Toward a Model of Student Empowerment and Empowering Academic Settings

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ABSTRACT

Schools settings can be powerful places which help prepare students for a lifetime of thriving, yet many school reform efforts have ignored how schools can be empowering settings. The current qualitative study explored ways in which schools may promote student empowerment. Results revealed key characteristics at the classroom level and school-wide. These include teachers that promote equitable relationships, sense of community, and shared decision-making in the classroom, positive and inclusive school traditions, and valued student leadership. Future directions for the project include the development of a scale to compare classrooms and schools on empowering characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

• Despite high spending, the U.S. education lags behind other countries in educational outcomes, and marked disparities exist between demographic groups on key educational indicators (Children's Defense Fund, 2010).
• While the school climate literature has identified positive elements of a school (Cohen et al., 2009), issues of power and empowerment are seldom considered. These elements are particularly critical for marginalized youth (Freire, 1970).
• As shown in Figure 1 (column 3), empowering school settings may influence student empowerment, a process by which students gain "mastery" within the academic domain. This process leads to various empowered outcomes (Zimmerman, 1995, Thomas & Velthouse, 1990, Finn, 1989).
• Previous research on empowering settings has identified safe and supportive relationships, quality, meaningful activities with adequate resources, engagement in critical analysis leading to action, and shared power with multiple roles for youth and adults as key characteristics which are associated with youth empowerment (Maton, 2008; Jennings et al., 2006).

RESEARCH QUESTION
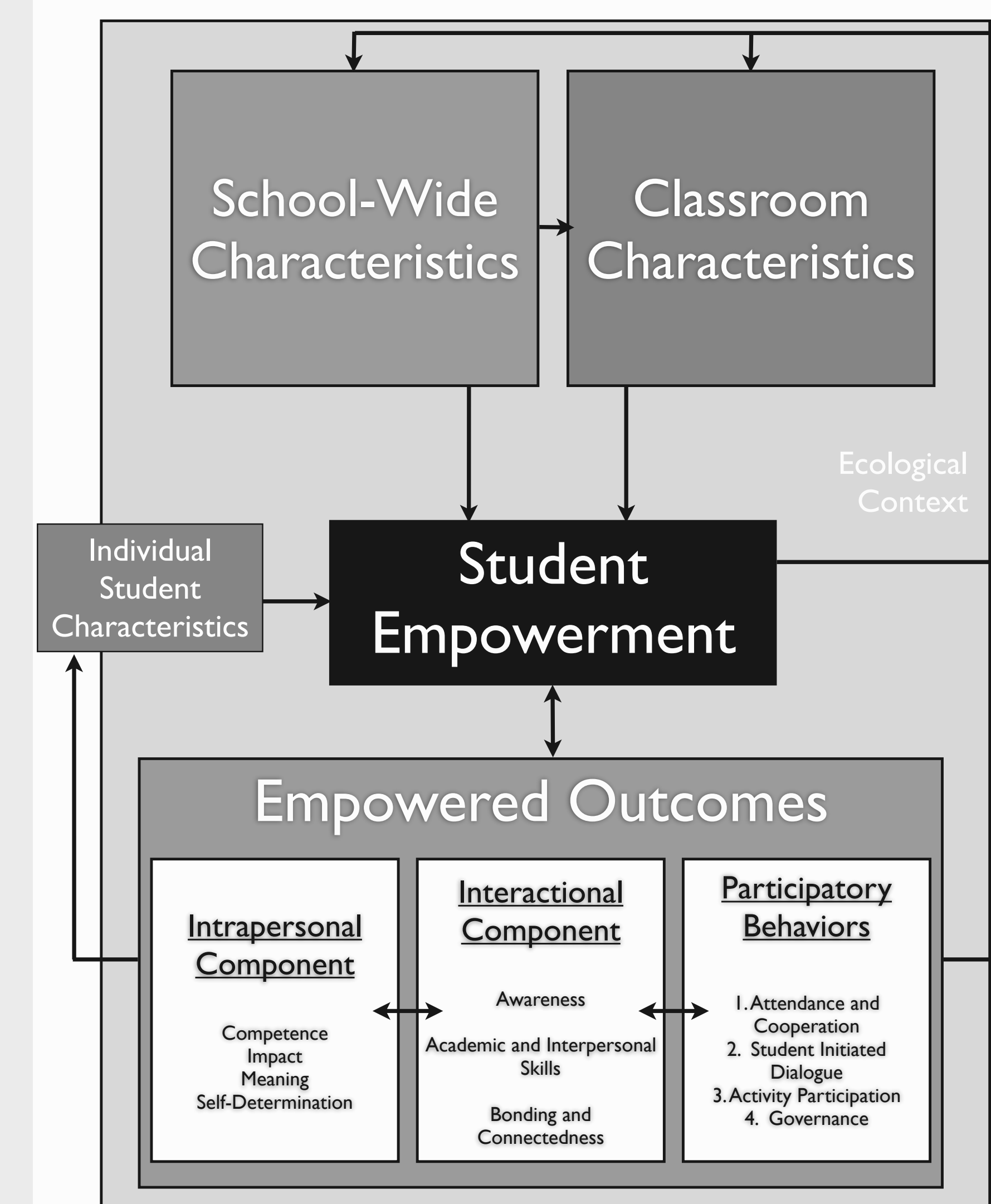
What makes schools empowering places for students?

