

1-2-2017

## Teacher Empowerment: A Focused Ethnographic Study in Brunei Darussalam

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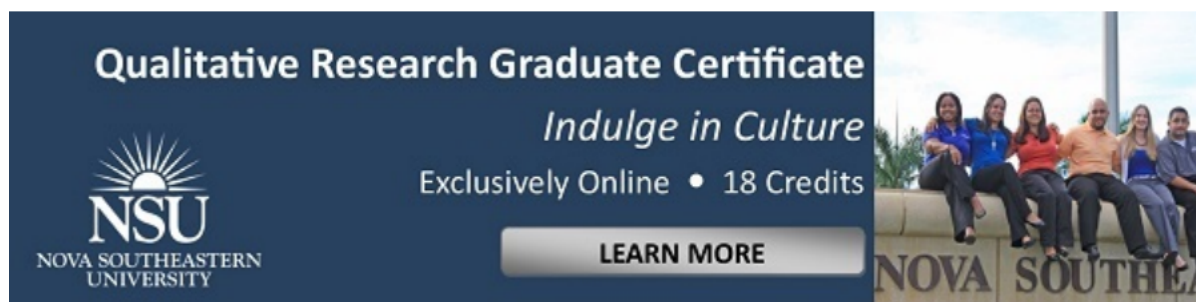
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### Recommended APA Citation

Thomas, S. (2017). Teacher Empowerment: A Focused Ethnographic Study in Brunei Darussalam. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(1), 47-72. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2587>

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### Abstract

Teacher empowerment, as a process that enables teachers' intrinsic motivation and brings out their innate potential, is of critical importance in modern times. However, the teacher empowerment construct in existing education literature originated in the west, and its dimensions are aligned to the western cultural scenario. The purpose of this study was to understand the behaviours of school leaders, teacher colleagues, students as well as their parents, and themselves, that teachers perceived as empowerment-facilitating and/or empowerment impeding. This study took place in a secondary school in Brunei Darussalam, a private secondary school. This study was designed as a 'focused ethnography', a methodological adaptation of the conventional anthropological ethnography. Fieldwork took place over a span of six months. The study concluded that teacher empowerment is relevant to non-western contexts, only if it is adapted to the contextual cultures. Finally, this study asserted that teacher empowerment is a self-driven phenomenon, and that the contextual culture decided the nature and extent of empowerment that can possibly take place in a particular setting.

### Keywords

Teacher Empowerment, Focused Ethnography, Ethnography, Brunei Darussalam, Culture

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### Acknowledgements

This research was undertaken with the Graduate Research Scholarship awarded by the Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei Darussalam.

## **Teacher Empowerment: A Focused Ethnographic Study in Brunei Darussalam**

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*Teacher empowerment, as a process that enables teachers' intrinsic motivation and brings out their innate potential, is of critical importance in modern times. However, the teacher empowerment construct in existing education literature originated in the west, and its dimensions are aligned to the western cultural scenario. The purpose of this study was to understand the behaviours of school leaders, teacher colleagues, students as well as their parents, and themselves, that teachers perceived as empowerment-facilitating and/or empowerment impeding. This study took place in a secondary school in Brunei Darussalam, a private secondary school. This study was designed as a 'focused ethnography', a methodological adaptation of the conventional anthropological ethnography. Fieldwork took place over a span of six months. The study concluded that teacher empowerment is relevant to non-western contexts, only if it is adapted to the contextual cultures. Finally, this study asserted that teacher empowerment is a self-driven phenomenon, and that the contextual culture decided the nature and extent of empowerment that can possibly take place in a particular setting. Keywords: Teacher Empowerment, Focused Ethnography, Ethnography, Brunei Darussalam, Culture*

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Teacher empowerment, as a process that enables teachers' intrinsic motivation, and brings out their best potential (Spreitzer, 2007), assumes relevance and significance in modern times as studies around the world present a dismal picture of teacher motivation (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; Richardson, 2014; Riggs, 2013; Weale, 2015). However, the teacher empowerment construct as it exists now in education literature was conceptualised in western cultural scenarios, and its cultural relevance and applicability in non-western cultural contexts is not well-understood (Spreitzer, 2007, Yochim, 2004). Indeed, school reforms involving teacher empowerment in non-western contexts such as China and Hong Kong have not been successful to the desired extent, since the organisational changes involved were not acceptable in the local culture (Chan, 1998; Lin, 2014; Steyn & Squelch, 1997; Wan, 2005; Wang, 2013; Wong, 2006). This points to the need to identify a more localized approach, aligned to the local cultural context, in understanding teacher empowerment (Klidas, 2002; Spreitzer, 2007).

This article reports a study that was undertaken in response to the above-mentioned need to "reconstruct" teacher empowerment so that it aligns with the culture of local, non-western contexts. This study aimed to understand teachers' perceptions of the empowerment-facilitating and empowerment-impeding behaviours engaged in by school leaders, colleagues, parents, students, and the teachers themselves, in the cultural context of a private secondary school in Brunei Darussalam.

## Background

### The Context

This study took place in Brunei Darussalam, a relatively newly independent postcolonial nation-state in South East Asia. The Monarchical Government of Brunei places great importance on developing its educational field. In its long term development plan, Brunei Vision 2035, a key goal is for the Brunei society to be recognised as educated and highly skilled, as per the highest international standards. HIS Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah, the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei, in his "Titah" on New Year's eve, said, "multiplied efficacy in teaching and learning" (Kamit, 2015), is necessary to achieve the key goal on the educational front. In the *Ministry of Education (MoE) Strategic Plan 2012-2017* (Ministry of Education, 2012), teachers are given the major responsibility to provide education comparable to the highest international standards, so that the country progresses towards accomplishing "Brunei Vision 2035."

The study setting was a private secondary school called Excelsior (pseudonym), which is a "Chinese" school in the sense that (a) it is run and financed by the local Chinese community, (b) the Chinese language is taught as a subject there, and (c) Chinese students are the majority (Tan, 2013). The secondary teachers in this school were the participants of this study. They were a group of 21 individuals of diverse nationalities: 7 Indian, 2 Filipino, 2 Iban (a tribe in Borneo), 6 Chinese, and 4 Malay.

### The Cultural Context

Excelsior school, the setting of this study, is situated in a predominantly Malay-Islamic context, but it is also a Chinese community school, with the management, some teachers, and most of the students belonging to the local Chinese community. Also, as mentioned above, the 21 teachers in Excelsior who participated in the study were from different countries in Asia: India, The Philippines, Malaysia, China, and Brunei. Thus, Asian culture is pervasive in the context, with Chinese and Malay Islamic cultures being dominant.

Therefore, it is useful to adopt the cultural dimensions theory of Hofstede (2011), who identified five cultural values comparing different countries. According to this, "high power distance" and "collectivism" were associated with Asian countries in general. Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of a society expect and accept power inequalities, whereas collectivism is the tendency for people to consider themselves as being integral parts of groups, rather than individuals. Another dichotomy observed is that westerners' perceptions tend to be independent of the context while Asians perceptions are dependent on and in relationship with the context (Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005). Added to these are the Chinese Confucian and Buddhist cultures and the broader Malay Islamic societal culture of Brunei.

