

Teacher and Principal Empowerment: National, Longitudinal, and Comparative Perspectives

by Jianping Shen

During the past twenty years, the educational field has been replete with the rhetoric of decentralization, site-based management, teacher empowerment, and distributed leadership.¹ Given the continuing emphasis on such ideas, it is important to investigate (a) how teachers' leadership has evolved in practice between the 1987-88 and the 1993-94 school years; (b) whether there is any variation of teacher empowerment for various kinds of teachers; and (c) whether there is a discrepancy between principals' and teachers' perceptions of teacher empowerment.

The Rationale for the Study

The concept of empowerment has gradually gained momentum in theory and practice since the Second World War. Worker empowerment has been positively related to enhanced job performance, increased job satisfaction, greater work efficiency, and higher motivation.² In education, the school-effectiveness research of the past twenty years has repeatedly affirmed the role of principals' leadership in school success. Principals remain key individuals as instructional leaders, initiators of change, school managers, personnel administrators, problem solvers, and boundary spanners for the school.³ As for teachers' leadership, teacher empowerment has been positively related to enhanced teacher self-esteem, increased teacher knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy, stronger staff collegiality, improved curriculum and instruction, and higher student achievement.⁴

Accompanying this empirical research has been the argument that principals and teachers should be more "empowered." In other words, principals and teachers should be able to display

more leadership in schoolwide and classroom policies and issues. However, despite the research, we know little about how teachers' and principals' leadership evolved in practice in the past few years. We know little about whether teacher empowerment differs for new and experienced teachers in different kinds of schools. We know even less about whether there is a congruence between principals and teachers in terms of their perceived leadership.

There are basically two major rationales for this study. First, there has long been a discrepancy between rhetoric and practice in education. It is, therefore, important to investigate how the rhetoric on principals' and teachers' leadership has been put into practice over the past decade and a half. History reminds us of the importance of comparing theory to practice. For example, in the 1960s, the education field was filled with talk of individualized instruction. John Goodlad and his associates developed a checklist that addressed whether schools paid attention to and made substantial provisions for individual differences and whether teachers used basic principles of learning and instruction regularly. What they found was that expectations for individual instruction were not met in the classrooms they visited.⁵

The second rationale for the study is that there appears to be possible tension in the recent rhetoric on teachers' and principals' leadership. On one hand, site-based management, decentralization, and instructional leadership tend to emphasize principals' leadership in improving the school, in general, and curriculum and instruction, in particular. On the other hand, the language of teacher empowerment and distributive leadership tends to focus on teachers' leadership in bettering schools and their curricula and instruction. Ideally, these two emphases could be combined, leading to a "win-win" situation that enhances both principals' and teachers' leader-

Jianping Shen, Ph.D., is an associate professor of educational leadership at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo.

ship. However, the dual emphases could also result in tension between principals' and teachers' leadership. Therefore, this study investigates the impact of the dual emphases by comparing the evolution of principals' and teachers' leadership roles during the past decade and a half.

Data Source

Since the 1987–88 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education has conducted surveys of principals' and teachers' leadership in public schools. Every three school years, the staff asks a representative sample of some 9,000 principals and 50,000 public school teachers to rate, on a six-point Likert scale ranging from “no influence at all” to “a great deal of influence,” their leadership on the following schoolwide and classroom policy issues.

Schoolwide issues:

- Determining discipline policy
- Determining the content of in-service programs
- Establishing curriculum
- Hiring new full-time teachers
- Deciding how the school budget will be spent
- Evaluating teachers

Instructional issues in the classroom:

- Selecting textbooks and other instructional materials
- Selecting content, topics, and skills to be taught
- Selecting teaching techniques
- Disciplining students
- Determining the amount of homework

The following trends of principals' and teachers' leadership emerged from the survey data collected between the 1987–88 and the 1993–94 school years.⁶

Teachers' Leadership: Stagnant between the 1987–88 and the 1993–94 School Years

Table 1 (next page) displays, in each of the school years, the percentage of teachers who perceived they had much influence on some schoolwide and classroom issues. Three observations emerged from the data.

