as well as removing stimulants that students perceive to be unpleasant.
- Legitimate power derives from the student belief that the teacher has the right to prescribe behavior given the status of their position. Here, teachers have the legitimate power to tell students what to do such as assigning homework and generally students accepts this assignment through respect for the status of the teachers' position.
- Referent power is a personal power that stems from students' identification with the teacher and their desire to be liked by their teacher. This power extends beyond the classroom as the student, in the less powerful position, bids to emulate the personal characteristics of teacher who wields referent power.
- Expert power derives from the student belief that the teacher possesses some special knowledge or expertise which is important for achieving a particular task they are presented with. Exercising these power bases effectively is a professional obligation for teachers [2].

Although teachers' power may operationalize throughout these five power bases, detrimental consequences may arise if teachers operationalize their power in a manner that oppresses or inhibits students' creativity, critical thinking or independent thought. Educator and philosopher, Freire provides an account of how teachers can negatively use their power to oppress students by embracing the banking concept of education [16]. Here, this banking concept of education portrays education as a pursuit that is characterized by teachers depositing information into the minds of their students who go on to store this information. In this regard, students are passive in their acceptance of the information being deposited in their minds. By annulling students' creative power, their passive acceptance of information imbues habits of

mind that leads students to passively accepting the status quo of their existence in the world. As opposed to depositing information in students' minds, posing problems to students that encourages them to critically reflect on societal and power structures and how they influence students' life's *"can develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation"* ([16], p. 83). However, it is within the interests of teachers to embrace the banking model of education because in its fulfillment, teachers retain their power [16]. Relinquishing their power by providing students with a space to critically reflect and question such influential structures may risk or threaten teachers' status and power. However, Freire encourages teachers not to exercise their power *over* students, but rather they should use it *with* students their journey of learning. The process of relinquishing power, as such, giving power to individuals is characteristic of an endeavor to empower [17]. Therefore, towards the generation of empowering learning environments, it is necessary for teachers to identify the power dynamics that establishes in their classrooms while enacting on such dynamics to relinquish some of their power to empower students.

#### 4. Empowerment

Similar to the multi-faceted nature of the concept of power, empowerment is also a nebulous concept that carries with it many different interpretations and definitions. Rappaport considers empowerment as *"a belief in the power of people to be both the masters of their own fate and involved in the life of their several communities"* ([18], p. 142). Unlike this perception of empowerment as a belief [19], considers empowerment as a process seeking to nurture efficacy; *"enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information"* (p. 474). Zimmerman also considers empowerment as a process that is characterized by the affordance of opportunities for people to control their own destiny and to influence the decisions that affect their lives [20]. Similarly, Lightfoot perceives the opportunistic facet of empowerment involving the affordance of opportunities people have for autonomy, responsibility, choice and authority [21]. According to Kieffer, not only should empowerment involve acquiring new practical skills, it should also involve individuals being afforded opportunities to reconstruct and deeply engrained personal systems of social relations [22].

Within an educational context, Ashcroft objects to words typically associated with definitions of empowerment such as *"motivating"*, *"supporting"*, *"freeing"* and *"enabling"* [8]. According to Ashcroft, *"motivating"* is solely the act of a teacher and as such, neglects the powers within the students themselves. *"Supporting"* infers weakness, inadequacy or impoverishment in students. *"Freeing"* suggests a directionless and laissez-faire teaching role while *"enabling"* does not tend to exude the potency and the positive impetus to action better which is characteristic to empowerment. In critically evaluating the concept of empowerment in education and its associated definitions, Ashcroft [8] purports that to empower is to *"nurture belief in capability and competence"* (p. 145) whereby capability refers to one's ability/capacity to act and competence refers to sufficient/appropriate/effective action. Therefore, according to Ashcroft, an

empowered person is someone who believes in their ability/capacity to act in a sufficient/appropriate/effective manner.