### The Teacher Empowerment Construct

Teacher empowerment has been conceptualised in various ways in education literature, but within the last two decades, there have been many attempts to integrate them (Boonyarit, Chomphupart, & Arin, 2010; Kahles, 2015; Lee & Nie, 2014; Maynard, Gilson, & Mathieu, 2012; Spreitzer, 2007). Following these scholars, it is possible to view teacher empowerment as a process in which certain organisational and social behaviours (Heck & Brandon, 1995; Short, 1994; Spreitzer, 2007), facilitate the generation of intrinsic motivation in a teacher

(Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), which may lead to teachers functioning at optimal capability as they bring out their inner potential (Bernstein, 2003; Harwell, 2003). This process is iterative, since positive empowerment outcomes may encourage more of the enabling organizational factors such as teachers' involvement in decision making. This conceptualization of teacher empowerment closely follows the theoretical framework that Lee and Nie (2014) proposed, including both social structural and psychological empowerment, and outcomes.

### **Empirical Research on Teacher Empowerment**

Empirical research on teacher empowerment till date falls largely under four broad categories: First, there are studies that explore the relationship of teacher empowerment to a host of organizational variables such as job satisfaction (e.g., Amoli & Youran, 2014; Bogler & Nir, 2012; Cypert, 2009; Kirika, 2011; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Rinehart & Short, 1994). Secondly, there are studies that deal with the perceptions on empowerment, of teachers and/or school leaders (e.g., Coble, 2010; Gardenhour, 2008; Keiser & Shen, 2000; Weshah, 2012; Klecker & Loadman, 1998a, 1998b). Thirdly, there are studies that explore empowering leadership and other empowering/disempowering practices in schools (e.g. Leech, 1999; Kirgan, 2009; Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009; Sagnak, 2012). Finally, there have been sporadic studies in some non-western countries, critically evaluating teacher empowerment efforts in their cultural context (e.g., Boey, 2010; Dardjowidjojo, 2001; Kao, 2015; Tat, 1997; Wan, 2005; Wong, 2006). This last category of studies concluded that empowerment efforts were hindered to some extent by the strongly rooted cultural values of the study context. However, there has not been, to the best of my knowledge, any study that set out to understand why such a hindrance was experienced, and how teacher empowerment and its dimensions are understood in non-western contexts.

This gap in existing literature had been felt for quite some time. In 2007, Spreitzer pointed out that little research had been done across cultural boundaries, where the empowerment dimensions might look very different from a western context. Klidas (2002) has asserted that empowerment is

...clearly the cultural product of the American culture, which is not invariably embraced outside Anglo-Saxon cultures. This primarily stresses the role of cultural divergence in shaping culture-specific attitudes and behaviours at work and underlines the need to be cautious with the transfer of management concepts across national borders. There is therefore a need for a more localised approach to the application of empowerment, which should take into account and eventually adjust to the specific cultural context of each country. (p. 8)

### **The Study**

*The research questions that guided the study were:*

- 1) What empowerment-facilitating and empowerment-impeding behaviours of *school leaders* do teachers perceive in their work lives?
- 2) What empowerment-facilitating and empowerment-impeding behaviours of *colleagues* in the school do teachers perceive in their work lives?
- 3) What empowerment-facilitating and empowerment-impeding behaviours of *their own selves* do teachers perceive in their work lives?

## Method

This study made use of focused ethnography as its method of enquiry. Focused ethnography is an adaptation of the conventional anthropological ethnography, which is essentially a cultural interpretation of phenomena under study (Creswell, 2013; Fetterman, 2010; Wolcott, 1987). Since its roots are in conventional ethnography, focused ethnography retains the essential spirit and many of the distinctive features of ethnography (Cruz & Higginbottom, 2013). Cultural interpretation still remains the objective of the study. Multiple methods of collection of data (i.e., participant observation, interviews and scrutiny of documents) are still used. The major points of departure from classical ethnography are the (1) researcher having knowledge and perhaps experience in the cultural context to be studied, (2) the specific research questions with which the researcher enters the field, (3) comparatively shorter period of time spent doing fieldwork, (4) the use of audio visual recording equipment, (5) data is gathered from the emic perspective, but with a focus on particular aspects of interactions, situations and activities (6) data sessions or meetings in which data collected by individuals is presented to others, and “alterity” or “other”ness, against the backdrop of communality (i.e., background of shared knowledge, Knoblauch, 2005).

### Rationale for Choosing Focused Ethnography for This Study

This study evolved from my interest in understanding why teachers in Excelsior were not motivated to optimize their performance, and how a pervasive lack of empowerment was destroying their enthusiasm and creativity in teaching. This interest gradually crystallized into an interest in the contextual culture of these teachers’ work life that could be shaping their own behaviours, and those of school leaders and colleagues. Thus, the purpose of my study was to understand the meanings that teachers assigned to the behaviours they encountered in the school, including their own, in terms of whether they perceived those behaviours as empowerment-facilitating or empowerment-impeding. From what I observed and what my participants told me, I had to “infer” (Wolcott, 2008, p. 77) the cultural concepts and beliefs that I could “attribute” (Goodenough, 1976, p. 5) to these participants’ life world - in other words, the cultural context. As a study aiming at *cultural interpretation* (Wolcott, 2008) ethnography became my chosen methodology. My reasons to decide on *focused ethnography* as the methodology for this study are given below.

My study was going to take place in the school I had worked from the latter half of 2001 till 2009. Thus I had not only background knowledge, but also experience in the study site, both as a teacher and as the Head of a Department. This itself is a point of departure from classical ethnography, in which the researcher studies a strange cultural group. My reasons for choosing this school was ease of access and the surety of eliciting valuable and trustworthy data. This latter aspect was important, since some of the data I hoped to elicit were of a sensitive nature. Some of the teachers in the school were my ex-colleagues, so I was confident about their cooperation with me.

Furthermore, I had specific questions when I started my fieldwork, and a conceptual framework that provided me a lens to perceive particular aspects of teachers’ work lives. A detailed review of literature was in place before I began fieldwork. This is another point of departure from classical ethnography, in which the researcher begins the study with just an interest.

Moreover, my field work at Excelsior school took place over a period of six months in 2013, while in classical ethnography, there is an unwritten convention of spending at least a year in the study site (Wolcott, 1987). In focused ethnography, a shorter term of field visit is the norm, but this short term is a period of intensive data collection, using audio visual

equipment. Thus it is “data intensive” and involves intensive analysis. In my own case, I used audio recording for interviews and meetings, to capture the verbal exchanges first hand. I had decided on a time period of six months for intensive data collection, since I had to leave enough time for analysis, including the laborious and time consuming transcription. This was necessary because the period of time allotted for full time research is three years in our university.

Also, in my study, there was the focus on particular situations, interactions and activities which is quite unlike classical ethnography. The focus was on behaviours, of school leaders, colleagues and the teacher himself/herself, which teachers perceived as empowerment-facilitating or impeding. Therefore, my study did not include in its scope how teachers were interacting with students in the classroom, for example.

