

**EMPOWERING TEACHERS – OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS****Aparna Morris¹ & Smita Phatak², Ph.D.**¹*Ph.D Research Scholar, Tilak College of Education Pune – 30*²*Associate Professor Tilak College of Education Pune - 30***Abstract**

*Teacher empowerment is defined as investing teachers with the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and to exercise professional judgment about what and how to teach". Empowerment also increases productivity when teachers have more time to collaborate. One option to **increase productivity** is to provide experiences during the school hours that allow teachers to discuss student performance, curriculum, and instruction with their colleagues, as well as, provide encouragement and support. With regards to professional development, administrators might ask for teacher input as to their needs, but, sadly, the input is not always to truly shape the experiences that follow. Instead, the very fact that teacher input was sought is seen as sufficient, while much of what teachers say is dismissed as unrealistic.*

Key words – Teacher, empower ent, hierarchy, isolation, outside experts, professional development.



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Introduction

“**Teacher empowerment** is defined as investing teachers with the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and to exercise professional judgment about what and how to teach”. (Bolin, 1989)¹To follow the above definition, administrators must be active in providing experiences for all teachers to grow as leaders. In today’s economy and with limited funds available to provide teachers with **professional development**, administrators must be creative and open to numerous options for individual and school growth. This growth is enhanced by empowered teachers, who are committed to the overall success of the school’s mission, have increased productivity in and out of the classroom, and an increase in the teachers disposition Research shows that when administrators use tactics to increase **teacher empowerment**, teacher. Terry (2000) states, “In schools where teachers are empowered to be leaders, the focus of control changes from the principal to the teachers”. In the “Journey to Teacher Empowerment (1999) the authors share that when teachers’ confidence increases and when they feel competent in their abilities, classroom instruction will improve. Goyne (1994) states that” administration should encourage other teachers to seize opportunities to share their strengths with other members of the staff”.

Empowerment also increases productivity when teachers have more time to collaborate. Teachers need to be placed in situations where they can learn from other teachers. Therefore, administrators should provide structure for collective practice. Whitaker (2003) said “**teachers should be placed in situations where they can learn from other teachers**”. One

option to **increase productivity** is to provide experiences during the school hours that allow teachers to discuss student performance, curriculum, and instruction with their colleagues, as well as, provide encouragement and support.

Background

Administrators must be active in providing experiences for all teachers to grow as leaders. In today's economy and with limited funds available to provide teachers with **professional development**, administrators must be creative and open to numerous options for individual and school growth. This growth is enhanced by empowered teachers, who are committed to the overall success of the school's mission, have increased productivity in and out of the classroom, and an increase in the teachers disposition. Teacher empowerment can emerge within the current system through teacher-led professional development. Teacher-led professional development creates opportunities to enhance professional autonomy, emphasizes professional judgment, and provides spaces to validate teacher voices, all essential components of teacher empowerment.

Obstacles in Teacher empowerment

Hierarchical School Structures

Teachers exist within a hierarchical bureaucracy (Webster, 1994), where administrators, who are perceived as holding power, often do not hear their voices. With regards to professional development, administrators might ask for teacher input as to their needs, but, sadly, the input is not always to truly shape the experiences that follow. Instead, the very fact that teacher input was sought is seen as sufficient, while much of what teachers say is dismissed as unrealistic. That is, administrators use and solicit teacher voice as a means to show their processes "promote effectiveness" (Blase & Anderson, 1995, p. 129) or to increase teacher motivation for a particular program. These methods ignore what teachers actually feel is important to the needs of their students and school. For example, school district administrators may implement a behavioural improvement model known as PBIS (Positive Behavioral Improvements and Supports) without consulting teachers regarding the programme's effectiveness or whether the school needs the programme. Teachers are then asked to lead committees to implement PBIS, creating the illusion of teacher empowerment through leadership. These committee "leaders" articulate programme goals dictated by the external PBIS programme, not goals derived from teachers within the school. Similarly, a school district in Illinois recently created a technology initiative and named 61 "teacher trainers" (Biggs, 2012) who will receive training to support others. While these teachers may perceive themselves as leaders, they are, in effect, implementing administratively-driven programmes.

Teacher Isolation

Teacher isolation is another roadblock to teacher empowerment (Webster, 1994). In many schools, teachers are in a single classroom and rarely have opportunities to interact with other teachers. The issue of teacher isolation is nothing new. Goodlad (1983) discovered that in most schools, teachers worked in isolation and were not encouraged to discuss curriculum. Tye and Tye (1984) also observed a lack of connection between teachers, who often worked in a self-contained environment. When teachers work in isolation, they are unaware of the potential collaboration and support they can receive from other professionals. Teachers also sometimes feel they will lose their autonomy if they collaborate with other teachers and

create common lessons and assessments; they do not want other teachers to use “their stuff.” This proprietary culture creates competition, weakening the collective voice teachers can have as professionals.

