

RESEARCH REPORT

INFLUENCES OF EMPOWERMENT DIMENSIONS IN AN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION AMONGST MALTESE TEACHERS

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Abstract – *The need for more decentralised and teacher-focused managerial school systems in Malta has long been felt. Although there have been attempts in the literature to address this issue within the Maltese context, empirical research in this area of empowerment has been relatively less frequent. This study investigated the relative influences of four empowerment dimensions on salient work-related outcome behaviours, namely intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, intention to turnover, commitment and job frustration amongst a sample of 120 Maltese teachers in state schools. Multiple regression analyses were performed on the data and showed that job involvement contributed highly on nearly all outcome behaviours while decision latitude, when compared to the remaining three empowerment dimensions, hardly contributed significantly. Practical implications and limitations of the study are also included.*

Introduction

Empowerment has attracted a larger diversity of opinion than most other management trends in recent years (Clutterback, 1994; Denham, 1994). Even so, some social psychologists believe that within the context of today's continuous organisational development, empowerment cannot have an exact technical meaning. Reitzug (1994) has argued that much of the literature regarding empowerment advocates a narrow conception of the term. Kinlaw (1995) believes that empowerment deals with popular ideas such as 'letting people closest to a problem solve the problem', 'letting teams manage themselves' and 'trusting people to do the right thing'. Burdett (1996) and others (e.g. Macy, 1983; Rapaport, 1981) argue that empowerment involves the 'voluntary transfer of [partial] ownership of a task... [whereby]... ownership involves the combination of authority, responsibility and accountability' (p.33).

Within the Maltese schooling contexts, attempts have been going on to introduce more self-management schemes amongst school teachers and this need

has been documented through review articles by Bezzina (1997) and Sergiovanni (1997). However, there has been relatively less attempt to investigate the influence of psychological dimensions of empowerment, namely 'decision latitude', 'job responsibility', 'job involvement' and 'enabling environment' (cf. Short and Rinehart, 1992; White, 1992), on attitudinal outcomes amongst Maltese teachers:

1. **Decision latitude:** Karasek (1989) defines decision latitude as the employee's authority to make decisions on the job. Crawford and Nonis (1996) and Mercer and Evans (1991) indicated a positive relationship between decision latitude and job satisfaction. Others (e.g. Punch and Tuettemann, 1990; Sharp and Childs, 1992; White, 1992) found that a lack of teacher influence in school events correlated highly with teacher distress, low morale and demotivation.

2. **Job responsibility:** Job responsibility may be defined as one's degree of accountability vis-a-vis one's job performance standards. Research (e.g. Keedy and Finch, 1994; Southworth, 1993) has generally found that improving responsibility amongst teachers tends to improve the level of self-efficacy and motivation. Bezzina and Gatt (1992) also showed that Maltese teachers in their sample generally wished to be given more responsibility in the actual design of class programmes.

3. **Job involvement:** Jans (1982) has defined job involvement as a feeling of psychological identification with one's particular job. Within the school environment, Washington (1993) found that high levels of job involvement contributed to better acceptance of necessary administrative changes in the school system.

4. **Enabling environment:** Burdett (1996) defines this concept as one in which 'empowerment boundaries are set, but the policies, procedures, rules and practices of the organisation do not hamper the transfer of full ownership' (p.33). Mercer and Evans (1991) suggest that an impoverished physical and social environment is likely to flourish feelings of job dissatisfaction. Other studies sustain such findings. Similarly, Punch and Tuettemann (1990) found that teachers with little or no access to basic teaching facilities showed increased levels of distress.

This brief literature review therefore indicates that all the above four empowerment dimensions should contribute and are related to important outcomes and attitudes amongst teachers. This study primarily investigated these replications in the Maltese educational context.

Method

Research settings and participants

The research sites for this study were both from the primary and secondary sectors. Four Maltese state schools from each level were chosen randomly and the necessary research data were collected from all teachers employed in the resulting eight Maltese public schools. This was done in order to ensure an equal representation of teachers working at the primary and at the secondary level.

From a total of 150 questionnaires that were distributed, 120 (80%) returned their questionnaire in full. The sample consisted of 58 males and 62 females. On average, the age of the respondents was 37.0 years (SD=12.4; range: 21 to 58 years). The average tenure of this sample in the educating profession was 12.3 years (SD=11.0; range: 1 to 40 years). 40 per cent of the respondents were primary school teachers while 60 per cent were secondary school teachers. The majority of the sample (34.2%) were in a possession of a college teaching certificate whereas the remaining were BEd(Hons) graduates (32.5%), PGCE graduates (18.3%), casual teachers or instructors (10%) and non-PGCE graduates (5%) (e.g. BSc or BA).

