

A Qualitative Investigation into Student Empowerment in Higher Education: Perceptions of Students, Faculty Members and Administrators*

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to explore the concept of student empowerment and empowering aspects of the higher education curricula as perceived by the students, faculty members and administrators. The research design was a case study and it is conducted at a private university in Turkey. The data were obtained via semi-structured interviews with 24 undergraduate students, eight faculty members and five administrators. The findings of the study revealed the complexity and multi-dimensionality of student empowerment. Participants defined empowered students in higher education as having active personal and social characteristics. Different members' views of the empowering factors overlapped to a great extent and they were grouped under three interconnected dimensions: academic, social and political empowerment. Participants' reports indicate that student empowerment in university curricula depends on several factors, such as faculty qualifications, active student participation in curriculum decisions, student clubs, extracurricular activities, and whether students have the opportunity/right to voice their demands and objections. The data analysis points out a possible existence of a fourth dimension which centers around personal characteristics. Hence, further research is needed to prove the existence of this fourth dimension as in the current data set it did not come forth as a major dimension. Furthermore, the findings revealed that democratic understanding is a precondition for student empowerment and a "deep" democratic understanding is needed in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Emancipation, empowering curriculum, democracy, higher education, student empowerment

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Introduction

The 21st century, also referred to as the information age, digital age, or technology age, is an era of uncertainty because of the unprecedented changes it is undergoing. Schools are expected to prepare students for jobs that do not exist and for problems that cannot be predicted. In this era of uncertainty, students must meet the expectations of the workforce and society. To meet these expectations, university students have been ascribed too many attributes.

Many of the characteristics attributed to higher education students are determined out of the real contexts of higher education institutions, mostly based on the needs and expectations of the economy and job markets. For example, characteristics of a higher education graduate have been listed in an OECD report (2018) as being curious, flexible, resilient, self-regulated, showing respect to others' viewpoints and values; dealing with failure, and managing to move on despite the challenges they face. From the same token, UNESCO - not a higher education institution - has been publishing market research results on how higher education graduates would attain these characteristics during their education and how higher education institutions would empower them. The report published stated that there were two main roles of higher education institutions; a) to ensure sustainable development and b) to empower students (UNESCO, 2017).

The last few decades have witnessed unmatched increases in the number of higher education institutions and students. These quantitative increases, together with competition between the institutions, have led to qualitative concerns and debates on the effectiveness of higher education. The increased demand for higher education has led to an increase in the number of private higher education institutions, bringing new concerns and debates. The main controversial issues caused by privatization in higher education are the commodification of higher education, human rights and equality in higher education, the quality of higher education and unqualified academic degrees (Altinay & Seggie, 2015). Higher education is now viewed as a commodity, and the student becomes the customer (Apple, 2001).

Students need to be empowered within a student-centered paradigm in this change process. In the process of paradigm change, higher education institutions should synthesize realities of their own context and educational theories that provide a cumulative knowledge base. A student-centered paradigm requires more intellectually, socially, politically and academically active students. For example, students want to and need to have a say in the decisions of what and how to learn and shape their learning processes (Casares, Dickson, Hannigan, Hinton & Phelps, 2012). However, many studies showed that although many institutions and educators state they follow a student-centred approach, in reality, the learning and teaching process is only under teachers' and institutions' control (Biggs, 1999; Farrington, 1991; Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003). As a matter of fact, the very nature of higher education is relevantly committed to recognizing active students and providing conditions for active participation at all levels of decision making with a democratic understanding (Dewey, 1929).

Student Empowerment

First, the words “power” and “powerful” should be analyzed to understand student empowerment. Sullivan (2002) discusses three different concepts of power. The first one is “power-over” which means one party uses power over the others. The second is “power-with” that describes the situation in which power is shared equally between the members. The final one is “power-to” in which people feel the power to act. From these three different concepts of power, the last one signals empowerment. In other words, empowerment can be defined as to authorize someone (or self) in certain areas or issues (Barrow & Milburn, 1990). It is important to underline here that a higher authority does not necessarily give authority, but it is more about becoming powerful throughout some developmental processes.

Empowerment as a concept in education has appeared in various forms in the literature since the 1980s and has been variously defined. Most of these definitions base student empowerment on the same philosophical, psychological and social roots with student centered and society centered approaches. For Boomer (1982), for example, student empowerment is a process of participation; for Ashcroft (1987), Duhon-Haynes (1996), and Sullivan (2002), it is an educational philosophy related to the self-actualization of the individual; for Freire (1973), Shor (1992), Leuchauer and Shulman (1992), and Frymier, Shulman, and Houser (1996), it is a set of educational processes that create a critical consciousness of action; for Husen and Postlethwaite (1994), it is an educational approach, an idealized educational situation; for Stone (1995), it is a set of necessary skills that enable individuals to function effectively; for Brunson and Vogt (1996), it is a developmental process, continuous improvement; for McQuillan (2005), it is a structure consisting of academic, social, and political dimensions; and for Broom (2015), it is a set of educational processes, rights, and responsibilities.