## 5. Empowerment in schools

Just as power exists and functions in different ways in schools, both inside and outside the classroom, empowerment can also exist and function in different ways both inside and outside the classroom. However, much empowerment-based research that has taken place in an educational context has focused on the empowerment of teachers. With respect to teacher empowerment, it is conceptualized by Short, to manifest in six dimensions that includes; (i) decision making, (ii) teacher impact, (iii) teacher status, (iv) autonomy, (v) professional growth and (vi) teacher self-efficacy [23]. The decision making dimension of teacher empowerment relates to teachers' participation in making critical decisions that directly affects their work such as budgets, teacher selection, scheduling and curricula. The teacher impact dimension of teacher empowerment refers to teachers' perceptions that they have an influence on aspects of school life. Teachers' perceptions that their colleagues respect and admire them professionally are characteristic to the teacher status dimension of teacher empowerment. Teachers' beliefs that they can control aspects of school life such as scheduling, materials and instructional planning is characteristic to the autonomy dimension of teacher empowerment. The professional growth dimension refers to teachers' perceptions of the opportunities they are afforded by their institution to grow and develop professionally and enhance their skill set during a continuous learning endeavor. For teachers to believe that they have skills and ability to help students learn and that they can effectively instruct and compile programs that are successful in promoting student learning is characteristic to the teacher self-efficacy dimension of teacher empowerment [23]. Following on from this conceptualization of teacher empowerment, there has been considerable attention devoted to the exploration of various processes of teacher empowerment as well as investigating their impact on school life.

### 5.1. Processes of teacher empowerment

Apart from the characteristic dimensions of teacher empowerment, many have set out to describe processes that promote the empowerment of teachers. The affordance of decision making opportunities and promotion of increased responsibilities are factors that dominate conceptualizations of teacher empowerment processes. For example, Bolin considers teacher empowerment to involve *“Investing in teachers the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and the right to exercise professional judgment about the content of the curriculum and means of instruction”* ([24], p. 83). Similarly, Bredeson conceives teacher empowerment as *“a systematic process by which teachers would assume greater responsibility in their professional work life is rooted in a large body of research in the areas of participatory decision making, professional development, job enrichment, as well as in the areas of professional autonomy and teacher efficacy”* ([25], p. 2). According to Melenyzer, true teacher empowerment *“leads to increased professionalism as teachers assume responsibility for and an involvement in the decision making process”* ([26], p. 16). Perceiving empowerment as a process is also echoed by Short et al. who defines empowerment

as “a process whereby school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems” ([27], p. 38). Unlike these conceptualizations of teacher empowerment, Carl places the enhancement of students' learning experiences as a core function and outcome of teacher empowerment; “Empowerment does not mean unrestrained and unstructured actions, but rather increasing the learning outcomes and other experiences which may flow from it, thereby contributing towards developing the learner's potential. A teaching environment within which teaching may occur optimally can only be created through effective empowerment” ([28], p. xi).

## 5.2. The impact of teacher empowerment on school life

The impact of teacher empowerment can implicate school experiences for both teachers and students. The empowerment of teachers is linked to a number of desirable outcomes such as heightened teacher self-esteem [29] and job satisfaction [30–33] as well as enhanced organizational and professional commitment [32, 34, 35] and reduced dysfunctional resistance [36]. Teacher empowerment is also linked to enhanced middle school effectiveness [37] and the establishment of positive school climates [29]. Bogler and Somech [34] claims that principals should establish the conditions necessary for teachers to perceive their competency and status such as affording teachers with opportunities to grow professionally. However, Spreitzer [38] claims that individuals must be psychologically receptive if such empowering conditions are to be fully realized.

The impact of teacher empowerment on student learning is less than straight forward on the other hand. Although one study describes how teacher empowerment is a significant independent predictor of student achievement in standardized proficiency tests in reading and mathematics [37], two separate studies report no direct relationship between teacher empowerment and student academic achievement [39, 40]. According to the findings of Marks and Louis [39], the conditions that are necessary for teacher empowerment to positively influence student performance are understood to involve the affordance of decision making opportunities relating to teaching and learning decisions [37] in a professional teaching community that has collective responsibility for student learning [39]. It is conceived that teacher empowerment encourages teachers to improve how they teach, to instill a belief that student achievement is linked to their own teaching effort as well as promoting the communication and collaboration among teachers in exchanging of information about teaching effectiveness [39]. While considerable empowerment research that has taken place within the educational context has investigated the collective empowerment of teachers on an institutional level from external sources such as principals or board of management [37], less focus has investigated the empowerment of individual teachers [29, 35, 41] and even less attention has been devoted to investigating the empowerment of individual students.

## 6. Professional teacher knowledge for student empowerment

A crucial aspect of teachers' professional knowledge is perceiving and operationalizing their power in a manner that does not oppress or inhibit students' creativity, critical thinking or

independent thought but rather, they use their power to empower students. Some important factors to consider towards the generation of empowering learning environments include the establishment of strong teacher-student rapport, developing a theoretically sound conceptualization of what it means “to empower” while setting out to promote equitable power dynamics in the classroom.