Measures

Predictor variables:

Decision latitude was measured using Karasek's (1985) 9-item 'decision latitude' scale. *Job responsibility* was measured by using four items out of the 6-item measure of 'experienced responsibility for work outcomes' by Hackman and Oldham (1975). *Job involvement* was measured by using Jan's (1982) sub-scale of 'work involvement'. For *enabling environment* no specific useful measure could be found. Therefore, an 8-item measure was developed on the basis of the literature review (inter-item correlational analysis was significant at $p < .05$). The items cover various aspects of enabling environment ranging from other professionals' feedback about one's work to the access of physical aids for teaching.

Work-related outcome behaviours:

Five such variables were assessed in this study. The first, *intrinsic work motivation*, was measured using Warr, Cook and Wall's (1979) 6-item measure. The second, *job satisfaction* was measured using Bentley and Rempel's (1980) 20-item 'teacher's job satisfaction' scale. The third, *intention to turnover* (i.e.

leave), was measured by Camman et al.'s 'withdrawal cognitions' 3-item subscale. The fourth, *commitment*, was measured using O'Reilly and Chatman's (1986) 'organisational commitment' 12-item questionnaire. The last, *job frustration*, was assessed using Peters, O'Connor and Rudolf's (1980) 3-item measure.

All nine above measures were scored on a five-point scale from 1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*. Some items were reversed scored and for each dimension, items were added to yield a global measure for that particular dimension. Higher scores represented higher levels for each of the nine variables.

Procedure

This study was based on a survey questionnaire that was finalised after conducting a pilot study. The distribution and gathering process of the survey package took place during November 1997. Eight teachers, one from each school, served as contacted persons and were responsible for the distribution and collection of the survey packages which were sealed in envelopes to maintain confidentiality.

Results

Correlational analysis

In order to analyse the relationships between the empowerment dimensions and teachers' work-related outcome behaviours, correlations and regression analyses were used. In order to obtain a first impression of the relationships between the four empowerment dimensions and the five work-related outcome behaviours, Pearson Product Moment correlations were calculated.

A large number of correlations appear to be statistically significant, some of the coefficients being rather high. In addition, significant correlations are in the expected direction.

Decision latitude, job responsibility and job involvement correlated very significantly with all five behavioural outcomes. Teachers generally appear to score higher on motivation, job satisfaction and commitment if their job offers them better opportunities to make more self-decisions, be more responsible for their class and school activities and if they are given better opportunities to share in the school's general management. Similarly, teachers appear to report higher levels of frustration and intention to leave their job if the above three

Table 1. Pearson-Product Moment correlations for all study variables ^a

Variable	Mean	SD	Range of scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Decision latitude	32.0	4.7	9-45	(.57)								
2. Job responsibility	15.6	2.9	4-20	.41**	(.71)							
3. Job involvement	15.3	2.4	9-45	.52**	.55**	(.73)						
4. Enabling environment	24.4	4.8	9-45	.25**	.19*	.19*	(.60)					
5. Intrinsic motivation	25.4	2.8	6-30	.30*	.40**	.49**	.04	(.80)				
6. Job satisfaction	76.3	10.2	20-100	.47**	.49**	.62**	.25**	.45**	(.72)			
7. Intention to turnover	5.6	2.9	3-15	-.31**	-.33**	-.53**	-.12	-.37**	-.64**	(.81)		
8. Commitment	36.7	6.1	12-60	.41**	.43**	.58**	.40**	.27**	.59**	-.50**	(.93)	
9. Job frustration	8.4	2.9	3-15	-.25**	-.36**	-.34**	-.35**	-.04	-.53**	.42**	-.45**	(.61)

^aN = 120 cases

*p < .05 ; **p < .01

Note: Cronbach's alpha (α) for each study variable is in brackets in the matrix

empowerment dimensions were perceived as being low. On the other hand, enabling environment failed to correlate significantly with both intrinsic motivation ($r = .04$, $p=n.s.$) and intention to turnover ($r = -.12$, $p=n.s.$) although it correlated highly ($p < .01$) with the remaining outcome behaviours.