Studies focusing on student voice also refer to student empowerment. In these studies, (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999; Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2003; Ngussa & Makewa, 2014), student voice does not only refer to students’ expressing their views, but also their taking active role in curriculum decisions and evaluation, and having the power to drive change. On the opposite side of student empowerment stands student alienation. Student alienation is an important learning problem that decreases academic performance and causes students to develop resistance to school.

To form the theoretical framework of this study and determine the features of empowering curriculum, definitions of Freire (Darder, 2014; Freire, 1973; in Shor 1987; 1992; 1996) and McQuillan (1995; 2005) were adopted. Freire relates empowerment with emancipation. His model of emancipatory literacy has been the foundational concept of later discussions on student empowerment or empowerment through education (Freire, 1973; Giroux, 1988; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988; Mayo, 1995; Galloway, 2012). Similarly, defining student empowerment from a re-constructivist perspective, Shor (1996) suggests a negotiated curriculum. For Shor, empowering curriculum is participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogical, de-socializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary and activist. On the other hand,

McQuillan (1995; 2005) defines student empowerment from a more analytical perspective and divides the concept into three interrelated dimensions: academic empowerment, social empowerment, and political empowerment. In this study, the three dimensions of McQuillan's definition are embedded in Freire's broader concept of empowering education.

In the light of the problems discussed above, this study aimed to explore the concept of student empowerment in higher education and to identify the factors that empower students from the viewpoints of the students, faculty members and administrators. This study is a descriptive case study employing qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methods are used when the purpose is to study a case or phenomenon in a holistic way in its natural setting or to thoroughly study issues about which there is a scarcity of research and investigation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 2009). The case can be a unit of analysis. The case in this study is the bachelors study programs of the particular university, which was discussed based on the participants' experiences and meanings. In line with the above purpose of qualitative research, in this study the concept of "student empowerment" is investigated in its natural setting. The data gathered from the interviews reflect participants' views and are presented descriptively. Direct quotations from the participants were given in the presentation of the findings.

The Participants' opinions were analyzed using the academic, social and political dimensions of empowerment, namely academic, social and political empowerment. Moreover, empowering processes and mechanisms are focalized through what, how and why questions. Lastly, no theories are tested in the data analysis, instead description of participants' views is aimed at.

Relevant to the aim of this study, answers to the following research questions were sought:

- What are students' conceptions as to student empowerment?
- What are faculty members' conceptions as to student empowerment?
- What are the empowering factors in a higher education curriculum for students, faculty members and administrators?

This study is important for the field of curriculum development in education because with this study, the concepts of "student empowerment" and "empowered student" were defined and brought into the field. In addition, the factors which empower students academically, socially and politically in higher education were identified and a framework was created. This framework is hoped to guide future studies in curriculum development and evaluation.

Method

Research Design

This study was conducted at a fee-paid private university in Turkey with limited financial scholarship options subject to high test scores in the university entrance exam. The university's mission is to conduct theoretical and applied research, to raise the qualified work force for the work market, to develop cooperation between university and industry, and to contribute to the country's and society's economic and social improvement with its research and development activities. In the year when the study was conducted, there were 5825 students enrolled in six faculties, 22 departments, 15 masters and 7 doctorate programs. There were 308 faculty members and 130 administrative staffs.

This university is chosen as the case in this study for two main reasons. Firstly, different from other universities in Turkey, it has three semesters and the education continues during the summer. Secondly, it has a unique program called cooperative education. This cooperative education is like an internship program which aims to strengthen the link between the university and industry. Unlike other internship programs in Turkey, this program is longer and students get paid. Students graduate from the university with one-year job experience in total.

Participants

The participant of this study were students, faculty members and administrators. In order to reach participants for the interviews, a purposeful maximum diversity sampling method was used. The purposeful sampling methods aim to reach key people in order to obtain the most relevant and richest data on the subject being researched (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2016). Thus, considering that they may have sufficient experience about the programs and structure of the university, 24 (12 female and 12 male) third and fourth-year undergraduate students, were interviewed. Eight (5 female and 3 male) faculty members who have been working at the university for at least two academic years and who teach at the undergraduate level with a PhD degree as a criterion were selected voluntarily. The faculty members consisted of one professor, three associate professors and four instructors. With the same sampling method, five (1 female and 4 male) administrators from each department with at least a two-year management experience were selected.

Research Instrument and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews forms were used for data collection. The main purpose of the interview technique is to understand individuals' experiences and how they interpret these experiences (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). In order to develop good interview questions, a connection should be made between literature and research questions, and interview questions should be continuously improved (Yildirim & Simsek, 2013). Semi-

structured interviews provide mutual understanding between the interviewer and participant and enable the researcher improvise follow up questions. And consistent with the theoretical and conceptual background of the study, -structured interviews should be based on previous research and address the conceptual foundations of the problem studied (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson & Kangasniemi, 2016). The interviews took 45 minutes on average and all interviews were recorded. The following steps were followed to develop the interview forms.