Finally, a researcher engaged in focused ethnography takes the stance of *alterity* (Knoblauch, 2005) or “other”ness against a backdrop of shared knowledge and communality with his/her participants. The researcher consciously sheds her/his identity which involves an intimate knowledge of the researching setting and its culture, and tries to become the “other,” the opposite of whatever is her/his identity, which is devoid of any intimate knowledge of the setting or the culture. The degree to which the “other”ness is achieved may differ at different points of the field work, but this stance makes it possible for the researcher to be sufficiently “strange” so that he or she may take the perspective of the participants of the study (Knoblauch, 2005). This is crucial to this study, since my study was conducted in the same school where I had taught for about eight years. I had to take the stance of ‘alterity’ to be *strange enough* to adopt the perspectives of the teachers participating in the study.

### **Setting of the Study**

This study was conducted, as mentioned earlier, in the secondary section of a private school in one of the districts of Brunei Darussalam. The participants were secondary teachers, who were observed in the various activities of their school life, including staff meetings and school assemblies. This particular school was chosen because of various reasons. First of all, it was easy to gain permission from the authorities of this school since I was known to them. Secondly, it is a school that has been performing consistently well academically, and is one of the top private schools in the country. Finally, and most importantly, I believed that I could elicit ample, trustworthy data, given that some of my colleagues were still teaching there. All the secondary teachers in Excelsior school, numbering 21, participated in the study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

This focused ethnographic study shares methods of data collection with traditional ethnography. Thus participant observation, semi-structured interviews and gathering of documents such as minutes of meetings comprised data collection methods.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

As I began the field work, I had the role of an observer as participant. Therefore, I did some teaching work by standing in for a teacher on leave. I also attended all the school functions, meetings and events from morning till afternoon, every day. Principal and the Head of Secondary Section invited me to give a motivational talk to a particularly disruptive class, and to a group of students who were entering secondary the following year. Giving such assignments to me indicates their trust in me as well as the research I was engaged in. I also helped with the oral examination preparation of the O’level students. These roles given to me was fine with me, as I found myself fully occupied with joining in discussions, conversing with

teachers who were free, arranging interviews, and most importantly, writing up and starting analysis. Being given regular teaching assignments would have taken away much valuable time.

In those six months, I sat in the staff room, engaging in small conversations with teachers when they were free and also hung around the teachers' refreshment room, and spontaneously interacting with as many as I could. I participated in all the staff meetings, school assemblies, the jogathon, and other school events. I jotted down field notes as soon as possible after talking or observing. For this, I used an "observational protocol" (Creswell, 2009). This is a single page with a dividing line in the middle. On the left is the descriptive notes- what is observed, and on the right side are the reflective notes, which are the researcher's thoughts and reflections on what was observed. Details such as the date, time and place were also included. Overall, I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis in focused ethnography is an iterative, cyclic, and self-reflective process (Higginbottom, Pillay, & Boadu, 2013). O'Reilly (2012) pointed out that it involves transforming data into a comprehensible argument, by arranging, summing up, categorizing, and interpreting, to be presented to a wide range of readers (O'Reilly, 2012). Higginbottom, Pillay, and Boadu (2013) advised the use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software such as Atlas.ti (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany) or NVivo (QRS International, Victoria, Australia).

Though at the beginning I used atlas.ti, the data analysis software, I gradually abandoned it, finding it too rigid. Thereafter, I used a combination of manual and technological mode of analysis using Microsoft Word. My data analysis involved (1) familiarisation with the data by transcribing, reading and re-reading, (2) assigning codes to data units, (3) grouping codes and corresponding data into categories, (4) grouping categories with corresponding codes and data into themes, (5) each theme with its categories, codes and data, are interpreted and made sense of, so that a coherent picture of the working of the culture is arrived at, (6) at the same time, a detailed portrait of the setting, actors, and events is drawn, so that the culture is well-delineated within the context.

## Results of the Study

### Empowerment-Facilitating Behaviours of School Leaders

All teachers found it empowerment-facilitating when school leaders conveyed their *appreciation* for the achievements of teachers, and for good work done. *Support* given by leaders, both personal and professional, also was seen as enabling empowerment. This was especially crucial in the case of novice teachers. Encouraging innovative ideas, and sharing of professional knowledge enabled *professional growth*. Teachers felt valued when leaders displayed *trust*, by delegating, entrusting teachers with important responsibilities and promoting teachers to leader positions as Heads of Departments (HoD). Giving *demanding tasks* to them as well as encouraging new learning, also facilitated teacher empowerment.

Leader behaviours that involved devolution of responsibilities to teachers were not seen by some as empowerment-facilitating. These teachers found extra responsibilities such as that of HoD duties as a burden, something that distracted them and took time away from teaching. One of these teachers resented taking up a middle-level leadership role, since, according to her, it could expose her to colleagues' criticism.



### **Empowerment-Empeding Behaviours of School Leaders**

Teachers were unanimous and vocal about the Principal's *lack of interest* and involvement in teacher initiatives, and *reluctance to give appreciation*. Moreover, perceived favouritism, heavy workloads, and above all, low pay as well as poor working conditions led the Principal and sometimes the Board of Directors to be seen as *unfair and undervaluing*. The one teacher who did not feel this was a local Malay religious teacher, whose salary was being paid by the Government.

At a deeper level, there was the clash between the examination-oriented *vision* of the Principal and the Board of Directors on the one hand, and the conviction of some, mainly the Indian expatriate teachers, that education is for the holistic development of students, on the other hand. Teachers used to be asked to engage in tasks which held *no meaning* for them. Also, there was reluctance on the part of the school leadership to share decision making powers even with HoDs. Prejudices, lack of respect and lack of trust, were also seen by teachers, which was exacerbated by a breakdown of direct, open communication and information sharing between the Principal, Board of Directors and the teachers. The infrequent professional development opportunities given were not seen as relevant or beneficial. There was minimal monitoring, feedback and constructive efforts for handling differing views. Teachers also spoke about the failure of school leadership to draw out teacher potential.

There were exceptions to the above dominant perception, though few. One notable exception was the Mathematics HoD recently promoted as secondary supervisor, who believed that the principal had empowered him with this promotion, and that he was appreciated as well as trusted in every way. He also believed that he was not popular among the staff because of his perceived closeness with the Principal.

### **Empowerment-Facilitating Behaviours of Colleagues**

Teachers were almost unanimous in considering colleagues as a *source of professional growth, though informal*. Peer consultation, role modelling, emulation and mentoring were spoken about as beneficial to teacher growth. Also, colleagues provided moral as well as problem solving support, and assisted each other in some of the clerical work related to teaching.. There was cooperation, and as one teacher pointed out, "no politics." Colleagues inspired and appreciated each other. Teacher Ramie said that they were "like family."

One teacher did not share most of these views, and harboured a distrust of her colleagues. She also had got into a conflict with a novice teacher, and felt that she had been misunderstood. On almost every front, she seemed to have negative experiences, according to her own perception.

### **Empowerment-Impeding Behaviours of Colleagues**

Impediment to empowerment from colleagues was mainly the formation of sub-groups on racial lines, gossiping about and blaming other groups, and a pervasive apathy to new ideas, initiatives and learning. Groupism contributed to competitive behaviours and sometimes, interpersonal discord. Inter-racial communication was getting scant, and the unity of the staff was felt to be under threat due to the strong sub-group affiliation. Any teacher who was different or took an initiative was discouraged by the majority.

There were exceptions like teacher Abhay, who, in the face of pervasive apathy, still managed to implement innovative ideas. However, even this teacher also felt the ill-effects of the environment and stated that he was doing only 2% of what he could actually do.