Regression analyses

After the calculation of these correlations, multiple regression analyses of intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, intention to turnover, commitment and frustration were performed with the four empowerment dimensions. Before the analysis all predictor variables were subject to testing for multicollinearity effects. The tolerance measure was used to assess multicollinearity effects. A high tolerance signifies that multicollinearity is insignificant. Tolerance values for all predictor variable in this study ranged from .65 to .90 thus indicating that multicollinearity was not a major nuisance in the results that follow. The results show that overall, the four dimension variables made a relatively big influence on the explained variance of each outcome, ranging from 43 per cent for job satisfaction to 20 per cent for job frustration. In fact, in all five cases the regression model was significant (p for $F < .001$). Generally speaking, the results of the four regression analyses are in line with the results of the correlational analysis.

When the results for the work-related behavioural outcomes are compared, not all significantly empowerment dimensions are selected in the regression analysis. The empowerment dimensions *not* selected apparently have relatively lower univariate correlations with the respective outcomes while the selected empowerment dimensions have much higher correlations. Hence insignificant beta weights do not imply that these variables are not important to the particular outcome but that their relative contribution is less or insignificant when compared to the contribution made by other empowerment dimensions.

Thus, starting with intrinsic motivation, job involvement was the best statistical predictor for this behavioural outcome followed marginally, but not significantly, by job responsibility ($p < .06$). In the case of job satisfaction, the variable job involvement was again the best predictor for this outcome followed relatively less significantly by job responsibility and marginally insignificantly by decision latitude ($p < .07$). In the case of intention to turnover the highest relative statistical predictor was job involvement while the other three empowerment dimensions made relatively insignificant contributions. For job commitment, the empowerment dimensions job involvement and enabling environment contributed very significantly for the explained variance of this outcome. Relatively no contribution is reported by job responsibility and decision latitude. Finally, the

variance for job frustration was significantly explained by enabling environment and relatively less significantly by job responsibility. Thus, job involvement outperformed all the other three empowerment dimensions in explaining important work-related outcomes except for job frustration.

Discussion

Summary and interpretation of the results

Overall, the results of this study support the general hypothesis that the four empowerment dimensions are related to relevant work-related outcome behaviours. The correlational results indicated clearly that improvements in particular job conditions that gave a higher degree of initiative and self-management to teachers' role in the class and in the school was associated strongly to positive work-related outcomes (i.e. intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction and commitment) and diminished the chances of higher scores on more negative work-related outcomes (i.e. intention to turnover and job frustration). These relationships were consistent both with theory (e.g. White, 1992) and with previous empirical findings (e.g. Crawford and Nonis, 1996; Punch and Tuettemann, 1990).

With regards to the relative importance of each empowerment dimension, the regression analysis consistently showed that **job involvement** across four of the outcomes was the most significant statistical predictor, implying that teachers in this study heavily associated job involvement as being the most important job empowerment variable that is related to important work-outcome behaviours. The importance of job involvement has been previously highlighted by findings of Washington (1993). This is consistent also with Bezzina and Gatt's (1992) findings who reported that the situation was such that only a minority of teachers actively contributed in their schools' curricular designs and hence shows the need to give this area more consideration.

These findings about job involvement suggest that if teachers are not involved enough in their school organisation, they have less opportunity to express their feelings about their work and this may lead to a loss of role-identification which undermines commitment and other outcomes (Prentice, 1990). In Malta the majority of school policies are traditionally taken in a top-down fashion without substantial consultation with teachers. The National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) introduced about ten years ago is a case in point. Designed by the central authorities with little teacher involvement, it resulted in a set of purely prescriptive norms which teachers had to follow even if they did not correspond to the specific

Table 2. Multiple regression results for outcome variables in the study ^a

Predictor Variables	Outcome Variables								
	Intrinsic motivation			Job satisfaction			Intention to turnover		
	Beta	t	Sign. ^b	Beta	t	Sign.	Beta	t	Sign.
1. Decision latitude	.048	0.50	.62	.153	1.83	.07	-.040	-0.42	.68
2. Job responsibility	.183	1.89	.06	.175	2.07	.04	-.054	-0.56	.57
3. Job involvement	.383	3.71	.00	.427	4.74	.00	-.475	-4.64	.00
4. Enabling environment	-.082	-0.99	.32	.095	1.32	.19	-.008	-0.10	.92
R squared	.27			.45			.28		
Adj. R squared	.25			.43			.26		
Model Significance (F)	10.79			23.22			11.30		
			.00			.00			.00

^a N = 120^b Figures in bold indicate significant effects for both lower terms and model effects where the highest degree of significance is adjusted to .05