- Setting the theoretical foundations
- Conducting unplanned interviews
- Deciding on the interview type
- Forming the interview questions
- Getting expert opinion
- Conducting the first pilot study
- Evaluating the pilot study results and getting expert opinion
- Conducting the second pilot study
- Finalizing the interview forms

Data Analysis

The data from the interviews were analyzed using content analysis. MaxQDA 18 program was benefited from in data analysis. The reason for using a computer supported program was the ease it provides to organize data and to search between the data sets (Angrosino, 2007). The data analysis started with transcribing the records and transferring the data to the computer program. Atkins and Wallence (2012) describe data analysis as a thinking process and it starts with the researcher's fully entering into the data set. Thus, as the first step in this study, the researcher's data set was read line by line to internalize. In the qualitative content analysis, deductive category application approach was followed. Deductive category application starts with prior defined, theoretically derived aspects of analysis and connects them with the text (Mayring, 2000). Data analysis started with the themes from the literature used to construct the interview forms.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative studies, the most important factors increasing trustworthiness are triangulation, long term interaction and transparency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2016). In this study, to ensure this, data were collected from three different participant groups and the interviews continued until saturation. All the steps followed in

the research were reported in detail, two pilot studies were conducted, and expert opinion was taken for the instruments. In the data analysis step, a sample from the data set was coded by two different experts in content analysis and their codes were compared by those of the researcher.

Results and Discussions

Students' Conceptions of Student Empowerment

Students' views on empowered students are gathered under four themes; personality characteristics, social characteristics, academic characteristics and political characteristics. For them, empowered students in higher education stand out with their personal and social characteristics. As understood from a student statement below, the most important personal characteristics of empowered students are that they have goals, set goals, can reach their goals, can make their own decisions, and are versatile individuals.

For me, an empowered student is someone who has decided on his future job and trusts himself. And in terms of the university life, this student works hard academically, socially and culturally to reach his goal (SFE3).

The social characteristics of empowered students come after personal characteristics and are followed by academic characteristics. Important social characteristics are having communication skills, having leadership skills, being in student clubs and having a big social circle. Academic characteristics only make sense when combined with individual and social features. On the other hand, applying what they have learned, passing their lessons by really learning and showing success in the lessons are among the most important academic characteristics. Furthermore, the politically empowered student is defined as a student who makes his/her voice heard.

The findings above largely overlap with the social dimension of student empowerment in McQuillan's (2005) classification. In social empowerment, an educational environment where students feel safe and all different voices are respected is aimed. Moreover, the emphasis on personal development is parallel to improve the autonomy and integrity of the individual in Barnett's (1992) classification of the aims of higher education.

Frequently used expressions such as "setting own goals, making own decisions, discipline, determination, being able to overcome difficulties" and skills such as self-regulation and self-control show that autonomy empowers students. This finding overlaps with the findings of studies (Bates, 1998; Kaur, 2014) that examine the relationship between student autonomy and student empowerment. Bates (1998) states that empowering curricula give students responsibility. Kaur (2014) defines an empowered student as an autonomous student. Providing students with the opportunities to develop metacognitive skills to gain autonomy, and maintaining democratic learning

environments without authoritarian pressure set the ground for student empowerment. These findings indicate that the empowering curricula give importance to the personal and social development of students and their academic development.

Faculty Members' Conception of Student Empowerment

Faculty members' views on the personal characteristics of empowered students largely overlap with those of the students. According to the faculty members, the first personal characteristic of empowered students is that they have goals and can reach their goals. Secondly, faculty members characterized students with advanced analytical skills and questioning as empowered. Moreover, empowered students can identify and solve problems. In parallel with the student findings, another characteristic of empowered students is their self-confidence and the faculty members stated that they aim to increase their students' self-confidence.

Self-confidence is very important, maybe it is the most important one. I always try to increase their self-confidence. For me, a self-confident student is an empowered student (FMFSL1).

As for social dimension, most of the faculty members described the empowered student as social with advanced communication skills. Like students, faculty members stressed that academic achievement alone is not enough to qualify a student as empowered. Just like students, faculty members use phrases such as "have goals, set their own goals, make their own decisions, and implement their decisions" while defining the empowered student. This finding supports studies (Bates, 1998; Kaur, 2014; Stone, 1995) examining the relationship between student empowerment and student autonomy.

Empowering Factors for the Students

Academically empowering factors

One factor that academically empowers students is students' taking active roles in curriculum development. For this, education should be defined as a process carried out with students, not as a service provided to them. Students must be a member of the curriculum development committee (Schwab, 1983). As the school's community members, the students have a critical role in the curriculum development process, and active participation of the students should be ensured (Dewey, 1929; Shor, 1992).

On the other hand, Oliva (2009) states that students are in the supporting group of curriculum development. According to Oliva (2009), students, as the recipients of the curriculum, provide the best feedback and the participation of students in the curriculum development process is directly proportional to their cognitive maturity level. In this study, the students also stated that their most active role was providing feedback. It can be concluded that the participation of the students in the curriculum development processes is "helpful" and "occasional" in Oliva's (2009, p.90) terms.

