Understanding teacher empowerment: Teachers' perceptions of principal's and immediate supervisor's empowering behaviours, psychological empowerment and work-related outcomes

Ai Noi Lee*, Youyan Nie

Psychological Studies Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

HIGHLIGHTS

- Both principal and teachers' immediate supervisor played key roles in empowerment.
- Perceptions of leaders' empowering behaviours predicted psychological empowerment.
- Teachers' psychological empowerment predicted teachers' work-related outcomes.
- Psychological empowerment was both a predictor variable and a mediating variable.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study examined the predictive relationships among teachers' perceptions of principal's and immediate supervisor's empowering behaviours, teachers' psychological empowerment and three teachers' work-related outcomes in terms of job satisfaction, organisational commitment and professional commitment. 304 teachers in Singapore participated in this study. Results from path analysis indicated that the four dimensions of psychological empowerment (i.e. 'meaning', 'competence', 'autonomy', and 'impact') mediated the relationships between teachers' perceptions of immediate supervisor's empowering behaviours and teachers' work-related outcomes. However, only 'meaning', 'autonomy' and 'impact' dimensions of psychological empowerment mediated the relationships between teachers' perceptions of principal's empowering behaviours and teachers' work-related outcomes.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Teacher empowerment is increasingly gaining attention among scholars and practitioners across educational contexts due to its positive associations with a number of teachers' work-related outcomes, such as teaching quality and innovation, teacher leadership, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and professional commitment, which could further impact on classroom improvement and school effectiveness (e.g., Bogler & Somech, 2004; Dee, Henkin, & Duemer, 2003; Erawan, 2008; Ghani, Hussin, & Jusoff, 2009; Lee, Yin, Zhang, & Jin, 2011; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Short & Rinehart, 1992; Wan, 2005; Zembylas &

Papanastasiou, 2005). A basic assumption of teacher empowerment is that teachers are autonomous professionals who are willing to perform their best at work when they feel intrinsically motivated and satisfied (e.g., Dee et al., 2003; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Wan, 2005). Accordingly, advocates see an imperative need for school leaders to adopt a more empowering approach of management to facilitate teacher empowerment effectively (e.g., Blase & Blase, 1996; Blase & Blase, 1997; Rinehart, Short, Short, & Eckley, 1998; Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2010). However, there still exist several issues which deserve greater empirical attention in order to gain a better understanding of teacher empowerment as a school practice.

First, previous teacher empowerment research tended to examine the social structural influences in the teachers' work context and teachers' psychological functioning in separate studies (e.g., Ghani et al., 2009; Sagnak, 2012; Vecchio et al., 2010). As a result, the relationship between the social structural and

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: ainoi@yahoo.com (A.N. Lee).

psychological processes of empowerment, particularly in terms of school leaders' empowering behaviours and teachers' psychological empowerment, is largely underexplored. Second, previous research has not given sufficient attention to teachers' psychological empowerment as a potential mediator in the teacher empowerment process. An understanding of the mediating role of teachers' psychological empowerment could help to clarify how social structural influences such as school leaders' empowering behaviours might directly or indirectly affect teachers' work-related outcomes. Third, although both the principal (i.e. head-of-school) and teachers' immediate supervisor (i.e. head-of-department/subject head at the middle-level management) may play instrumental roles in teacher empowerment, previous research has tended to focus predominantly on the influence of the principal and neglect the influence of teachers' immediate supervisor in the empowerment process (Lee & Nie, 2013). Given the positional authority of the principal and the close working relationship between individual teachers and their respective immediate supervisors in the day-to-day school practice, how teachers perceive and interpret their principal's and immediate supervisor's empowering behaviours would likely have a crucial impact on teachers' psychological empowerment and work-related outcomes (e.g., Lee & Nie, 2013). This thus suggests an empirical need to differentiate between teachers' perceptions of principal's and immediate supervisor's empowering behaviours and explicitly clarify their unique and joint influences on teachers' psychological empowerment and work-related outcomes.

To address the above-mentioned issues, the present study aimed to (1) propose a theoretical framework of teacher empowerment by integrating both the social structural and psychological perspectives of empowerment to gain a more comprehensive understanding of teacher empowerment as an integrated process; (2) examine the predictive relationships among teachers' perceptions of principal's and immediate supervisor's empowering behaviours, teachers' psychological empowerment and teachers' work-related outcomes in terms of their job satisfaction, organisational commitment and professional commitment; and (3) examine the mediating role of teachers' psychological empowerment to determine how it might affect the relationship between teachers' perceptions of principal's and immediate supervisor's empowering behaviours and teachers' work-related outcomes. Findings of this study could provide useful insights to inform teacher empowerment research and practice.