METHODS

Setting
• One urban high school (1900+ students, 58% Hispanic/Latino, 23% ELL, & 75% economically disadvantaged)

Procedures
• Participant Observation
-- Participant team conducted observations in classrooms, hallways, lunch time, and school events
-- "Jottings" and reflections were recorded
• Focus Groups
-- Semi-structured focus groups were completed with students (5 groups, 71 students) and staff (5 groups, 39 staff).
-- Questions asked about student perceptions of school (i.e. What do you like best..?) and their favorite classes (i.e. What makes your best class good?)
-- Open coding was followed by a structured coding process.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EMPOWERING ACADEMIC SETTING

Classroom Level

Belief in Student Success	"The assumption here is that every kid that comes in this building is someone better than average" -- Teacher
	teachers "don't let you slack, but they also do it in a way that, I guess, that makes you think you can do it" --Staff Member
Equitable Teacher-Student Roles	"We allow kids to see that we are human" --Teacher
Sense of Community	"We have a very good relationship with our students, and we have a relationship with all of them."--Teacher
	"you're connected with your teachers. I mean like you're really, really close to them. You get to know them a lot...You get closer to your family"-- Student
Shared Decision Making	"The students do the work however they want. They're not being strict like saying "You're going to do it this way"--ESOL Student
	"in all the classes I've been to, I have a voice in it.....everyone's accepting and listening" -- Student
Engaging Classroom Practices	"you could just see that she was dedicated to everything. She was like "I love this book, and I'm going to show you guys how it changed my life." --Student
	"Because it was always like, here's the next thing, like there was no down time...He just had a plan and had control of the class, and everyone was like really interested." -- Student

School Level

Positive Traditions	"Our traditions are great. What other school gets to "tee pee" their own school?" -- Student
Valued Student Voice	"I don't think there's a classroom that I go to where the teacher's like "Okay guys just shut up and do what I say." I think everybody...all the teachers kinda listen to you."--Student
	"we pick a wide range [of students for the leadership group]....you're a huge mix of kids from all different parts of the building...you're all kind of different and you run a whole wide..um...scheme of the school. We have a pretty big wide range here." -- Administrator
Embraced Diversity	"We embrace our neighborhood instead of wishing it was the neighborhood that it used to be. We're in this together" -- Teacher
Empowered Staff	"We're part of planning it [a recent school change], so we're going to work hard to make it work"--Teacher
	"We have a lot of people who want to be in charge of their own destiny"--Teacher
Staff Sense of Comm.	"It takes a special teacher to be here though, cause we do have..have had teachers that they go through our system and then they won't survive in this and that department with this type of clientele" --Teacher
	"Teachers collaborate a lot across teams...We want to do what is right for kids" --Teacher
Adequate Resources	"(Our school) receives a great number of resources."--School Staff

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Student Empowerment

DISCUSSION

• The current study identified key characteristics of academic settings which are connected to student empowerment:
• Classroom characteristics emphasized the role of the teachers in establishing equitable relationships with students, building a sense of community in the classroom, and allowing students to participate in making decisions.
• School-wide characteristics emphasized the role of positive, inclusive traditions, mechanisms which encourage student leadership, and administrative policies which facilitate empowerment and a sense of community among staff.
• These characteristics build on those found in other studies on school climate (Cohen et al. 2009) and empowering settings (Maton, 2008; Jennings et al., 2006).

Limitations and Future Research

• Student and staff responses may have been subject to social desirability and the purposive sample may not be representative of all students and staff.
• Future research as part of the Empowering Schools Project will use in-depth interviews with students from marginalized groups to learn more about student empowerment and empowering settings.
• Built from this qualitative data, an Empowering Schools Survey will be created to measure these characteristics between classrooms and across schools. This will be combined with observation and academic and behavioral outcome measures.

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