Another important feature of the empowering curriculum is that students and teachers

develop a critical and democratic perspective together (Shor, 1992; 1996). The majority of students think their participation in curriculum development processes has positive effects. However, a small number of students believe that they should not take an active role in those processes. Emphasizing that they have high academic goals, they think to reach their academic goals, faculty members should have more control on curriculum, and the faculty members should take decisions. Some students reported worries that their academic success will decrease and they will not reach their goals if students make decisions. Yet, some students wished for more control in decisions about the programs. Based on this finding, it can be concluded that the teacher's being the absolute authority challenge further the students who already have difficulties in learning while making the already successful ones happier. This finding matches with Apple's discussion of knowledge, power and curriculum when he poses the question "why and how do people get convinced to accept the understanding and policies of dominant groups?" (Apple, 2012, p.11)

Their cooperation with their peers and faculty members is another empowering factor for students. This finding can be explained with Vygotsky's views on cooperative learning based on the idea that the learner being an "apprentice" gaining the knowledge and skills of his culture through guidance and cooperation (1978). The developmental theory is based on the role of the student's collaboration with a more talented person such as a parent or teacher, facilitating the transition from supported performance to independent performance.

According to students, the three-term education system is another factor contributing to their academic empowerment. Although students consider three-semester education tiring, they think it empowers them academically by providing continuity in education and keeping them in the learning environment. Thanks to this continuity, they think they spend both summer and class periods more efficiently. Moreover, as seen in the sample student statement below, students are empowered academically by gaining self-discipline and regular studying habits.

I didn't expect to study this much. You know, I need to study every day and be disciplined. The terms are shorter and programs are intensive. If I don't study, I will fail. I learned to be organized thanks to this three-semester education (SFE1).

Another academically empowering factor that all students agree on is faculty members. Most students stated that the faculty members are very knowledgeable. Moreover, as understood in the sample student sentence below, students think that taking lessons from faculty members who are experts, have different backgrounds, and are well-known in their fields empowers them academically.

We had a professor in particular, maybe if he weren't there, we couldn't have learned so much. He offered methodology courses in the history department. It was the best course; I think this was a huge plus for us. Also, we had a famous international law professor. It was a privilege to learn from such professors (SFSL3).

At the basis of many learning-teaching approaches such as situation-based learning, project-based learning, and problem-based learning, lies an understanding of

education in which the student can use their power and learn by doing and experiencing, as suggested by Dewey (1929). In this study, most of the students think that they establish a connection between theory and practice in the programs they attend through both in-class and extracurricular activities, which also empowers them academically.

Finally, high academic expectations are among the factors that significantly contribute to academic empowerment. The prominence of high academic expectations and challenging academic programs as factors that empower students academically is consistent with the views of McQuillan (2005). McQuillan (2005) states curricula that enable students academically should have high standards and teachers should have high expectations. The existence of a relationship between teacher expectation and student achievement has been proven by similar studies (Boehlert, 2005; Cooper, 2000; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010).

Socially empowering factors

According to the students, the factors that empower them socially are the close relationships between the stakeholders in the institution, easy communication, importance given to improve leadership and entrepreneurship skills, student clubs and the frequent group works in lessons. Education is a social process, and of course the quality of the relationships students have with other members of the community affects their empowerment. As understood from a student quotation below, for the student, the most important reason of their having empowering relationships is the institution's being relatively small.

For example, they say there is not much socialization in the school. However, it is a small school and because of this, I think we are likely to get to know a lot of people. I have at least one friend from each department. This is very good, we will be in contact with each other when we enter business life in the future. I think this school provides me with a good social circle (SFL2).

This finding is supported by various studies on school size and facilities (Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Nathan & Febey, 2001; Schneider, 2002; Wasley, Fine, Gladden, Holland, King, Mosak & Powell, 2000). While Fowler and Walberg (1991) states that small schools increase academic success, Nathan and Febey (2001) points out that besides academic success, they provide a safer education environment for students and fewer disciplinary problems. Schneider (2002) states that small schools positively affect student- teacher relation and communication. On the other hand, Wasley et al. (2000) conclude that small schools increase student success, student participation, and students' sense of sociality.

Secondly, the findings show that the healthy and easy communication students establish with different members within the institution is socially empowering. This finding overlaps with the results of many studies in the literature (Houser & Frymier, 2009; Kirk, Lewis, Brown, Karibo & Partk, 2016; Robinson, 1994). Houser & Frymier (2009) state that accessible and open teacher behavior is an important predictor of empowerment and learning. According to Robinson (1994), the most important component of the classroom environment is communication. Good teachers are in successful and effective

communication with their students, which both empowers their students and themselves (Robinson, 1994). When the teacher is in an open interaction with the students and the educational environment based on dialogue, the students learn from the teacher. In contrast, the teacher learns from the students. Thus, both teachers and students are empowered.