### **6.1. Empowering teacher-student rapport**

A profound precursor to the generation of empowering learning environments is the establishment of strong rapport between individual teachers and individual students. According to Hattie's meta-analysis of what influences student achievement, what teacher's know, do and care is the greatest source of variance among differences in student achievement [42]. The relationship between a teacher and their student is considered to be an interpersonal relationship [43, 44] with students' relational goals and motives implicating this relationship [45, 46]. Among students' relational goals is the need for them to be liked by their teachers [45]. Teachers can help students to achieve these relational goals by ensuring students know they care for them. For students to develop an enhanced sense of empowerment, feeling cared for is vital. The extent to which a teacher cares for their students may be expressed by their immediacy, disclosure, assertiveness, responsiveness, and attractiveness [47]. Teachers need to be realizing just how important it is to express such behaviors given their influence on students' affective learning experiences, to the extent that their cognitive learning is enhanced [47]. Expressing care may be reciprocated, whereby the care that teachers express to their students is reflected in how students will care for their teacher. Providing strong rapport between individual teachers and individual students are established on a foundation of care, teachers can then begin to conceptualize and embrace what it means to empower.

### **6.2. Conceptualizing empowerment**

#### *6.2.1. Nurturing belief in capability*

Following a comprehensive analysis of the concept of empowerment in education as well as a critique of stated definitions of empowerment, Ashcroft [8] encapsulates the fundamental pursuit of empowerment that is characterized by the nurture of “*belief in capability and competence*” (p. 145). A belief stems from personal knowledge or understandings that are antecedents of attitudes and subjective norms; they establish behavioral intentions [48, 49]. Elbow contends that “*Belief is the source of a child's power*” and new belief stems from success and the infusion of new power it brings for students [50]. Therefore, towards the nurture of student empowerment, teachers are challenged to instill a sense of belief in individual students of their ability/capacity to act in a sufficient/appropriate/effective manner. When seeking to nurture students' beliefs in their capabilities, teachers may firstly consider identifying the factors that suppress such beliefs. Once these factors have been identified, teachers should proceed to promote students' sense of efficacy in completing tasks which they may once have believed as being too complex. Overcoming such limiting pre-existing beliefs towards the positive advancement of students' personal efficacy may be achieved by issuing explicit and compelling feedback [51].

### 6.2.2. *Transforming potential energy into human power*

Ashcroft [8] portrays a useful analogy for teachers to assist in developing a conceptualization of empowerment. This analogy aligns human capability with potential energy while considering the Law of Conservation of Energy. According to the law of thermodynamics, energy can neither be created nor be destroyed, only transferred from one form to another. Therefore, it would infer that human capability, as potential energy, cannot be created or destroyed but it can be *“transformed, changed, altered, and developed into countless forms of human power”* ([8], p. 149). This analogy can inform the founding of empowerment philosophy of education for teachers, whereby the utmost purpose of their role in the life's of their students is to transform students' incredible and limitless potential energy into human power. Such human power will be different for each student. For some, it may manifest as the ignition of a passion or the development of new and enhanced confidence or sense of belonging. If the very premise of an empowerment process is *“to give power to”* ([17], p. 667), then, unleashing students' potential energy as human power is in essence, the act of student empowerment. Unleashing students' potential energy as human power is not necessarily restricted to learning that is characterized by the acquisition of new knowledge. As the saying goes, *“Knowledge is Power”*, but learning to feel a sense of safety, security and belonging can also be a source of empowerment for students since *“Most young people alone can exercise little power... A student's power springs from the collective strength, talent, knowledge and dedication of all team members”* ([14], p. 185).

### 6.3. Promoting equitable power dynamics

The equitable use of power by teachers implicates intrapersonal student empowerment [52]. Teachers should be conscious of how power dynamics establishes in their classrooms and how they can embrace such dynamics to empower, as opposed to oppress students' creativity, independent, and critical thinking. Providing a safe space for students to voice their thoughts, ideas and opinions as well as including them in decision making processes pertaining to everyday classroom issues such as subject topics, coursework and classroom logistics can promote students to develop their own sense of empowerment as their individuality is recognized, listened to and valued. Students should be encouraged to develop a sense of responsibility and connectedness that comes from the teacher trusting them to make such contributions. Teachers should seek to emphasize the importance of students' contribution to everyday classroom life as well as the importance of the teachers' role in the lives of their students, while it may be assumed that it is primarily the role of the teacher to see to the generation of empowering learning environments in the classroom, it should be noted that students also play a role in the generation of such environments. Since, student behavior can influence the experiences of teachers [53], teachers need to also be conscious of how such behavior may have inherent implications to the teachers' efforts to promote the generation of empowering learning environments.