### **Self-Empowerment-Facilitating Behaviours of Teachers' Own Selves**

Teachers felt that they had occasions for self-expression through creative pursuits like making a vegetable garden with students (teacher Lina), making recycling bins from scratch (teacher Abhay), conducting fun fair (teacher Leona), decorating the venue for a graduation ceremony (teacher Katrina), getting students interested through videos or science experiments and creative ways of teaching language (teacher Adwaith). They considered such activities as meaningful as they were significantly beneficial to students. One of the teachers even “rebelled” against the Principal’s focus on examination-oriented teaching and lack of attention to extra-curricular activities, by introducing activities during the assembly. They felt empowered when their students achieved good results, changed their negative attitudes, and gained a better hold on their own lives. Teachers considered it their victory when, because of their efforts some students achieved seemingly impossible tasks. Teachers were free to teach the way they wanted, employ any teaching method, use any supplementary material, and decide on assessments. This autonomy in the classroom extended to self-managed professional growth also. Almost half of the teacher participants considered “critical incidents” (difficult situations) they encountered while teaching as professional development opportunities. Many of them engaged in self-updating as demanded by as the curriculum and the students, and also realised the professional benefits of being in charge of students’ extra-curricular activities. One expatriate teacher spoke about how he deliberately updated himself in preparation for teaching in Brunei, and another spoke about asking students for feedback about his own teaching.

### **Self-Empowerment-Impeding Behaviours of Teachers' Own Selves**

Teachers’ perceptions of their own empowerment-impeding behaviours includes lack of reading for professional growth. Some teachers confessed their own behaviour as unethical, leading to colleagues and school leaders disrespecting them. Another such behaviour was failing in the basic duty towards students, which was described by teacher Nina as “giving up” on some students. This caused regret, when the teacher happened to see the particular student working later on as a lowly labourer. Another behaviour that teachers felt empowerment-impeding, and causing an erosion of self-efficacy, was their experiences of inability to live up to students’ expectations, due to their own lack of motivation and enthusiasm.

### **Empowering Personal Factors of the Individual Teacher: Values, Beliefs and Dispositions**

Teachers generally considered values such as sense of duty to students, commitment to the school and the profession as empowering. Added to this were positive beliefs such as high self-efficacy beliefs, positive beliefs about the teaching profession, belief in the meaningfulness of the job and a positive self-image. Dispositions such as affinity to the teaching profession, learning attitude, and a general positive attitude to life were also empowering, according to teacher’s own perceptions. These values, beliefs and dispositions were the factors that ultimately decided whether a teacher is an empowered teacher or a disempowered one.

### **Disempowering Personal Factors**

Teachers who displayed culturally incongruent values, and were indifferent to the outcome of their behaviours, were seen to be disempowered. A negative self-image and low self-efficacy beliefs also contributed to this. Lack of interest in the teaching profession, being ashamed of being a teacher, lack of drive to update oneself, and bitterness were also personal

factors that contributed to the individual teacher's disempowerment. Teachers with this tendency in them were inclined to see and internalise only the disempowering elements of the school environment, and ignore the empowering elements.

### **Empowerment-Facilitating Behaviours of Students**

Almost all teachers shared that they perceived students' *motivation*, interest to learn, responsiveness to teacher efforts, achievements and development as very much facilitative of their empowerment. *Intellectual stimulation* from students such as challenges posed by bright students, though not frequent, and the successful handling of these challenges by the teacher, raised self-efficacy beliefs. Lastly, students' *acceptance of teachers*, their trust, appreciation and respect vastly facilitated teacher empowerment.

### **Empowerment-Impeding Behaviours of Students**

Students impeding teacher empowerment was when they showed racial prejudices to teachers who belonged to other cultures, disrespectful behaviours and poor discipline. Academic ineptitude of students sometimes led teachers to doubt their own capability. Students being passive, not challenging or participating in the class, as well as performing poorly in the class led to teachers being demotivated and not enthusiastic to build up their own capability.

### **Behaviours of Parents of Students Affecting Teacher Empowerment**

Parents' behaviours that facilitated teacher empowerment were their support, and manifestations of trust, appreciation and respect, for teachers. Parents' behaviours that impeded teacher empowerment were very rare, and it was reported only in the case of one student. This student's parents did not support the teacher's efforts to help him overcome his poor performance. Excepting this one case, teachers at Excelsior considered the parents of students as supportive of the teachers and the school in whatever way they could.

These findings from the study may now be scrutinized in the light of extant literature, to reveal how they compare, and what unique elements are seen in the study context.

### **Teacher Empowerment in the Cultural Context: Differences from the Western Construct**

Teachers' perceptions of stakeholders' behaviour as facilitative or impeding of empowerment, as given in the previous section, gives an indication of what empowerment means for teachers. This study is grounded on this epistemological position that what teachers consider as reality is actually their perception of reality. These perceptions, at least partially, can be explained by cultural influences (Matsumoto, 2007; Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005). Cultural influences may be "inferred" (Wolcott, 1997, p. 156) from teachers' perceptions of the behaviours of school leaders, colleagues, teachers, students and parents, as empowerment facilitating/impeding, and in turn, "attributed" (Goodenough, 1976, p. 5) to such perceptions so that they may be adequately explained (Wolcott, 1997).

In the following section, I present the possibilities of meaning that teachers in this study context may have given to empowerment-facilitative school leadership, teacher empowerment and disempowerment. These meanings are juxtaposed with the western understanding of empowerment, and an attempt is made to explain the similarities and differences. Cultural differences are cited as a possible influence that may explain the differences. As Hallinger

(2010) argued, even similarities may differ in meanings attached to terms and the manner in which they are manifested in practice.

### **Empowerment-Facilitating School Leadership**

The teachers in this study considered their leaders to be facilitative of empowerment in some aspects, but impeding in other aspects. From their responses, the dimensions of empowering school leadership could be inferred as follows. Teachers' own words, are given in brackets.

1. Appreciation – showing interest and involvement in teachers' initiatives, appreciating and rewarding achievements

*When your supervisors praise you or tell you that you have done well, then you feel like doing it again. (Nina, about secondary supervisor and the Principal)*

2. Support – moral support, professional support, support for risk-taking, supporting and encouraging innovative ideas

*Some students complained against me...(but)The Principal and the supervisor always defended me saying I was teaching well and I knew the subject. That is why I survived. (Lina, about Principal)*

*I am doing only 2% of what I can actually do. I know that...Life is too easy... There are many teachers who have very positive qualities... Nobody makes use of all this. They are just put in a corner... They are meant to do only their job. Because of that we ourselves feel shame. (Abhay, generally about school leaders)*

3. Promoting professional growth—sharing professional knowledge, mentoring, arranging useful workshops in consultation with teachers

*He (Dean of Studies) told me my drawbacks, and how to change. That is why I have come this far. (Jason, about Dean of Studies)*

4. Trust – entrusting teachers with important responsibilities, promoting teachers to leadership positions, and delegating, if teachers are ready and willing.

