

Empowerment and Learned Hopefulness – Constructs and Paths to Student’s Well-Being? Literature Review and Proposed Guidelines

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1. Abstract

2. Rationale

3. Objectives

4. Review of the studies and comments

5. Conclusions

1. Abstract

The main aim of the article is to review the literature on constructs of empowerment and learned hopefulness in the field of social sciences in order to outline information related to the definition, implementation and evaluation of the constructs. The articles have been gathered using as key words empowerment, psychological empowerment, hope, learned hopefulness, dimensions, evaluation, education, within the scientific data bases Sage publications and Ebsco. There have been delineated four needs related to the constructs of empowerment and learned hopefulness: to clarify both upon the constructs’ defining characteristics and upon the qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods, to extend the interventions based on enhancing empowerment from disadvantaged groups to all students, and particular to Romanian students in order to sustain their adaptation to global education requirements.

2. Rationale

When discussing the problem of personal power and empowerment the debates in the scientific literature have stated the importance of the construct, as a solution to overcome Seligman's (1976) [1] learned helplessness, but there is no convergence about the explanations at scientific level.

Ever since Rappaport's [2] definition (1984) there have been multiple attempts to analyse the construct of empowerment ([3], [4], [5]), but it could not be achieved convergence of views towards one way of explanation at scientific level.

In this frame of reference within the present article there have been emphasised, starting from some elements of difficulty related to the construct of empowerment and learned helpfulness, some needs related to its examination, implementation and evaluation in social settings in general, and future implementation in educational settings.

Although the construct of empowerment is highlighted by the literature as being relevant to the wellbeing of the individual, there is no agreement on the definition and analysis of its dimensions.

The intervention based on empowerment is centred on the referral of danger of individual victimization, on qualitative analysis tools and, in few cases, on quantitative analysis tools; this makes it difficult to establish the objective impact of the empowerment intervention and its results, and to extrapolate them to larger groups of individuals.

Studies highlighting ways to develop empowerment are relatively limited and strongly determined by the specific characteristics of the group which they addressed to and by the way of how the helplessness of that group is operationalized.

3. Objectives

The core objective of the present article is to argue over four needs in approaching with more clearness the construct of empowerment and related concepts like hope and learned helpfulness.

These ideas refer to the need to clarify more among the concepts, the need to gather and emphasise on the means of evaluation of empowerment construct both using qualitative and quantitative methods, the need to implement trainings based on enhancing Romanian students' empowerment and finally the need to expand empowerment trainings to larger groups not only to disadvantaged ones, mainly among students.

4. Review of the studies and comments

There have been used the following words to gather articles from the international data bases Sage publications and Ebsco: empowerment, psychological empowerment, hope, learned helpfulness, dimensions, evaluation, education.

As empowerment was seen as a dimension located on the way to developing hope it is still unclear if empowerment is the drive for learned helpfulness or it emerges from it on the way to overrun learned helplessness [5, p. 73]. Anyway, it is expected that people feeling hopeful also show psychological empowerment as a sense of control over their life. [5, p. 73].

Although the term empowerment is used with a high frequency since the 70s, there were few attempts to define the construct, as evidenced in the literature by various authors. This happened mostly because of the lack of consensus among the authors.

Sally Rogers ([8], [9]), when starting to develop a quantitative analysis tool of empowerment for people with mental illness highlights the lack of conceptual consensus and concern for the clear delineation of the construct dimensions. Aslop, Bertelsen and Holland (2006) [10] aim to achieve a comprehensive analysis

of the construct empowerment, noting that the missing link to a better approach of the construct is a coherent approach.

Within the 80's Rappaport [2] was concerned to emphasise the main characters of defining the concept of empowerment, continuing Kieffer's [11] ideas related to its processual dimension. In this regard he concluded that empowerment should also be considered as a process oriented towards gaining control over self and environment.

Besides the lack of a clear definition of the construct, there is, also, an overlapping terminology, the term empowerment is used both as result or condition and also for the process of reaching the state of control over our own lives [3]. Also, since 2001 David Fetterman [12] introduces the term of empowerment-based assessment, appreciated as a very good way of assessing complex community programs. But this use of the term increases furthermore the ambiguity of the construct dimensions.

When addressing the construct of empowerment in a larger context, as we have previously shown, it is frequently explained in relation to learned helplessness and learned hopefulness.

Seligman's learned helplessness theory has been since the 70's widely debated and clearly explained the idea of learned hopefulness still needs consideration.

A debate upon the issue of learned hopefulness has to start from some aspects related to hope as a trait. There have been many studies on hope defined as an internal capacity of the individual, but there is less evidence about the effects of hope as a trait or learned hopefulness as it was defined by Zimmerman [4]. In analogy to the destructive phenomenon of learned helplessness discovered by Seligman [1], in the early 90's, Zimmerman [5] speculated about the potential benefits of a learned hopefulness, but this approach has not been investigated further.