Another factor which empowers students socially is cross-cultural communication. It also overlaps with similar studies in literature (Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, Irvine, Nieto, Schofield, & Stephan, 2001; Kaya, 2014; Shor, 1992). Banks et al. (2001) state that students must have certain knowledge, attitudes, and skills to adapt to society and establish positive relationships with people from different groups. These knowledge, attitudes and skills can be developed by interacting with different cultures. Shor (1992) states that curriculum should be based on multiculturalism to prevent student alienation, make students feel a belonging to their educational processes, and be empowered. Multicultural education; regardless of race, gender, culture, language, religion and social class, requires an educational environment where all students respect each other and benefit from educational opportunities under equal conditions (Banks, 2013; Kaya, 2014).

A different factor that socially empowers students is entrepreneurship and leadership. Leadership and entrepreneurship courses, the expectation from students to find a business idea and establish an imaginary company within the scope of this course, and financial support given to successful student projects coincide with the aims of the entrepreneur university. Among the main objectives of the entrepreneur universities are students' being educated as entrepreneurs, providing students with technology and innovation awareness, establishing university-industry cooperation, graduates' not only looking for jobs but also producing jobs (Sakinc & Bursalioğlu, 2012; Schulte, 2004).

Students' views on the impact of student clubs on their social empowerment also overlap with similar studies in the literature (Hawkings, 2015; Smith and Chenoweth, 2015). These studies show that students who play an active role in student clubs are more competent, autonomous and independent in setting goals. According to Hawkings (2015), participation into the clubs contributes to students' success in different areas of university life. In addition, students stated that they developed leadership skills through their clubs. This finding coincides with the findings of Smith and Chenoweth (2015). For Smith and Chenoweth (2015), students who took part in extracurricular activities and clubs develop leadership characteristics.

Politically empowering factors

In terms of political empowerment, students feel politically empowered by the fact that they can conveniently communicate their demands and objections to the appropriate people, by the existence and work of the student council, by shared decision-making in class, by student clubs, by respect for different views within the institution, and by freedom of expression. The student statement below illustrates the politically empowering contributions of student council.

Once there was a problem. First, students tried to collect signature and wrote on social media. But we couldn't solve the problem. Actually, they should go and talk directly, but they didn't. Then, the student council stepped in. They spoke up and the matter was settled (SFE3).

From students' statements, it can be inferred that the university administration is open to meeting student's demands, and steps are taken quickly to meet students' demands, especially academic demands related to curricular issues and exam calendars. Students' stating that steps are taken to meet their academic demands quickly while they are slow to meet other demands shows that the institution emphasises academic empowerment.

Other empowering factors focus on personal expectations and personal development. These findings support studies that examine student empowerment under subheadings such as personal identity (James, 1996), personal development and awareness (Angelique, 2001), and personal empowerment (Baird, Bracken, & Grierson, 2016). Based on these findings and these different expressions in the literature, it can be inferred that student empowerment may have a fourth dimension related to personal characteristics.

Empowering Factors for the Faculty Members

Academically empowering factors

Faculty members' views on student participation in the curriculum development processes largely overlap with those of the students. As in the student findings, it is understood from faculty members' statements that students' contribution to the curriculum development process is occasional and helping. As understood from a sample faculty member statement, students' feedback is very important in developing the course and in decision making processes.

When I first started giving the course, at the end of the first few semesters I got feedback from the students on content of the course, the curriculum and the evaluation processes. Their comments were very beneficial and I shaped the course and teaching accordingly. (FMFSL1).

Like students, faculty members agree that the emphasis placed on linking theory and practice in their programs is an academically empowering factor. The most important practice linking theory with practice is project-based education. The projects improve students' such skills as problem solving and group work.

Faculty members stated they had high academic expectations and carried out challenging programs accordingly, which empowers students academically. High academic expectations coincide with McQuillian's views (2005). They also underlined that to empower students they aim to increase students' participation in the lessons through in-class discussions and group work. Faculty members's views on academic empowerment and the use of different teaching methods overlap with the results of the studies (James, 1996; Huff & McNown, 1998; Tamim, 2018) examining the relationship between student empowerment and teaching methods. Moreover, this finding supports the studies (Ince, 2002; Joshani-Shirvan, 2008; Pakfiliz, 2004; Teker, 1990) examining

the effects of learner-centered teaching methods on student achievement in Turkish literature.

Interestingly, the views of faculty members and students regarding extracurricular activities are different. While most of the faculty members in the study thought that extracurricular activities empower students academically, very few students listed them as academically empowering factors. This difference shows students and faculty members have different perspectives on extracurricular activities. Faculty members look at these activities from an academic perspective, but students look at them from a social perspective and think these activities are socially empowering rather than academically.

On cooperation between faculty members and students as an academically empowering factor, the faculty members' and the students' views are parallel. Cooperative learning is one of the most effective learning-teaching methods in creating democratic learning environments and enabling students to interact with each other and with their teachers (Yilmaz, 2001). For the faculty members, cooperative learning increases students' academic success and contributes significantly to developing their social skills by keeping students active. Collaborative learning is also very effective in developing critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity skills. A sample faculty member quotation below illustrates these faculty member views on cooperative education.