*They believed in me....that is why they made me the Head (of the department. (Adwaith about the Principal and secondary supervisor)*

5. Demanding/giving challenges: giving demanding tasks and challenges, and encouraging new learning, to teachers who are ready to extend themselves

*It was a real challenge for me and I was quite confused about how to teach Principles of Accounts. But then when he asked me*

*to do it, I prepared hard and did extra work. So now I have an additional skill. (Katrina, about the Principal)*

6. Being fair and transparent – fair workloads, promotion criteria, salary and living conditions, not prejudiced against any teacher

*In our meetings, the Principal always says he likes only the new teachers. He doesn't like teachers with daughters and sons because they have more commitment to the family, not to the school...That time I looked at the teachers with ten years and twenty years. Everyone just looked. In my case, I just feel I am not important. (Leona, about the principal)*

*No, I am not happy with my salary. Not at all. I am getting the same salary that I was getting five years back. (Abhay, about Board of Directors and the Principal)*

7. Aligning vision – aligning education goals and methods with those of teachers, giving meaningful tasks, simplifying procedures, not bureaucratic

*Education is not just academic. It is the total development of the student....the Principal now is only bothered about academic matters...Even our assemblies now-a-days don't have any news reading or presentations. Whatever is useful to the students is not there. The Principal says all that is boring. We know that he is wrong. But what can we do? (Adwaith)*

8. Sharing power of decision making: involving teachers in making decisions in areas where they have a stake, and giving Heads of Departments the power accompanying their position.

*...the curriculum not suitable for the students...for me lah...because in this school in one class only 12 students muslim...25 are non-Muslim...it is hard for the non-Muslim to cope...so for me...the ministry want to do a core subject...but they have to refer back the subject but I don't have any power. (Ramie, the Government Religious teacher, about her superiors at the Ministry of Education)*

9. Strict supervision: Monitoring constantly, giving feedback, disciplining and being strict, holding teachers accountable, high expectations.

*There is no monitoring... No one to be scared of. I wish he would at least walk around the school. It is showing in the school results and school strength. (Sheena about the principal)*

*There is a difference between how my children do homework when I am supervising them, and when I am not supervising them. That is exactly the difference in the school, between when*

*the principal is supervising the teachers or not. (Lina, about the Principal)*

10. Nurturing: caring, protecting, individualized attention to teachers

*These few years there is no teacher-Principal relationship here. No one to personally tell me things, or to help me know my strengths and weaknesses... (Abhay, about school leaders generally)*

11. Open Communication – sharing information, consulting, being available, tolerant to differing views, willing to listen

*Now the situation here is that between superiors and teachers there is no communication...my HoD's or the secondary Head's side the only talk that comes is "submit this" "submit that." They don't ask 'what can we do for the improvement of students as a team or as a teacher or as a school... That is really affecting us. Other than the intrinsic motivation coming from inside the person, there is no motivation coming from outside. (Lina, about the Principal)*

*There is no teacher-Principal relationship. I can only talk to my HoD. If we approach the Principal with some genuine things, he will say very easily...you go and talk to the secondary supervisor. (Abhay, about the Principal)*

12. Treating teachers with respect - Holding teachers in high esteem, respecting, trusting their expertise, providing respectable working conditions

*I feel the way the people in authority here, the people in power here, treat you... that should be improved... We have to be treated in a better way. (Sumith, about Board of Directors and the Principal)*

13. Modelling professional and respectable behaviour – able to bring about school improvement, tolerant to differing views, respectful treatment to teachers.

*He (the Principal) says he wants the school to be great. Then he doesn't do anything about that...His idea of high performing school is like building a basketball court. Our idea is to improve education. (Sheena)*

These thirteen features of empowering leadership in the current study and the features of empowering leadership presented in the "School Leader Empowering Behaviour" (SLEB), an instrument developed and validated in the Singapore context by Lee and Nie (2013), have several commonalities. The seven items in the scale are, (1) Delegation of authority, (2) Providing intellectual stimulation, (3) Giving acknowledgement and recognition, (4) Articulating a vision, (5) Fostering collaborative relationships, (6) Providing individualized concern and support, and (7) Providing role-modelling. The sole difference is "fostering

collaborative relationships” among staff, that is considered an empowering leadership feature in the Singapore context. In the current study, teachers did not seem to think of this as a responsibility of the leader. Most of them believed that the groupism that existed in the staffroom was the result of lack of open communication and trust both among themselves and on the Principal. They seemed to believe that if there was open communication and trust, there would be more collaboration among the staff. It also seemed that they were not aware of possible Principal roles in fostering collaborative behaviour among the staff.

These Asian studies may now be juxtaposed with seven features identified in a US-based study by Blasé and Blasé (2001), on empowering leadership. The features identified by them are: (1) developing trust, (2) Establishing shared governance structures, (3) Supporting teachers, (4) encouraging autonomy and innovation, (5) Role modelling professionalism, (6) minimizing threat and encouraging risk, (7) appreciating and rewarding hard work and good results, and (8) establishing structures for problem solving.

Comparing the current study and the American study, the differences in perceptions of empowering leadership are clear. In the current study teachers are asking for effective supervision (“Why can’t the Principal walk around and supervise our teaching?”) whereas in the US context the teachers are asking for the opposite (shared governance structures and autonomy). Both the current study and Singapore study mention nurturing and individualised care, whereas such personal dimensions are absent in the American study.

Given below is a closer portrayal of empowering leadership according to the results of this study context.

### **The Benevolent Autocrat**

In this study, teachers observed that the absence of *strict supervision* and *personalised nurturing* were impeding their empowerment, and suggested that a leader who exhibits these behaviours would have had a positive, empowering effect on them and the school.

It appears to be a unique cultural phenomenon that teachers ask for school leaders who are *strict supervisors* and yet would be *nurturing*. In this study, some of the major problems that teachers pointed out as demotivating were the absence of monitoring and feedback by school leaders, especially the Principal. There was a distinct “felt need” for leadership and supervision. A common problem was that the Principal of that period “did not care” enough to monitor teachers’ work or to talk to them about their work. Yang, Irby and Brown (2002) pointed out that the power that is wielded by the leader in these cultures that follow Confucianism, is benevolent power that takes care of subordinates. The hierarchical and patriarchal nature of the Asian family is extended to schools where the *autocratic authority* of the Principal is accepted, but this authority is *benevolent*, knows and does what is best for teachers (Dimmock, 2000; Wan, 2005)

Another way to understand this is to look at the power dynamics in the empowerment context. The *power in empowerment*, is understood in western studies as *power with* (collegial), *power from within* (self-empowerment), and *power to* (delegating, authorising); not *power over* which meant *domination* (Irwin, 1996; Veneklasen, & Miller, 2002). However, the notion of power as “*power over*” assumes a positive character in the cultural context of this study, as a benevolent, yet strict authority, who “cares” for subordinates, and engages in empowerment-facilitating behaviours for the welfare of the subordinates, yet at the same time insist on adherence to accepted rules and norms for excellent teaching and learning. This “*power over*” need not be dictatorial, negative power; it can be beneficial power. Indeed, hierarchy, acceptance of large differences in power and status and respect for authority is at the heart of East Asian cultures (Hallinger, 2010), a cultural characteristic that Hofstede (2011) referred to

as “power distance.” Here, the “power over” dimension of power dynamics is in evidence, and explains the empowerment experience of teachers.

Strict supervision is not a dimension in the Singaporean model. However, the *nurturing* dimension is expressed as *individualized concern and support*. This could be because, as Gopinathan and Ho (2000) explained, new curricular demands in Singapore schools had given rise to more spontaneous (not forced) collegiality among teachers, and this had resulted in changes in the Principals’ work style. Both strict supervision and nurturing are absent in the American model, perhaps because the implicit hierarchy in these behaviours is alien to the western egalitarian culture.