First, teachers' leadership on schoolwide issues—determining discipline policy, determining the content of in-service programs, and establishing curricula—remained stagnant over the years.

Second, regarding classroom issues, the percentage of teachers who perceived that they had much influence on determining the amount of homework and disciplining students remained the same or decreased slightly. However, the percentage of teachers who reported much influence on selecting textbooks, teaching content, and teaching techniques increased nominally between the 1987–88 and the 1993–94 school years. When we combine the evolution of teachers' leadership on schoolwide and classroom issues, it is fair to say that teachers' leadership remained stagnant over the years.

Third, from the 1987–88 to the 1993–94 school year, only about 35 percent of the teachers indicated that they had much influence on schoolwide policy issues such as setting discipline policies, determining the content of in-service programs, and establishing curriculum. However, the percentage of teachers who reported they had much influence on classroom issues ranged from 54 percent to 87 percent. Therefore, despite the rhetoric of teacher empowerment and distributive leadership, teachers still perceived that they had more influence on classroom issues than on schoolwide ones.

In summary, teachers perceived that their leadership was stagnant between the 1987–88 and the 1993–94 school years and that they had more leadership in classroom issues than in schoolwide issues.

Variation in Teacher Empowerment

Given that working conditions and cultures differ significantly in urban, suburban, and rural schools, it is interesting to inquire into possible differences in teacher empowerment in these different kinds of schools. Furthermore, the organizational structures of elementary and secondary schools differ greatly due to the nature of instructional delivery. Therefore, there might be a difference between elementary and secondary teachers in their perceived influence on schoolwide and classroom issues. Finally, teachers' characteristics, such as full-time status, tenure, and years of experience, might relate to how they perceive their influence in the school and classroom. Thus, the study investigates whether new and more experienced teachers perceive their empowerment differently.

Table 2 shows the variation in teacher empowerment by school location, school level, and years of experience. Some interesting patterns emerge

Table 1. Percentage of Teachers Perceiving They Had Much Influence on the Following Issues

Item	1987-88	1990-91	1993-94
<i>Schoolwide Issues</i>			
Determining discipline policy	35	37	35
Establishing curriculum	35	35	35
Determining the content of in-service programs	31	33	31
<i>Instructional Issues in Classroom</i>			
Determining the amount of homework	87	87	87
Selecting teaching techniques	85	87	87
Disciplining students	70	72	69
Selecting content, topics, and skills to be taught	59	60	61
Selecting textbooks and other instructional materials	54	55	55

Table 2. Variation in Teacher Empowerment: Percentage of Teachers Perceiving They Had Much Influence on the Following Issues in 1993-94

Item	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Elementary	Secondary	New*	Experienced
<i>Schoolwide Issues</i>							
Setting discipline policy	34	33	37	42	27	35	39
Determining the content of in-service programs	31	30	30	34	29	31	38
Hiring new full-time teachers	8	9	8	9	8	8	9
Deciding how the school budget will be spent	12	12	8	12	9	10	11
Evaluating teachers	3	3	3	2	3	2	5
Establishing curriculum	30	34	40	32	37	34	37
<i>Instructional Issues in Classroom</i>							
Selecting textbooks and other instructional materials	48	54	64	49	62	56	48
Selecting content, topics, and skills to be taught	55	60	67	54	67	61	60
Selecting teaching techniques	84	88	88	84	89	86	89
Evaluating and grading students	86	88	88	84	90	87	87
Disciplining students	67	69	70	71	64	69	72
Determining the amount of homework to be assigned	85	88	89	84	90	87	89

*New teachers were those who had five or less than five years of experience in teaching.

from the data. School location displays some consistent patterns with instructional issues in the classroom, but not with schoolwide issues. Basically, urban, suburban, and rural schoolteachers all reported increasing levels of empowerment over instruction-related issues such as “selecting textbooks and other instructional materials,” “selecting content, topics, and skills to be taught,” and “determining the amount of homework.” It appears that rural teachers had more power in instructional issues than their counterparts in suburban and especially urban schools. This might be related to the more formalized decision-making structure in urban schools. There is no consistent pattern to the schoolwide issues. However, it is

interesting to point out that teachers in all three kinds of schools perceived that they had much less power in schoolwide issues than they did in instructional issues.