Thanks to this cooperative education, I believe our students are well prepared for work life. I observe it when our students and students from other universities do projects together. Moreover, I see their performance at work after they graduate. They are used to work life; they know how to behave at work. They are result-oriented and minor tensions or problems do not demotivate them. They are more mature. (FMFEAS1).

Faculty members think that they have well-developed curricula, which empowers students academically. The first factor that makes their curricula empowering is their being original for the faculty members. Faculty members stated that they designed original curricula in line with the students, faculties, and departments' needs and goals. Moreover, for the faculty members, electives courses offered by their departments and faculties are empowering. Finally, offering double major and minor degrees empowers students academically by allowing students to do interdisciplinary work. From the statements of the faculty members, it can be concluded that student-centered education programs are conducted and these programs empower students. In the student-centered approach, education programs are prepared considering the interests and needs of students (Ellis, 2013). In this study, faculty members stated that students' interests and needs were taken into account. In addition, elective courses, minor and double major programs are the empowering factors as students attend in line with their interests and needs.

Socially empowering factors

For the faculty members, socially empowering factors are student-faculty communication, student-faculty member relations, leadership and entrepreneurship skills and social activities. In line with student findings, the faculty members also stated

that the teaching staff were open and accessible to communication. There is an open door policy in the institution, and students can reach the faculty members whenever they want. To reach faculty members, students mostly prefer to visit them in their offices or call them. They also use email as an effective means of communication.

Secondly, the relationship between students and faculty members stands out as a socially empowering factor. Faculty members described their relations with their students as respectful and sincere. As in student interviews, no negative expressions about the relationship between students and faculty members were used. For the faculty members, the reasons for establishing a sincere and respectful relationship between students and faculty members are the university's being a foundation university, being a small university and having young academic staff. Faculty members' views on the relationship they set and are expected to set with the students and communication between faculty and students are parallel with the findings of many studies in the literature. Intrapersonal student empowerment is related to equitable use of power by teachers, positive student-teacher relationships and building a sense of community in the classroom (Kirk et al, 2016).

As discussed previously, the purpose of the institution is to train students as leaders and entrepreneurs. Following this purpose, faculty members also stated that they aim to develop leadership and entrepreneurship skills through both in-class and extracurricular studies. Moreover, group works, projects, and presentations are frequently included in the courses, contributing to students' leadership skills. Lastly, for a faculty member the Leadership and Entrepreneurship course that students in all departments take compulsorily improves their leadership skills.

Politically empowering factors

The views of the faculty members on politically empowering factors overlap with the students' views. Just like students, faculty members think that the first factor that empowers students politically is the ability of students to express their demands and objections easily. Students can easily express their demands to school administration, faculty and department heads and academic staff. Also, like students, faculty members underlined that the academic demands of the students were met more rapidly. Analyzing faculty members' views on the factors of political empowerment as a whole, one can conclude that in order for students to be politically empowered, they should not be silent stakeholders, but their voices must be heard (Angelique, Reischl, & Davidson, 2002). Moreover, as illustrated below, for the faculty members the works of the student council and freedom of expression are two other factors that politically empower students.

I think there is a peaceful atmosphere. For example, there is a comfortable environment in the USA. Everyone can express his opinion freely. I think our school is a bit like that. Our professors are open-minded. I think no teacher has an attitude to judge students for their ideas or beliefs. I have never met such an instructor here. (FMFE3).

As for the other empowering factors, faculty members expect their students to be individuals who research, question, think critically and analytically, and have advanced

problem solving and interpretation skills. In addition to these skills, faculty members stated that students are expected to be self-confident, versatile and entrepreneurial individuals who are ready for the business. These views of faculty members on the other empowering factors are parallel to those of students.

Empowering Factors for the Administrators

Academically Empowering Factors

According to administrators, several factors empower students academically. One of them is interdisciplinary studies. The most important program feature enabling students to do interdisciplinary studies is elective courses. Administrators emphasized that their programs are rich in terms of departmental, faculty and non-faculty elective courses. These elective courses empower students academically by allowing them to specialize in a field they want and learn about different disciplines. Secondly, administrators stated that double major and minor degree programs provide students with the opportunity to do interdisciplinary studies and empower students academically. Finally, two administrators stated that students can carry out interdisciplinary studies and become academically empowered thanks to the projects carried out jointly by different departments and faculties in the university. This focus on interdisciplinary studies through elective courses, minor and double major studies supports the findings in the literature regarding the relationship between interdisciplinary studies and student empowerment (Mason, 1996; Newell, 1990). For Mason (1996), interdisciplinary studies contribute to learning in psychological, sociocultural and motivational aspects. In Newell's (1990) views, interdisciplinary studies improve students' analytical thinking, critical thinking, research and communication skills and help them to understand better the world they live in.

Like faculty members, administrators think they empower students academically with well-developed curricula. For the administrators, the programs they carry out are unique, aim at the needs of students and the business world, and provide students with the opportunity to specialize in a field. For example, one administrator stated that they first designed the curriculum and then recruited appropriate lecturers for the courses to be opened, they didn't design the curricula according to the teaching force they have.