### Teachers’ Involvement in School Decision Making

The teachers in this study context did want to have a voice in decision making at school. However, they demanded a voice in “matters involving students we teach” (Abhay) “class timetable and extra classes” (Nina) “Co-curricular activities” (Keerthi) “Professional growth opportunities” (Adwaith), “students’ work in the subject” (Annette), “student promotion to next level” (Katrina), and “discipline matters related to own students” (teacher Lina). In other words, these teachers demanded to be given the authority to decide on matters that they considered were their core job- which is to teach and take care of student growth - areas in which they had a stake, interest and capability.

However, the western concept of teacher decision making is different in its meaning and character. According to Short (1994), a key empirically-derived dimension of teacher empowerment is teachers’ being involved in school decision making, which means ensuring “the participation of teachers in critical decisions that directly affect their work ... responsibility for decisions involving budgets, teacher selection, scheduling, curriculum, and other programmatic areas” (p. 2). Fullan and Hargreaves (1995) also advocates greater involvement of teachers “outside as well as inside their own classrooms” and “in curriculum development and improvement of the schools” (p. 24). This is participative decision making which involves a sharing of power by the Principal with the teachers to take decisions.

It is interesting to see that, even in the west, where participation in decision making in school level issues is considered an integral part of teacher empowerment, it often resulted in “aimlessness, confusion, frustration and burnout- a sense that we are not getting anywhere and that valuable time is being taken away from the classroom” (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1995, p. 23). These authors blame it on problems in the conceptualization and implementation of the concept. But in this study context, it was clear that teachers would like to leave school level decision making to the school authorities, who, according to teacher Adwaith, “may be more knowledgeable, and may do a better job of it.” A combination of two cultural factors may be at work here: Asian Principals may be reluctant to share power, and Asian teachers may not aspire to acquire more power, preferring to concentrate on teaching alone. Using Hofstede’s (2011) terminology, low individualism and high power distance may be at work here. These teachers’ points of view are echoed elsewhere. In Wong’s (2006) study in China, in the context of participative decision making, the participating teachers mentioned,

- *It is impossible to ignore our tradition and accept the Western concept [of participation] immediately.*
- *As an intellectual, power is not our utmost concern.*
- *As a teacher the most important duty should be teaching.* (pp. 244-245)



The nearest to participating decision making that happens in this culture is that the principal might ask teachers or Heads of department their opinion before deciding on an issue, and once decision is made, will inform the teachers. Since the teachers have been asked to give their opinion, they have a commitment to accept the decision.

In the case of a private school like Excelsior, there is an added element of the Board of Directors in the management of the school. In this case, teachers appear to be doubly aware of the two power centres in their work lives- the Principal and the Board of Directors. In Wong's (2006) study, the private school teachers mentioned that their aspirations towards more power might make the Board of Directors unhappy and may lead to her being terminated from teaching. This dimension of job security related to displeasing the Board of Directors was not explicitly mentioned by the participating teachers in the study, perhaps because at the time when this study was conducted, the Principal did not encourage interference by the Board of Directors in school matters, and therefore, they seemed to keep a low profile, coming to the school only on occasions such as the Graduation ceremony.

## Status

This dimension of teacher empowerment is defined by western scholars variously, as being highly regarded by colleagues (Short, 1994), teachers being recognised for their expertise (Squire-Kelly, 2012), salary and working conditions (Maeroff, 1988), and trust, reward and autonomy (Hargreaves, Cunningham, Hansen, McIntyre, & Oliver, 2007).

In the context of this study, though trust, reward, autonomy, and colleague support were important, the crucial determinant of their status in society, in the teachers' eyes was their remuneration and incentives such as bonus.

This is particularly a sensitive issue since in Brunei, private schools such as Excelsior paid much lower salaries than the Government schools, despite performing much better than the Government schools in every area of schooling. Private school salaries are paid by the school management whereas government school salaries are paid by the Government. Teachers in the study context feel the unfairness of being paid lower for the same job, despite working harder. Below given are teachers' perceptions on the matter.

*When other people come to know how much we get as a teacher, they feel pity for us. (Abhay)*

*They say bonus is related to results. But I don't think so. Now in the science dept. I have got better results than everybody else, still I am getting the lowest bonus. (Lina)*

*In Chinese culture, some people think success as money. When I am with such people I feel ashamed to say that I am a teacher...once my students asked me "Teacher, your maths is so good. How come you are just a teacher?" (Leona)*

*I feel ashamed that even after doing Masters, I am just a school teacher. (Keerthi)*

## Professional Growth

According to Short (1994), professional growth refers to teachers' perceptions that the school in which they work provides growth and development opportunities continuously, and that they can hone their skills through the work life of the school. Teachers in western schools

may have to design curriculum and learning material, and may have to take decisions beyond the classroom. Since teaching is not text-based, the need for learning and being up-to-date may be felt constantly. Thus the need for professional growth opportunities may be more felt in those schools, and such opportunities are more appreciated.

In Excelsior school also, professional development was felt to be a need by all teachers, but not to a great extent. There were teachers in the school who were not upgrading themselves but were still doing good teaching, since all they had to teach was in the textbook, the notes that some previous teachers had given, or in the answers to past year question papers. They were practically teaching for an exam, though there could be individual differences among teachers, on the degree of focus on the examination. Their need for professional growth arose only in the rare cases when a smart student asked them a question out of syllabus. Text based teaching, and readymade curricula led to less motivation to improve, since there was hardly any challenge from the syllabus, or the mostly passive students. In such a situation, informal learning from each other satisfied most of their professional needs. However, some teachers were very aware of the ill effects of teaching to the test. As teacher Abhay observed, “Teaching just for the examination is very constraining. We cannot do many things. It is bad for the teachers’ growth” (Abhay).

### **Autonomy**

Little (1995) defined teacher autonomy as teachers’ capacity to engage in self-directed teaching. Short (1994) contended that Autonomy, as a dimension of empowerment, refers to teachers believing that they have the freedom to control and make decisions about some aspects of their professional life, such as scheduling, curriculum, textbooks, and instructional planning.

In the current study, secondary teachers at Excelsior did have instructional planning *within the classroom* but did not control scheduling, curriculum, or textbooks. Nor did they want to do so. One of the teachers (teacher Adwaith) even pointed out that having a readymade teaching material is a blessing, since teachers can concentrate on teaching. Furthermore, he believed those who design curriculum and study material to be of good capacity and calibre, much more capable than himself in those matters, and so better equipped to do it. Teacher Katrina also saw merits in the system. “*It is quite organized if we just follow the duties given by our superiors or administrators.*”

According to the *Self Determination Theory* by Deci and Ryan (2000) autonomy is one of the basic psychological needs (the others are competence and relatedness) that human beings have to fulfill, in order to experience well-being and optimal functioning. The Self Determination Theory does recognize that while the basic construct holds true universally, the domains and activities of autonomous behaviours will be different in different cultures (Chirkov, 2009). The present study is in congruence with this view. The autonomy that Excelsior teachers have, or would like to have more of, is in their classroom and in dealing with their students’ life in the school, not in school-wide issues as Short (1994) contended.