As for school levels, secondary teachers reported more power than their elementary counterparts in curriculum- and instruction-related issues such as “establishing curriculum,” “selecting textbooks and other instructional materials,” “selecting content, topics, and skills to be taught,” “selecting teaching techniques,” and “determining the amount of homework.” However, secondary teachers reported less influence than their elementary counterparts in “setting discipline policy” and “disciplining students,” a phenomenon

that might be explained by principals' or assistant principals' responsibility for discipline-related issues in secondary schools. The data also indicate that secondary school teachers tended to have less influence than their elementary counterparts over schoolwide issues such as "determining the content of in-service programs," "hiring new full-time teachers," and "deciding how the school budget will be spent."

Given the tenure system and organizational culture, it might be expected that junior teachers would perceive themselves as less empowered than their senior counterparts. This hypothesis is confirmed by the data in which schoolwide issues were concerned. The results suggest a consistent pattern: experienced teachers reported more influence over schoolwide issues than their junior counterparts. However, where instructional issues in classrooms were concerned, the results were more mixed. Experienced teachers perceived that they had slightly more influence than their junior counterparts in "selecting teaching techniques," "disciplining students," and "determining the amount of homework to be assigned." However, new teachers perceived that they had slightly more power than their senior counterparts in "selecting textbooks and other instructional materials" and "selecting content, topics, and skills to be taught."

Analysis thus reveals some consistent patterns related to the variation in teacher empowerment. First, when curricular and instructional issues were concerned, teachers perceived an increasing level of empowerment from urban to suburban to rural schools. Second, secondary teachers felt that they had more influence over curricular and instructional issues than their elementary counterparts. Third, when some schoolwide issues were concerned, experienced teachers reported more empowerment than their junior counterparts. Finally, secondary teachers indicated much less influence than their elementary counterparts in "setting discipline policy" and "disciplining students."

Principals' Leadership: Slightly Increased between the 1987-88 and the 1993-94 School Years

Table 3 shows the percentage of principals who perceived they had much influence on schoolwide issues in each of the three school years. It is apparent that principals had more and more influence in hiring new full-time teachers and setting discipline policies from the 1987-88 to the 1993-94 school year. The percentage of principals reporting much influence on hiring new full-time faculty increased from 75 percent in 1987-88, to 82 percent in 1990-91, to 85 percent in 1993-94. The corresponding statistics for setting discipline policy increased from 81 percent in 1987-88, to 85 percent in 1990-91, to 87 percent in 1993-94. However, their leadership in establishing curriculum remained basically unchanged during the same period. This might be due to the trend of state-mandated curriculum. Therefore, principals' leadership increased slightly from the 1987-88 to the 1993-94 school year in schoolwide issues such as setting discipline policy and hiring new full-time teachers, a trend consistent with site-based management. However, only 50 percent of the principals indicated that they had much influence on establishing curriculum, and the percentage decreased slightly over the years, a development consistent with the increasingly state-mandated curriculum.

Discrepancies between How Principals and Teachers Perceived Teachers' Leadership

Some interesting patterns emerge when we compare teachers' and principals' respective perceptions of teachers' leadership on some schoolwide issues. The first pattern, as illustrated in Table 4 (next page), is that principals felt teachers had more leadership than teachers perceived themselves to have. For example, in the 1993-94 school year, 35 percent of the teachers perceived that they had much influence on establishing curriculum and setting discipline policy, but as many as 62 percent and 75 percent of the principals, respectively,

Table 3. Percentage of Principals Perceiving They Had Much Influence on Schoolwide Issues

Item	1987-88	1990-91	1993-94
Setting discipline policy	81	85	87
Hiring new full-time teachers	75	82	85
Establishing curriculum	55	49	54

perceived that teachers had much influence on establishing curriculum and setting discipline policy. The discrepancy is even greater when school budget, in-service programs, and teacher evaluation were concerned. For example, 41 percent of the principals, but only 10 percent of the teachers, reported that teachers had much influence on determining how the school budget should be spent. Similarly, 24 percent of the principals, and only 3 percent of the teachers, reported that teachers had much influence on teacher evaluation.