As you know, especially in some state universities, the curriculum is designed according to their teaching staff, which is limiting. However, we did the opposite. When we founded our faculty, we first designed the ideal curriculum and then recruited the teaching staff. I think this is one of the most empowering features of our curriculum (FMEAS1).

Just like students and faculty members, administrators compare their programs with programs in other universities and draw attention to their differences. This can be interpreted as an indication of the privatization of higher education. With the neoliberal transformations that started in the 1980s and increased their influence in the 1990s, education's marketisation gradually increased. Accordingly, the purpose, function and content of education has transformed and changed to meet the market's needs. The

purpose of education, which has been transformed into a commodity, has been transformed into the training of human resources in line with the demands of the market by qualifying individuals more quickly and effectively (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Educational institutions most affected by this transformation have been higher education institutions. Competitive entrepreneurship culture has become one of the basic educational paradigms. While institutions that meet international standards are seen as successful, those who cannot meet these standards have started to be defined as second class (Sayilan, 2006).

For administrators, another important factor that empowers students is the credentials of the faculty members. In the interviews with students and faculty members, faculty members stood out as an important empowering factor. The students stated that they liked their faculty members very much, could communicate easily, and benefited from their counseling and guidance. This finding was shared with the administrators and the reasons behind were asked. The administrators stated that there is an unwritten norm for the faculty members to establish a close relationship with their students, faculty members are expected to be in such an attitude and whether or not candidates are qualified to establish such relationships is one of the determining factors in the recruitment process. They also stated that student feedback is of high importance, yet they did not use any expressions regarding students' direct and active participation at the decision level.

Student quality and high academic expectations are other academically empowering factors. Administrators stated that most of their students pass the university entrance exam with success and come to their faculties with high expectations and this situation also empowers others. Moreover, for administrators the targets and standards of their programs are high and this is academically empowering. In addition to emphasizing that they have high academic expectations, the administrators also compared their programs and departments with the programs of other universities that are best known in their fields. This is also an indicator of high academic expectations.

Socially empowering factors

All participants in the study underlined the existence of a respectful relationship between students and faculty members and described both students and faculty members as respectful. In line with the opinions of the students and the faculty members, the administrators think that the most important factor that empowers students socially is the healthy communication students have with their faculty members. Administrators think that the first reason for establishing a close relationship between faculty members and students within the framework of respect is that faculty members are open to communication, as seen in the sample quotation below. It is emphasized that this is expected from faculty members and students' feedback on this issue is highly important.

I think communication is very good in our school. Our doors are open to all students. For one reason, most of our teachers are young. For example, we don't have any instructor over 50s in our department. (AFE1).

Secondly, the institution's being a relatively small university, the number of students' per faculty member being low, and faculty members' and students' interacting in the same environment for a long time strengthen the relations between students and faculty members. Other factors that empower students socially are student communities, intercultural communication, campus facilities, social activities, entrepreneurship and leadership lessons and social media. Administrators, like students and faculty members, think having a small campus increases the communication, cooperation and solidarity among the members and the campus is used effectively. The fact that all departments receive education in classrooms side by side in the same building ensures that students have friends from different departments. This finding regarding the link between school size and empowerment parallels the findings of many studies on school size and facilities (Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Nathan & Febey, 2001; Schneider, 2002; Wasley, et. al., 2000).

Politically empowering factors

The administrators' views on the factors that empower students politically are parallel to those of students and faculty members. Administrators stated that the first factor that politically empowers the students was the ability of the students to express their demands and objections easily. According to the administrators, other factors that empower students politically are the institution's being relatively small, the student council's work, making decisions with the students, and the students' ability to reach the administration comfortably.

Overall Summary of the Results

A comparative analysis of the findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Comparative Summary of the Findings

Participants	Student empowerment	Empowering Factors		
		Academic	Social	Political
Students	- Having goals	- Student Participation to curriculum development processes	- Close relationship between the stakeholders	- Conveying demands and objections to the related people
	- Setting goals	- 3-semester education system	- Communication between the stakeholders	- Student council
	- Reaching goals	- Faculty members	- Importance given to leadership and entrepreneur skills	- Shared decision taking
	- Making his/her own decisions	- Cooperation between stakeholders	- Student clubs	- Student clubs
	- Having communication skills	- High academic expectations	- Group works	- Respect for different views
	- Showing leadership skills	- Link between theory and practice		- Freedom of expression
	- Being in a student club			
	- Having a big social circle			
	- Transferring learning to real life			
	- Having academic success			
	- Making his/her voice heard			