### **Self-Efficacy**

Another dimension of teacher empowerment that looks different in this cultural context is self-efficacy. According to Short (1994) self-efficacy is “teachers’ perceptions that they have the skills and ability to help students learn, are competent in building effective programs for students, and can effect changes in student learning” (p. 3). It is the firm belief that one can successfully carry out the behaviour required, to produce certain outcomes, according to Bandura, (1977), who introduced the concept. Self-efficacy has the dimensions of magnitude, generality and strength. Bandura further explains, “...when tasks are ordered in level of

difficulty, the efficacy expectations of different individuals may be limited to the simpler tasks, extend to moderately difficult ones, or include even the most taxing performances....” (p. 194). Also, self-efficacy beliefs could be limited to particular behaviours, or more generalized behaviours. Furthermore, there can be weak or strong efficacy expectations. Therefore, Bandura asserts, “An adequate expectancy analysis, therefore, requires detailed assessment of the magnitude, generality, and strength of efficacy expectations commensurate with the precision with which behavioral processes are measured” (p. 194). Lin and Gorrell (2001) argued that cultural differences significantly affected self-efficacy perceptions since in different cultures, teachers’ roles were perceived differently.

There are vast differences in teaching practices, environments, what is taught and who is taught, between the schooling system in the west and in Asian countries, which may influence teachers’ understandings about their roles and responsibilities (Ho & Hau, 2004). If the teacher understands the text and can teach in a way students understand, and if their students perform well in the examination, teachers in Excelsior may say that their knowledge of the subject and teaching capacity are high. Thus, self-efficacy beliefs may stem from a thorough knowledge of the text, acquired by teaching the same text for years together, as well as the capability to teach particular sets of students so well as to enable them to perform well in examinations.

The tasks that are involved in the daily life of teachers in a western country like the United States and what is expected of them, drastically differ from those of Asian teachers, in planning, teaching and post teaching activities (Fang & Gopinathan, 2009). Self-efficacy may take on an entirely different meaning here. For example, one of the items for self-efficacy measurement in the “School Participant Empowerment Scale” (Short, 1992), is *I have a strong knowledge base in the areas in which I teach*. What constitutes a *strong database*, may differ greatly between countries and culture. The Psychological Empowerment scale (Spreitzer, 1995), has the following item *I have mastered the skills necessary for my job* as one of the items to measure self-efficacy. Again, *the skills necessary for my job*, may not be the same in their magnitude, generality and strength (Bandura, 1977).

In this study, all the teachers, excepting two, reported high self-efficacy beliefs, in teaching, subject knowledge and class management. However, for reasons cited in the previous paragraph, a “high” self-efficacy belief may not mean the same in both Asian and Western contexts.

### **Self-Empowerment and Self-Disempowerment**

An unexpected, but found to be valid observation was that however empowerment-impeding the school environment may be, some teachers were doing excellent teaching. In fact, Excelsior was still one of the best schools in the country. On closer discussions, I found that these teachers carried on teaching well, because of their inner values, beliefs and dispositions that drove them to do so. For example, one of the participating teachers told me,

*Nobody has said anything or appreciated me. But I continue my work in the same sincere spirit, maybe because of my loyalty to the profession. So I am continuing my work. As a teacher I think it is my duty and I do it.*

Conversely, those teachers who had weaker values, beliefs and dispositions were more prone to be affected by the empowerment-impeding elements in the school environment. It appeared that they had internalized the negative aspects of the school environment so much that they had come to accept it and be resigned to it. Some teachers, like teacher Adwaith, had accepted it, and moved on to do what he could, despite the environment.

*In this kind of a situation, we don't even think about what we don't have. It doesn't occur to us... You are talking about empowerment. There is not even such a concept here... In a situation where it does not and will not happen, even such an idea will not come to us. We don't even think about it. Because the environment is not conducive for such things to happen, such things are out of our heads. (teacher Adwaith)*

However, this teacher was not demoralized, as he further said

*Even though there are many demotivating situations now, there is still meaning in teaching...., I still think it is a very valuable profession. Very meaningful profession... I haven't had any negative feelings about being a teacher. (teacher Adwaith)*

However, some other teachers could not seem to make the critical transition from being affected by the environment, to ignoring it and carrying on teaching despite the obstacles. Teacher Leona spoke of her lack of motivation due to negative experiences with the administration.

*Earlier I used to put in 150 percent effort to teach ... now I put in only 80 to 100 percent only. Sometimes I put in only 80% because I need some time to rest... This kind of dullness is because of demotivation from some people. ... I need some appreciation. This year because of my bad experiences I didn't even try out innovative methods in my classes. Because of my bad experiences. (teacher Leona)*

A few teachers, such as Jason, felt his experiences to be more facilitating of empowerment than impeding. In his case, there were positive experiences all along.

*I continued here only because the Dean (of Studies) helped me. I had problems expressing myself in English... The Dean told me how I can overcome those difficulties. Otherwise after the probation period I would have gone back to India. He told me my drawbacks, and how to change. That is why I have come this far... I have never thought about being the Secondary Supervisor... I feel they recognised me because I have the capability. If I had performed badly, they would have sent me away... They would have felt that I am doing good work. That may be the reason. Anyway it is a recognition of my capability. (teacher Jason)*

Teacher Jason did speak about some experiences from colleagues that had made him almost leave the job, but he overcame those with a self-enforced positive attitude.

Thus, I found that the individual teacher's values, beliefs and dispositions made the ultimate difference in deciding whether a teacher would be empowered or disempowered in a particular school environment.

### **Students and Parents Affecting Teacher Empowerment**

The second unexpected finding was that students and to a much lesser extent, their parents, had a role in teacher empowerment and disempowerment. During the study, it

emerged that teachers time and again referred to students and parents (the latter to a much lesser extent than the former), as a significant factor in empowerment facilitation/ impediment. This was a surprising finding, one which may be taken as an example of what Agar (2006) calls the *abductive logic* that characterizes ethnography.

A review of literature on teacher-student relationships in multicultural classes by Brok and Levy (2005) concluded that there is consistent association between ethnicity and students' perceptions of teachers. For example, according to Evans, Baskerville, Wynn-Williams and Gillet (2014), ethnic Chinese students invariably have respect for teachers. In Confucian cultures, school is seen as an extension of family, and the teacher-student relationship is an extension of the mother-child bond (Kim & Park, 2008). Ho (in Chen, 2006) pointed out that "in the Chinese classroom, the teacher's authority ensures that they can control the classroom and teach better, but after class teachers will make use of every opportunity to establish a warm and affectionate relationship with their students, which is not common in the West" (p. 2). In the western culture, teacher-student relationship was more professional (Grant, Stronge, Xu, Popp, Sun, & Little, 2014). This could be the reason for the dimension of students and their parents to be absent from existing literature on teacher empowerment, most of which is in the western context.

In summary,

- 1) *Teacher empowerment is a self-driven phenomenon.* A facilitative environment to teacher empowerment can be created by school leaders, colleagues, students and parents. Teachers' capacity and the availability of resources are necessary to realize empowered behaviour of teachers.