### 6.4. Empowering students to empower teachers

Ken Macrorie's *“Uptaught”* changed how writing was taught in America in the 1970's. Macrorie envisioned writing as a fundamental pursuit of human empowerment that teachers should seek to facilitate. Macrorie encouraged teachers to *“set up an arrangement which allows*

*the majority of students in a class to find their own powers and to increase them. Making others powerful makes the teacher feel powerful. And the power of both is a fact"* ([54], p. 88). Here it is explained how teachers' efforts to facilitate the empowerment of students may serve to indirectly empower teachers themselves. Therefore, a potentially potent means of developing an enhanced sense of teacher empowerment is through the embrace of the inherent ability and control that teachers have to empower individual students.

There is a tendency for descriptions of teacher empowerment processes to feature as a collective process involving all teachers that unfolds on an institutional level that is initiated and sustained by an external source such as principals or board of management. However, teachers may develop their own sense of empowerment by seeking to enhance the sense of empowerment experienced by their own students. Further, it is also important for teachers to consider how they can control and perceive the six dimensions of teacher empowerment as described by Short [23]. It may be assumed that the extent of which teachers believe they can make decisions, have an impact on school life, have status and autonomy as a teacher, to grow professionally or feel efficacious is dependent on external factors such as the influence of principals or boards of management. However, every teacher has the inherent power to make a decision about how they operationalize their power in the classroom. Every teacher has the inherent power to have a positive impact on the everyday school experiences of individual students. Every teacher has the inherent power to recognize and embrace their status as professionals with autonomy over how they act in the classroom. Every teacher has the inherent power to decide to grow professionally by creating or choosing to engage in professional development activities. Every teacher has the inherent power to feel efficacious in their abilities and capacities to unleash students' potential energy as human power as a function of their endeavors to empower their students.

## **7. When power and empowerment gets difficult**

As nebulous and intricately complex concepts that have profound implications to the experiences of teachers and students, aspects and applications of power and empowerment can prove difficult for teachers. Contemplating the relinquishment of power, in any capacity, is a prospect that may be perceived as threatening to the status of an individual who has power. As aforementioned, it is desirable for teachers to embrace the banking model of education because in its fulfillment, teachers retain their power [16]. Teachers may hesitate to relinquish their power to empower students through the affordance of spaces for students to exercise creativity, independent thought and critical reflection of structures and norms that shapes their lives through a possible fear that their status or power may be undermined or questioned. Not only is the prospect of relinquishing power to students a potentially fearful prospect for teachers, but it also calls for those in power to be comfortable and flexible in a number of situations that deal with their expertise and authority [55]. For example, teachers need to be comfortable in appropriately addressing questions that students may ask them, responding to the development of students' critical thinking and dealing with students' developing understanding of how the wider society works to ultimately implicate every aspect of their lives. Within the context of the empowerment of teachers from a principal's point of view, principals may

hesitate to promote the empowerment of teachers as it may threaten their status and power. However, Gonzales and Short [12] refutes that the empowerment of teachers may threaten the status of principals claiming that empowering teachers will further teachers' recognition of the principals' expertise when in the process of promoting effective change.

Regardless of whether it is principals seeking to empower teachers or teachers seeking to empower students, the relinquishment of power demands critical thought, attention and time. However, it must be emphasized the full relinquishment of power might not always be possible. Certain hierarchies must be preserved within schools for their effective management. Principals must retain some power to make and enact on decisions made to see to the progress of the school. Similarly, teachers must retain some power to reward and prescribe behavior towards ensuring student growth. Achieving the establishment of equitable power dynamics that simultaneously negates oppression but nurtures the growth of every individual within schools is a vital component of teachers' professional knowledge. Principals and teachers must therefore be conscious of their power, to perceive how much power they could relinquish towards the empowerment of students but understand how much power they should retain in order to nurture growth.

## 8. Conclusion

Power works to shape the experiences of every individual within the school institution. Recognized as authoritative individuals with expert knowledge and expertise in the classroom, teachers assume power that can function to implicate their students' learning experiences. Teachers have a professional obligation to be conscious of the power that they assume in the classroom and how they operationalize this power. Without careful consideration of how they use their power, teachers may unknowingly oppress students, stifling their creativity and independent thought. Teachers must be encouraged to perceive their role and capacity to empower students by nurturing their sense of belief in their ability and capacity to act in a desired manner. In doing so, the act of student empowerment by teachers is perceived as an endeavor to unleash students' potential energy as human power. This human power will manifest differently in each individual student such as the ignition of a passion or the development of new and enhanced confidence or sense of belonging. While the relinquishment of power may be refuted by those who retain power as a means of preserving their power, teachers must be conscious of the consequences of how they use their power.

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