Faculty members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having goals - Reaching their goals - Having analytical skills - Questioning skills - Identifying and solving problems - Having self-confidence - Social - Having communicating skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student participation to curriculum development - Link between theory and practice - Faculty members - High academic expectations - Teaching methods and techniques - Cooperation between stakeholders - Quality of education programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student-faculty communication - Student- faculty member relations - Leadership and entrepreneurship skills - Social activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expressing demands and objections easily - Student council
Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inter-disciplinary studies - Quality of education programs - Faculty members - Link between theory and practice - Student participation in curriculum development processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication between students and faculty - Studying at a small university - Intercultural communication - Campus facilities - Social activities - Entrepreneurship and leadership courses - Social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expressing demand and objections - Studying at a small university - Student council - Making decisions with students - Reaching administrators easily

As seen in Table 1 above, students' and faculty members' views on the characteristics of an empowered student overlap to a great extent. Yet, while the students list more personal characteristics, faculty members focus more on academic characteristics. As for the empowering factors, again students and faculty members are mostly of the same opinion. On the other hand, administrators focus more on the quality of education and usually make comparison between their university and other universities to draw attention to differences.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study considered the curriculum as a practice (Young, 1998) an emancipation practice (Freire, 1973), a currere (Pinar, 1994) and political empowerment (Giroux, 1988). Findings showed that the most important feature of curricula that empowers students is possessing a multi-dimensional structure. This structure requires a complex and multidimensional curriculum approach. It is crucial to view curriculum considering students' academic, social, political, and personal empowerment. The first requirement is to provide students with an active role in curriculum design decisions that relate to the concepts of democratic education and deliberative curriculum on campus where democracy is a full-time occupation (Shaffer & Longo, 2019). The concept of students' active role has been discussed at diverse levels (Casares et. al., 2014). For Biggs' (1999) "although many institutions and educators state that they follow a student-centered approach, in reality the learning and teaching process is under the control of teachers and institutions". In a really student-centered understanding students are active intellectually, socially, politically and academically; students actively participate in the decisions of what and how to learn and shape their own learning processes. Yet, there

were even some student participants in the study who have a preference for the opposite. As McLaren (1989) addressed in his seminal work “the school is not only a place of indoctrination or social control or a site for instruction, but it is a cultural milieu that promotes student empowerment”.

Another conclusion that can be drawn regarding the curriculum is that an empowering curriculum is designed according to the interests and needs of the students. This result overlaps with the learner-centered program approach in the classifications of Ellis (2013) and Schiro (2008). It is important that curriculum meets students’ needs by providing them with the environment, opportunities and options they need. In determining these interests and needs, it is very important to collaborate with students, include students in decision-making, and receive regular feedback from all partners. This should include as Giroux stated “that enhance the creative capacities of young people and provide the conditions for them to become critical agents” (Giroux, 2014, p.122).

Although it is not a direct finding of the research, another conclusion about curriculum is that some of the participants do not have a full sense of the concepts of “democratic education or democratic school”. In the first pilot study of the research, the participants were asked whether their schools were democratic and some of the participants asked for explanation by stating that they did not understand the question. Some participants stated that the schools do not need to be democratic, they think that it is better when the teachers make decisions. This lack of understanding of democracy has resulted from changing roles and discourse of higher education. Educators have lost the language for linking schooling to democracy, convinced that education is now about job training and competitive market advantage” (Giroux & Giroux, 2004, p.4). Democratic understanding is a precondition for an empowering curriculum and democracy cannot exist without educated people. It can be concluded that there is a need for the establishment of democratic understanding in higher education and this democratic understanding should be a “deep” understanding of democracy.

What is more, the results have little inference about students’ political empowerment. Political empowerment defined “a commitment to act for social change and social justice” and occur concerning leadership, advocacy, experience and a strong will about social change (Angelique, Reischl & Davidson, 2002, p.818) and emancipatory education (Freire, 1973). Nor did participant groups have reference to these dimensions of political empowerment though there may be various forms of political empowerment in university setting.

This study explored the concept of student empowerment in higher education. The findings revealed the complexity and multi-dimensionality of student empowerment. Different members’ views of the empowering factors overlap greatly and are grouped under three dimensions: academic, social and political empowerment. These dimensions cannot be separated with sharp lines because they are interconnected and feed each other. Moreover, when defining empowered students, participants mostly referred to personal characteristics. This is considered a possible existence of a fourth dimension. Participants mostly referred to personal characteristics and this is considered a possible

existence of a fourth dimension that centers around personal characteristics. Darder (2014), with a profound analysis of Freire, addresses this aspect of curriculum seeing it as an empowering and decolonizing instrument.

In conclusion, university as an empowering agent for students is directly related to democracy, participation, fighting for rights, and enhancing capacities. These cannot be gained through only curriculum, yet it is an overall strategy development for a substantive understanding of democracy by and large as social dimension is the end goal of any institution. The findings led us to see how the concept of empowerment in higher education is linked to understanding democracy. Also, the concept and processes of disempowerment remained unknown in this study. Further research is recommended for discussions on democratic understanding in higher education and the ways to empower not only students but also the how to empower students and academics and administrators in this direction.

Ethics Committee Approval: This study is approved by Human Research Evaluation Board of TOBB University of Economics and Technology. (Date: July, 19, 2017, Number: 2017 July/01-3)

Informed Consent: An informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

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