This is congruent with existing literature. Schwarzer, Bloom and Shono (2006) categorically stated that no one can empower another person: we can only give a facilitative environment for self-empowerment so that a person may be encouraged to empower himself. Pham & Renshaw (2013), in the context of encouraging Asian teachers to adopt student-centred teaching, observed that conducting workshops for teachers is useless unless teachers changed their beliefs and conceptions about teaching. Rath (2001) contended that teacher education will not be of much use if it does not modify teachers' beliefs about what good teaching look like.

- 2) *The contextual culture decides the nature, and the character of empowerment that can possibly happen in a particular setting.* In the context of this study, in view of the prevailing culture, teacher empowerment can happen if it does not try to change the power relations in the school. It may happen in the form of delegation of authority and responsibilities to teachers, by the Principal, who will still have supreme power in the school. Dimensions such as participative decision making, autonomy, self-efficacy, professional growth and status, all dimensions of the teacher empowerment construct from the west, have different meanings in the contextual culture of this study.

Theoretical and empirical studies have emerged in recent times that agree with this view. For example, Wursten and Jacobs (2013), argued:

In High power distance cultures, empowerment and autonomy is not impossible, but it must take the form of clearly-defined delegation. The level of autonomy would be clearly defined and limited within a very strict set of mandates. If

things happen that are not foreseen by their mandate, schools would not be allowed to act independently to respond to the new situation. They would be required to go back up the chain of authority and ask for instructions first. (p. 19)

In a recent study by Liu and Feng (2015), that explored the experiences in China with borrowing the idea of flipped classrooms (FC) from the United States, called for more cultural sensitivity and studies of compatibility of such “best practices” borrowed from a foreign culture.

## **Implications**

A theoretical implication of the study is that studying phenomena in a culture different from the one in which the major theoretical work on the phenomena has been done, is problematic, and demands intercultural sensitivity, the “ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences” (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). If not, or if concepts from a Western culture are borrowed and used as a lens to study the same phenomena in a different culture, the study will run the risk of incorrect results and conclusions. Also, it should be accepted that universally acceptable educational improvements can be achieved in different ways by different countries. One example is given by Wursten and Jacobs (2013) who cites the case of Finland and Korea, showing excellent improvement in education. However, both countries have achieved it in different ways according to the differing cultures: Finland with a system that is student centred, and with teachers as facilitators and South Korea with a system that is teacher centred, and teacher-controlled.

Also, an instrument developed as a result of empirical studies in a particular culture, may not be suited for use in a different culture, because of the differences in the implicit assumptions and meanings of dimensions involved. A case in point is the School Participant Empowering Scale that was developed by Short and Rinehart (1992). If teacher empowerment in a western country and an Asian country are compared using this scale, the results may not be reflective of reality.

A methodological implication for researchers is that with distributed leadership becoming more widespread in schools, the term school leaders will have to include Heads of Departments, Section supervisors, Deans of Studies and Vice principal. Similarly, existing literature abounds with studies on empowering leadership, but the other agents in a school are largely under researched. Colleagues, students and their parents do play a role in teacher empowerment. The most important role in empowering a teacher is the teacher her/himself.

A practical implication of the study is that in a multi-cultural setting such as Excelsior in this study, any initiative will have to proceed after ensuring acceptance from all the ethnic groups involved. Ensuring just Heads of Departments’ acceptance may not mean that all teachers accept a particular initiative. Furthermore, the study results also imply that universally accepted educational improvements.

## **Recommendations for Future Researchers and Practitioners**

A study of this nature becomes meaningful only when, among other things, it makes recommendations for improving the scenario of empowerment. These are “recommendations” for all those players and stakeholders who are responsible to ensure teacher-empowerment.

### *For future researchers*

Future research is needed in Brunei Darussalam itself, in all schools and particularly in Government schools, to study the empowerment dynamics, using suitable qualitative methods. Qualitative methods are recommended because there is not much known about the teacher empowerment scenario that exists in this culture yet. Such studies will build a solid knowledge base for teacher empowerment in Brunei Darussalam, and help to develop healthy practices for teacher empowerment. After that, there can be quantitative studies that assess the quality of teacher empowerment in different schools, and design appropriate intervention measures. Researchers can also develop designs for short “action research” which are in the nature of highly practical organization development (OD) interventions.

### *For practitioners*

First, for leaders in education, Board of Directors in private schools and policy makers, I recommend that there should be strategies to reduce teacher attrition, and teacher burnout, as notable scholars in education (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2010) advocate. An important issue here is the low remuneration and low quality living conditions of private school teachers. Teacher empowerment will be empty rhetoric, if teachers do not earn what they deserve, and there are no increments corresponding to experience.

Secondly, the school leadership should possess a learning attitude. The leadership, including the Board of Directors, Principal, and the middle management should ‘learn to lead.’ For this, a practical suggestion is that every year, they should invest at least two days in a Review and Planning session. This is to examine whether the projected vision and mission are being realized; if they are not, why not; how can they be better realized, etc.

Finally, in teacher education programmes, there could be modules included which assess and align teachers’ inner selves with a conducive or receptive state towards empowerment facilitation. In the training for school leaders, there could be modules on behaviours that a leader might adopt that facilitates teacher empowerment. Psychologist William James said, “The greatest discovery of my generation is that by altering attitudes, we can alter lives.” The beliefs of teachers that influence their attitudes to themselves, students, school and the environment can be changed through effective psychological training interventions. Excelsior, and schools like excelsior, should implement such training programmes for teachers. Researchers and academic leaders need to devote time and attention for developing effective training interventions which can lead to personal changes and team spirit to help teachers rise above narrow prejudices.

## **Conclusion**

Teacher empowerment has both intrinsic and instrumental value for educators and students. Yochim (2004) asserted that “the most serious impediment to positive change in teaching is not the limited ability of teachers, but, rather, the failure of the system to truly empower them in a rapidly changing environment.” The challenging task here, as Yochim (2004) continued later, “is to take a model of teacher empowerment that has been developed largely in the industrialized western democracies and assess its applicability in an indisputably different context.” It is found in this that, indeed, in the contextual culture of Excelsior school, and in similar contexts, teacher empowerment, as it stands now in existing literature, *is not applicable*. This conclusion has been reached before in other disciplines (see Klidas, 2002), in the last decade. In teacher empowerment research itself, some Asian studies do mention the

cultural misfit and explore it to an extent (e.g., Liu & Feng, 2015), but does not provide empirical support.

Teacher empowerment, involving a concerted effort in a school to raise teachers' intrinsic motivation so that each teacher may perform at his/her optimal best, is a goal that every teacher in Excelsior school would like to achieve. What is needed at this juncture in time, is *not transfer or translation* of the empowerment construct from the west to Asia, but a *transcreation*, which would involve a *re-construction* of the teacher empowerment construct, so as to be culturally valid and beneficial to teachers in Asian cultures.

Teachers at Excelsior can become better teachers, giving students their very best, if given the right environment to work in, the right kind of professional support, and the right kind of opportunities for personal change. This is true, I believe, of not only Excelsior school, but many other schools in this country and abroad. Such a glorious future is possible, if educators, researchers and policy makers work hand in hand, cognizant of the ground reality, but guided by a common vision, about teacher empowerment.

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This research was undertaken with the Graduate Research Scholarship awarded by the Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei Darussalam.

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### **Article Citation**

Thomas, S. (2017). Teacher empowerment: A focused ethnographic study in Brunei Darussalam. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(1), 47-72. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss1/4>

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