Table 2 (cont.). Multiple regression results for outcome variables in the study^a

Predictor Variables	Outcome Variables					
	Commitment			Job frustration		
	Beta	t	Sign. ^b	Beta	t	Sign.
1. Decision latitude	.076	0.89	.37	-.010	-0.11	.91
2. Job responsibility	.121	1.41	.16	-.210	-2.10	.04
3. Job involvement	.416	4.58	.00	-.172	-1.62	.11
4. Enabling environment	.278	3.82	.00	-.274	-3.23	.00
R squared	.43			.23		
Adj. R squared	.42			.20		
Model Significance (F)	22.17			8.76		
			.00			.00

^a N = 120

^b Figures in bold indicate significant effects for both lower terms and model effects where the highest degree of significance is adjusted to .05

needs of particular classes. Bezzina (1997) rightly argues that: 'This approach to induce curriculum by centralist strategies helped a dependency culture already deeply embedded in our profession' (p. 16).

The other strong contributor in the regression analyses was **enabling environment**. The results showed that teachers were also likely to be more committed to their job if their physical and social school environment was equipped adequately to meet the needs and facilitate the teacher's activities. This empowerment variable also predicted statistically that job frustration could be reduced if there was the proper working environment in the school. These findings are consistent with previous research about the importance of this dimension, such as has been reported by Punch and Tuettemann (1990).

The third variable that revealed a significant contribution for at least two outcome behaviours was **job responsibility**. According to Johnson (1994) 'disempowered employees may resist empowerment. They feel safer in the old culture where they had lower levels of responsibility and accountability' (p. 17). From a local point of view, Saccasan and Sciberras (1994) found that 90 per cent of a sample of Maltese teachers felt that they were responsible for all the decisions they take but these were not necessarily related to enhanced positive behavioural outcomes. The message is thus that high levels of responsibility may actually *undermine* positive outcomes. This is contrary to the findings in this study which generally showed that higher responsibility was related to higher positive outcomes. One explanation for this seemingly opposite result is that the concept of responsibility, as explained in Johnson (1994) and studied by Sacassan and Sciberras (1994), had a different connotation from that used in this study. The 'responsibility' concept in this latter study referred to the fact that teachers were accountable if things go wrong whereas in the present study 'responsibility' emphasised more a *a priori* decision-taking and pro-active role approach. Furthermore, it needs to be appreciated that job responsibility has to be entrusted and increased only as part of a larger empowerment strategy taking into consideration that other variables in the educational system need to change before accommodating 'new ways of doing things'.

Practical implications of the findings

The results of this study cannot be analysed in a vacuum but only with reference to a particular context; in this case the educational context. While this study acknowledges the fact that Maltese school management systems can benefit greatly from knowledge obtained from foreign sources and adapted to the local scenario, this study also indicates the need to emphasise more the benefit that local

research can make to our *local* educational context. Such empirical attempts would help school organisations to match better local needs on the basis of local findings.

Furthermore, the study implies the need for more openness for change. Usually, Maltese head teachers, in line with conservative educational traditions direct the day-to-day running of 'their' school, while the teacher, occupying the lower stratum of the educational system, are restricted to just delivering the curriculum to students. Vella (1996) has written that: 'Head teachers end up having to become jack-of-all trades, ready to cope with both the unpredictable and the mundane tasks' (p. 61). In order to ameliorate the present situation, head teachers must learn therefore to become effective reflective thinkers rather than just traditional professional bureaucrats . They must be courageous enough to experiment with new ideas and ways of behaviour if they want their schools to become more effective.

Limitations of the study

This study is not short of limitations. The most significant are the following: First, the results in this study are based on a relatively small sample. In addition, the survey was conducted only amongst primary and secondary state schools. Both limitations need to be taken into consideration with regards to their generalisation. Another limitation is that this is a cross-sectional study and certainly cannot claim issues of causality. Finally, having used only a single questionnaire to collect all the data, some of the results obtained might have been effected by common method variance.

Conclusion

Despite the various limitations, this preliminary study investigated the relationship between Maltese teachers' affective and attitudinal work outcomes with dimensions of empowerment. The results cannot but emphasise the importance of enhancing teachers' degree of self-sufficiency to improve present educational management systems. Obviously, restructuring the Maltese school system towards such a management culture is a long-term undertaking which will imply taking strong decisions and courage; an approach based on systematic planning and professional intervention grounded on clear managerial objectives.

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