The second pattern emerging from the comparison is the different trajectory of teachers' leadership perceived by principals and teachers. Between the 1987-88 and the 1993-94 school years, principals felt that teachers' leadership on schoolwide issues increased considerably over the ten-year period, even though teachers themselves perceived that their leadership on schoolwide issues remained stagnant. To be more specific, for all three academic years, 35 percent of the teachers reported that they had much influence on establishing curriculum, but the percentage of principals who reported that teachers had much influence on establishing curriculum increased from 52 percent in 1987-88 to 62 percent in 1993-94. In regard to setting discipline policy, only about 35 percent of the teachers perceived that they had much influence, but the percentage of the principals who perceived teachers had much influence on setting discipline policy increased from 52 percent in 1987-88 to 75 percent in 1993-94.

It is evident that there was a discrepancy between teachers' and principals' perceptions of teachers' leadership development between the 1987-88 and the 1993-94 school years. Teachers perceived that their leadership remained stagnant over the years, while principals perceived that teachers' leadership had increased tremendously over the same period.

Summary and Discussion

The longitudinal and comparative survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics reveal the patterns of teacher and principal empowerment in our public schools. Both encouraging and discouraging patterns can be found. The encouraging aspects include teachers reporting much influence over instructional issues in their classrooms and principals feeling more empowered in the process of decentralization and site-based management despite the limited enhancement of their leadership.

However, the analysis also suggests a few major issues related to the evolution of teachers' and principals' leadership over the years. The first issue is that teachers perceived their leadership as primarily confined to classroom issues and their leadership in schoolwide issues as still weak. Furthermore, teachers perceived that their leadership remained stagnant over the years. Thus, as far as teachers' perceptions of their own leadership are concerned, the talk of teacher empowerment and distributive leadership has not been translated into practice.

The second major issue is the discrepancy between teachers' and principals' perceptions. Principals perceived that teachers' leadership increased steadily over the years, while teachers themselves indicated that their leadership remained the same. The rhetoric of teacher empowerment and shared decision-making has apparently given principals the impression that the wish has been translated into practice. However, teachers themselves felt that the proposed changes have not materialized in practice yet. To make the teachers' and principals' perceptions congruent is a daunting task facing us in this new era of school leadership.

The third major issue is related to teacher empowerment in urban, suburban, and rural schools. Urban teachers perceived that they were

Table 4. Percentage of Principals and Teachers Perceiving That Teachers Had Much Influence on the Following Issues in the 1993-94 School Year

Item	Principals	Teachers
Evaluating teachers	24	3
Hiring new teachers	33	8
Deciding how the budget is spent	41	10
Establishing curriculum	62	35
Setting discipline policy	75	35
Determining content of in-service programs	76	31

less empowered in curricular and instructional issues than their suburban and rural counterparts. The data seem to suggest that organizational structure and decision-making mechanisms tend to be more formalized in urban schools than in suburban and rural schools, which results in less-empowered teachers in urban schools. It is ironic that, given the magnitude and nature of the problems in urban schools, we expect urban teachers to be more empowered and take more initiatives in educational renewal. However, the expectation does not seem to be compatible with the more formalized decision-making mechanisms in urban schools.