1.1. The social structural and psychological perspectives of empowerment

Despite a growing interest in adopting teacher empowerment as a school effectiveness strategy (e.g., Dee et al., 2003; Erawan, 2008; Maeroff, 1988; Short & Greer, 1997; Wan, 2005), there still exists a vague understanding of the concept and process of teacher empowerment (e.g., Prawat, 1991). This is mainly because teacher empowerment, being a broad concept, has often been defined or conceptualised differently by various educational scholars and practitioners for use in different contexts (e.g., Lee et al., 2011; Prawat, 1991). For instance, Bolin (1989) defined teacher empowerment as "investing teachers with the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and to exercise professional judgement about what and how to teach" (p. 82). Short, Greer, and Melvin (1994) defined teacher empowerment as "a process whereby school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems" (p. 38). Sweetland and Hoy (2000) defined teacher empowerment in terms of "teachers' power to control critical decisions about teaching and learning conditions" (p. 703). Teacher empowerment

has also been conceptualised as teachers' participation in school decision-making (e.g., Rice & Schneider, 1994; Wadesango, 2010), delegation of authority to teachers (e.g., Hoy & Miskel, 2005) and teachers' autonomy (e.g., Lightfoot, 1986; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

Although the variations in the definitions or conceptualisations of teacher empowerment could pose a challenge for gaining a more coherent view of teacher empowerment (e.g., Lee et al., 2011; Prawat, 1991), from a review of the empirical research of teacher empowerment, it is generally observed that most of the studies have approached teacher empowerment from two main perspectives: *social structural* and *psychological*.

The social structural perspective of empowerment takes into account that the teachers' work environmental factors may directly or indirectly influence how teachers assess their work roles and the tasks they do (e.g., Dee et al., 2003; Spreitzer, 1996; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). Often, studies taking this perspective tend to view empowerment as an act of a school leader or a practice of the school management which involves the granting of power to the teacher(s) being empowered (e.g., Sagnak, 2012; Vecchio et al., 2010). For instance, Vecchio et al. (2010) found that school leaders' empowering behaviours were associated with a higher level of teacher performance and satisfaction as well as reduced dysfunctional resistance. Sagnak (2012) reported that principals' empowering behaviour was a significant predictor of innovative climate and teachers' innovative behaviours. Zembylas and Papanastasiou (2005) found that social structural factors such as decision-making, promotion, and status were associated with teachers' job satisfaction.

The psychological perspective of empowerment is usually defined as an individual's psychological state which manifests itself as four cognitions: *meaning, competence, autonomy*, and *impact* (Spreitzer, 1995, 1996). '*Meaning*' refers to a fit between the needs of one's work role and one's beliefs, values and behaviours (Hackman & Oldham, 1980); '*competence*' refers to self-efficacy specific to one's work, or a belief in one's capability to perform work activities with skill (Bandura, 1977; Gist, 1987); '*autonomy*' refers to a sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's actions (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989); and '*impact*' refers to the degree to which one can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes at work (Ashforth, 1989). Thus, psychological empowerment is closely associated with an individual's intrinsic work motivation, and the four cognitions of psychological empowerment reflect an active orientation towards one's work role (Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Specifically in the educational settings, Moye, Henkin, and Egley (2005) reported that teachers who found their work personally meaningful and who reported significant autonomy and substantial influence in their work environments had higher levels of interpersonal trust in their principals. Dee et al. (2003) found that teachers' sense of meaning, autonomy and impact, but not competence, had positive relations with teachers' organisational commitment. Ghani et al. (2009) found that psychological empowerment was a significant predictor of lecturers' innovative behaviours in Malaysian private higher education institutions.

In addition, we also found some studies which examined teacher empowerment as a single construct without explicitly differentiating between the social structural and psychological processes in predicting teachers' work-related outcomes (e.g., Bogler & Somech, 2004; Lee et al., 2011; Wu & Short, 1996). These studies mostly adapted Short and Rinehart's (1992) conceptualisation of teacher empowerment and their School Participant Empowerment Scale (SPES) which consists of six dimensions: decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact. For instance, Bogler and Somech (2004) studied a