Zimmerman considers learned hopefulness as a process where the individual is learning and utilizes problem-solving skills until achieves perceived or actual control [4, p. 72]. The author relates the achievement of learned hopefulness with the sense of psychological empowerment. [4, p. 73].

Taking into regard all the above issues, there can be concluded that there is a need of conceptual clarification among the constructs of empowerment, learned hopefulness and hope in order to extend their joint application from traditional used fields like Community Psychology, Organizational Psychology, Clinical Psychology and Public Health, to fields like Educational Psychology.

As one of the main issues of the present research is represented by emphasising the importance of using empowerment intervention in educational environments, mainly at university level, it would be important to synthetize some information from literature regarding the use of empowerment strategies in education.

Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire [13], [14], has developed a reference framework for education-based empowerment. His strategy includes at least four important aspects, referring to individuals' efforts to identify their own problems, to critically assess the social and historical roots of these issues, to represent their own health and a healthy society, and to develop social strategies through which to overcome challenges and barriers in order to achieve their own goals. Freire aims through empowerment education to achieve changes at the individual, group and system level [15].

Although Freire sensed the relevance of the impact of this strategy, it was still not possible to speak of appropriate intervention and assessment tools addressing empowerment construct in educational systems.

The significance of pedagogical effects of empowerment training strategies was highlighted in practice for educational groups only after 2000, examples of good practice can be highlighted in the USA by programs such as: Youth Empowerment Strategies [29], [30], and Youth Empowerment Solution for Peaceful Communities [6]. Although the programs had positive results for the development of cultural identity, they

have not been adapted to higher education.

Interventions to strengthen empowerment addressed to students were based on three dimensions: academic empowerment, political empowerment and social empowerment. The importance of developing the student's empowerment was highlighted in different studies, McQuillan [16, p. 640] stating that "student empowerment contains a significant promise for improving American education".

When implementing academic empowerment, were used Socratic seminars [16, p. 640], and other intervention strategies such as storytelling [28]. Also, among the techniques with positive results in the last years, we mention photovoice ([7], [27], [28]). This technique has been used in projects around the world as a means of promoting community change from root/base (Wang & Burris, 1997 in [6]). Positive results for inducing relaxation, empowerment, clarification of values and increasing self-awareness were achieved through the use of art therapy [17].

Interventions aiming to form empowerment for students were recommended, also for the prevention and improvement of clinical problems caused by adaptation to the academic environment. Cleary [18], highlight the importance of Response-to-Intervention (RTI) programs, which provide services of early effective intervention aiming to reduce the number of students who develop clinically significant academic or behavioural problems (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, Young, 2003 in [18]).

As a conclusion of the issues presented above we state upon the need to expand the models of empowerment development programs in educational environments to all students, not just to the ones constituting disadvantaged groups.

The stage of studies from the university level is associated with the idea of separation from centralized and learned structures and with the orientation toward personal and professional development according to projected goals. At university level, learning tasks become more complex and the share of individual work is enhanced. This situation was also reported in US schools during reforms. Susan Stiegelbauer noted that "students rarely think about them as participants in a process of change and organizational life" [16].

The lack of involvement in learning is associated by McQuillan [16] with student's lack of empowerment strategies, the author stating that these strategies have the effect of improving American education [16] (p. 640). In the American educational system there have been proposed, implemented and then evaluated projects based on empowerment designed for the majority of students, not just for students from disadvantaged groups.

The increased interest for the positive results of such programs like YES! (Youth Empowerment Strategies, [27], [28]), YES (Youth Empowerment Solution for Peaceful Communities [6], or for programs assessing interventions based on empowerment strategies, as FORECAST (The Formative evaluation and Consultation System technique [19]), viewed as a technique for the evaluation of EMPW systems, highlights the positive impact demonstrated by such programs.

The Romanian educational system has undergone transformations imposed by rallying to the objectives of the Bologna Process (restructuring university studies on the three cycles, student's mobility within the European Higher Educational Area, the introduction of ECTS, quality assurance in higher education, recognition of diplomas, a common European higher educational curriculum, student-centred learning, lifelong learning), which involved the harmonization of higher education in the European Union by 2010, according to the documents from the Bologna Package. In this context, students have the opportunity to access training or to study in prestigious European universities and to apply for mobilities in order to develop their education, benefiting

from the recognition of studies through ECTS. The weight of applications for mobility programs of study or research is quite low in the case of Romanian students, although there are European mobility programs meant to support these mobilities: Erasmus + or Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area.