The final issue is that new teachers felt less empowered than their senior counterparts. Although the finding is not unexpected given the tenure and power structure in our public schools, the disparity between junior and senior teachers in their perceptions of empowerment does raise the issue of equity in school governance. Given the fact that the turnover rate of new teachers is extremely high, it becomes ever more important to empower new teachers and treat them as professionals.⁷

In summary, the findings from the national longitudinal study indicate that although the literature is replete with the rhetoric of site-based management, teacher empowerment, and distributive leadership, teachers are still not empowered in many schoolwide policy areas. The disparity between the ideal and the practice of teacher empowerment is substantial. The findings also have implications for principals' behaviors and policymaking. Specifically, awareness of the findings from this study could assist superintendents and principals with their responsibilities for teacher empowerment and maximizing teacher empowerment. For example, principals need to involve teachers more in decision-making on many schoolwide issues. Principals may also need to adopt leadership behaviors or policies that maximize teacher empowerment. As a result, teachers, and ultimately their students and their schools, could potentially receive the full benefits of teacher empowerment. As illustrated in the literature review, the benefits of teacher empowerment include increased teacher job performance and productivity, improved teacher morale, and ultimately higher student motivation and achieve-

ment. We have a challenging task ahead of us to restructure the governance mechanism in public schools and improve teacher empowerment.

Notes

1. See, e.g., R. Aieta, R. Barth, and S. O'Brien, "The Principal in the Year 2000: A Teacher's Wish," *Clearing House* 62 (1988): 18-19; G. Anderson and A. Dixon, "Paradigm Shifts and Site-based Management in the United States: Toward a Paradigm of Social Empowerment," in J. Smith (ed.), *A Socially Critical View of the Self-managing School* (pp. 49-61) (London: Falmer, 1993); K. Leithwood, P. T. Begley, and J. B. Cousins, *Developing Expert Leadership for Future Schools* (London: Falmer, 1994); A. Lieberman (ed.), *The Changing Contexts of Teaching* (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 1992); P. Wasley, R. Hampel, and R. Clark, "The Puzzle of Whole-school Change," *Pbi Delta Kappan* 78 (1997): 690-697.
2. K. Tseo and E. L. Ramos, "Employee Empowerment: Solution to a Burgeoning Crisis?" *Challenge* 38 (1995): 25-31.
3. See, e.g., L. H. Browder, "Exploring the Meanings of Teacher Empowerment," *International Journal of Educational Reform* 3 (1994): 137-153; P. D. Daigle and D. C. Leclerc, "Turning a New Leaf: Flex Time for Teachers in a Restructured School," *NASSP Bulletin* 81 (1997): 38-43; K. Sullivan, "Stable Leadership, Time for Reflection Contribute to Momentum," *Journal of Staff Development* 16 (1995): 6-8; P. A. White, "Teacher Empowerment under 'Ideal' School-site Autonomy," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 14 (1992): 69-82.
4. See, e.g., M. Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991); K. A. Leithwood and D. J. Montgomery, *Improving Principal Effectiveness: The Principal Profile* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for the Study of Education, 1986); T. J. Sergiovanni, *The Principalship: A Reflective Practice Perspective* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1991); R. Vandenberghe, "Creative Management of a School: A Matter of Vision and Daily Interventions," *Journal of Educational Administration* 33 (1995): 31-51.
5. J. I. Goodlad and associates, *Behind the Classroom Door* (Worthington, Ohio: C.A. Jones, 1970).
6. The National Center for Education Statistics conducted The Schools and Staffing Survey in 1987-88, 1990-91, and 1993-94. Due to lack of funds, the survey was not conducted in 1996-97. The most recent survey was conducted during 1999-00, but the data will not be available until May 2001. Based on the three waves of data, we are able to ascertain the trajectories of teacher and principal empowerment.
7. See, for example, J. Shen, "Teacher Retention and Attrition in Public Schools: Evidence from SASS91," *Journal of Educational Research* 91 (1997): 81-88; and S. D. Whitener, K. J. Gruber, H. Lynch, K. Tingos, M. Perona, and S. Fondelier, *Characteristics of Stayers, Movers, and Leavers: Results from the Teacher Followup Survey: 1994-95* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1997).