Outside Experts

Mary Hatwood Futrell (1994) described problems in professional development within schools that have yet to be resolved almost twenty years later. She explained that “outside experts” lead professional development workshops and ignore the localized and individual needs of teachers and students. Moreover, teachers are not allowed to cultivate professional development programmes that could address their school needs and allow them to become activists for change. These outside programs ignore the professional expertise of local teachers, assuming that one-size-fits-all, expensive programs by so-called experts with no knowledge of community educational needs, can somehow reform a school with a few workshops. When school administrators hire outside “experts,” they convey to their own teachers that they are not experts, and therefore are not professionals. Lightfoot (1983) refers to this as “infantilizing teachers.” Most distressingly, reduced teacher empowerment often leads to unfortunate consequences for students as well as the individuals who teach them. Infantilized teachers often act in autocratic ways towards their students as a means to restore their power. Blase (1995) refers to this as the “micro politics” of schools. This concept of power, rather than true empowerment, unnecessarily creates an adversarial relationship in the classroom between teachers and students, contrary to the ends of education itself. For example, some teachers emphasize rules and order as their means to control the students. They focus on dress-code violations, tardy slips, and whether or not a student has his or her pen and textbook as means of domination over students. Their power is reflected in discipline referrals, not in professional expertise. These barriers described here are deeply entrenched in schools and play a powerful role in hindering teacher empowerment. But all is not lost. Opportunities for empowerment exist within schools, especially if we actively work to seek them out and, when they do not exist, to create them

Teacher-Led Professional Development in Practice

Teacher empowerment can emerge within the current system through teacher-led professional development. Teacher-led professional development creates opportunities to enhance professional autonomy, emphasizes professional judgment, and provides spaces to validate teacher voices, all essential components of teacher empowerment. According to Beane (1993, p. 11), “Communities of learners” emphasize collaboration, not competition. Teachers in a collaborative setting have opportunities to share their expertise as classroom professionals, develop common practices, and assess how those practices improve student learning.

Embedded professional development and informal learning communities described by Desimone (2011) can also lead to teacher empowerment. Desimone explains that this involves teacher group discussions, book clubs that meet after school, co-teaching, or mentor teachers working with other teachers to continually reflect on student learning. Moreover, reading groups encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. Discussions enhance teacher reflection on pedagogy, methods and pressing issues regarding the teaching and learning of social studies. These collaborative groups are created first by the teachers themselves and supported by the administration later to maintain the teacher network.

Overcoming Hierarchical Structures

Teacher-led professional development can help transform the hierarchical structure of schools by implementing programs that are teacher-driven, rather than administratively driven. Teach Plus represents a model for this transformation. Through shared leadership with the administration, teachers can restore their professional autonomy. Embedded professional development can alleviate pressures of meeting time and prevent teachers from thinking that collaboration is a burden. When professional development is embedded into the daily work of teaching, professional judgment can be restored. Teachers feel empowered to make professional decisions regarding how to spend their time outside of the classroom. Moreover, they engage in their professional voice to articulate their decisions on spending this time, realigning the role of administrator from decision-maker to facilitator.

Overcoming Teacher Isolation

Rather than reinforcing teaching as an isolated activity, teacher-led professional development, on the contrary, can enhance teacher collaboration, encourage self-reflection on one's own students, and empower teachers to work collectively to improve their practice. Teachers can meet together as autonomous individuals, each with their own personal experiences, in order to collaboratively improve the instructional methods of all. Rather than protecting their work, teachers willingly share with others and celebrate their professional work. Collaborative, rather than isolated, teacher-led professional development also strengthens professional judgment through teacher discussions of content and student assessment. Teachers working collaboratively to construct curriculum restore their professional judgment as experts within their classrooms and schools and learn from each other. In addition, rather than administrators claiming the voice of assessment through their discussions of standardized tests, teachers reclaim their professional voice by analyzing student achievement through their own assessments.

Overcoming the Influence of Outside Experts

Finally, teacher-led professional development allows teachers to reclaim their professional autonomy by becoming experts within their own schools. As teacher leaders, teachers are empowered to assist others through their own expertise in content and pedagogy, rather than an educational consultant who possesses no intimate knowledge of the district, school, teachers, or students. Moreover, through assessing the needs of the local community, teachers utilize their professional judgment to determine what reforms and programs should be implemented. Rather than hiring expensive consultants that present in a one-time workshop, local teacher leader experts provide ongoing professional development and analysis through their own knowledge. In addition, teacher-led professional development inspires respect for teacher leaders from colleagues within the school. Teacher leaders share their professional voice within their schools, providing analysis and reflection for fellow teachers. Teacher-led professional development restores professional autonomy, judgment, and voice, all essential components of teacher empowerment.

Conclusion

Teachers who have a hand in their own professional development feel compelled to address these needs because they are actively involved in identifying them and responsible for providing solutions to them. Led by the call to responsibility, teachers can become activists, designing and implementing programs focused on addressing student needs within their school's social and economic context. Thus, teachers, as activists, become responsible for

school improvement, acting in “positive political” ways (Blase and Anderson, 1995, p. 65). Through teacher-led professional development, teachers feel empowered. Teachers in all schools can become education reform activists within their own schools. Teacher empowerment will reinvigorate teacher professionalism and autonomy, strengthen teacher activism, and allow teachers to be advocates for their students.

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