In the American educational system there have been implemented empowerment development programs designed for the majority of students ([27], [28], [6]) which ended with positive results regarding the involvement of students in the educational process. These programs have approached high school students, at the beginning and, then, there were adapted for elementary school. Due to the positive results of these programs (in the case of tested ages), we suggest the need to extend the general approach for students or higher education.

In the frame of work of extending the good practices previously presented we emphasize the need for interventions meant to develop empowerment in Romanian higher education.

In the attempt to move some steps forward from clarifying the main dimensions of the mentioned constructs, one facet that needs more attention is the problem of empowerment evaluation that can give us also a proof of the effects of the programs based on empowerment.

For the construct of empowerment there were identified both qualitative evaluations related to in depth unstructured interviews or semi-structured interviews and quantitative evaluations based on questionnaires. Zimmerman [4] shows that empowering experiences oriented to learning new skills and developing a sense of control can be related to learned hopefulness. In order to conclude upon the presence of empowerment state, there are needed cognitive, personality and motivational measures of perceived control [4].

The role of qualitative assessments is to highlight specific issues and to determine their frequency. When looking at studies evaluating empowerment construct and process, excepting organizational psychology studies, there can be highlighted more qualitative studies compared to the number of quantitative ones. The preference for qualitative methods, is due to the ambiguity problems in defining the construct and of selecting certain dimensions considered relevant for certain groups and, on the other hand, to the involvement of specialists from different fields in approaching the construct – psychology, social work, sociology and educational sciences –, since methods are accessible to all specializations.

It is, however, required a summary of the results of qualitative interventions with an inventory of frequencies identifying different dimensions of explaining the construct empowerment.

Studies related to the assessment of the conceptual dimensions of empowerment oriented towards qualitative assessment mention ethnographic methods [20] [21], depth unstructured interviews [22], semi-structured interviews [23], [24], [25].

As for the quantitative methods, they were efficiently synthesized by Simmons, Lehmann [26] and are oriented towards aspects related to community groups, health, supporting people with different diseases, either they have a more general character: Psychological Empowerment Scale (Akey, Marquis & Ross, 2000 in [26]).

Given that the use of the quantitative evaluations instruments mentioned above is oriented towards assisting community groups and people in disease, it would be useful to adapt some of these instruments for the educational environment. As there are no questionnaires designed specifically for the educational settings mainly schools and universities, it would be of great use to develop some questionnaires in this field.

Quantitative methods assessing the construct are focused on certain dimensions according to target group and relate to scales [26]: Diabetes Empowerment Scale Short Form (Anderson *et. al.*, 2003), The Empowerment Scale (Rogers, Ralph & Slazer, 2010) [9], Health Care Empowerment Questionnaire (Gagnon *et. al.*, 2006), Menon Empowerment Scale (Menon, 1999, 2001), Psychological Empowerment Scale (Akey, Marquis & Ross, 2000), The Social Work Empowerment Scale (Frans, 2003). Analysing quantitative assessments, it can be observed they are oriented towards the medical field or towards community and the absence of quantitative tools appropriate for the educational field.

In the area of assessment tools for empowerment construct we state upon the idea of the need for inventory and differentiation of qualitative and quantitative assessment tools of empowerment in the educational environment and to develop an assessment tool for empowerment specially created for the educational environment.

5. Conclusions

There are some conclusions that can be highlighted after reviewing the literature related to empowerment and learned hopefulness applied to social settings in general and educational settings in particular. There have been emphasised four main needs related to empowerment intervention.

The need of conceptual clarification. In the literature, there have been multiple attempts to analyze the construct of empowerment (Gibson 1991 Skelton, 1994 Rodwell 1996, in [3]), but it could not be achieved convergence of views towards one way of explanation at scientific level.

The need to expand the models of empowerment development programs in educational settings to all students, not just to one part of disadvantaged groups. In the American educational system there have been implemented empowerment development programs designed for the majority of students ([6], [29], [30]), which ended with positive results regarding the involvement of students in the educational process. These programs have approached high school students, at the beginning and, then, there were adapted for elementary school. Due to the positive results of these programs (in the case of tested ages), we suggest the need to extend the general approach for students or higher education in general and to Romanian students in particular.

As a sequel of the idea of using empowerment strategies in student's education we stated upon the need for interventions meant to develop empowerment intervention in Romanian higher education in order to sustain students' adjustment to European educational systems frame.

The last piece of the image of empowerment construct and process is represented by its evaluation. In the area of assessment tools for empowerment construct there has been identified the need for inventory and differentiation of qualitative and quantitative assessment tools of empowerment in the educational environment and to develop an assessment tool for empowerment specially created for the educational environment

Taking into consideration all the four argument needs there can be stated that there are strong arguments for future researches concerning the implementation for enhancing personal growth in educational environments through strategies targeting student's empowerment and learned hopefulness.

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