CONTEXT
Recent education research has focused on new teachers and why large numbers of teachers leave the profession (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Few studies have targeted experienced teachers in an attempt to identify factors that have contributed to their retention. The primary outcome of this exploratory study was the development and testing of a quantitative instrument that could be used to identify pivotal experiences that contribute to long-term teacher retention in a larger teacher sample.

CLAIMS
Since the 1980s, teacher empowerment has been one focus of reform in public schools, yet existing research has failed to give much insight regarding what empowerment means to individual teachers, how these meanings are constructed, what events change these meanings, and whether teachers can retain a sense of empowerment in the context of events and changes that occur within and beyond the school setting. Researchers with the Center for Teacher Quality made connections between working conditions, student achievement, and teacher retention. In the Center’s Teacher Working Conditions (TWC) (2006), the researchers recognized the importance of teacher empowerment and proposed that the connection can help improve the retention of teachers and ultimately, the success of the students they teach. If empowerment is vital to effective schools, then it is important to know how it develops and how it can be nurtured.

TEACHER EMPOWERMENT
Though the term ‘empowerment’ is used frequently in contemporary educational discourse, one accepted meaning is shared among all educators. However, some common themes have emerged within the literature. Empowerment is most often viewed as a process through which people become powerful enough to engage in, share control of, and influence events and institutions affecting their lives. In part, empowerment requires that people gain the knowledge, skills, and power necessary to influence their lives and the lives of those they care about.

PHASES OF EMPOWERMENT
In an initial pilot study, Hobbs (2004) found that the six dimensions of empowerment identified by Short (1992) – decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact – appeared and matured in an identifiable sequence. The Hobbs (2004) Phases of Empowerment model (Fig. 1) emerged that conceptualized the teachers’ experiences and shows empowerment as a developmental process with three phases: Initiating (years 1-3), Growth (years 4-8), and Sustaining (years 9+). Empowerment.

PROJECT I.D. METHODOLOGY
This sequential, mixed-methods study was a continuation of the research begun by Hobbs (2004) to identify those empowering experiences of career science teachers that have caused them to persist in their careers. Initial qualitative data collection was accomplished through the use of one-on-one interviews in conjunction with the systems dynamics technique of utilizing behavior-over-time graphing (Fig. 2) to capture the experiences of science teachers (N = 52) identified as having positively or negatively impacted their feelings of empowerment. The qualitative data set was coded and analyzed and teacher comments for the survey were selected as representative of the range of experiences teachers reported within the construct of empowerment.

RESULTS – TRENDS
Although there was no statistical significance across the other demographic variables in this study, we did observe some interesting trends that are worth further study. The mean Empowerment Score from the 263 survey results indicated the following trends:

• Teaching Experience Groups – increasing low to high from the least experienced induction years (1-3 years) to the more empowered veteran teachers (9+ years).
• Grade Level Taught – increasing low to high from rural school teachers to the more highly empowered urban teachers.
• School Context – increasing low to high from high school teachers, to middle school teachers, to the more highly empowered elementary school teachers.

FURTHER RESEARCH
To further investigate empowerment in career teachers, we recommend expanding the study in three ways:

1. Refine and re-validate the Teacher Empowerment Survey, and include a much larger and national sample of teachers, including another STEM discipline like mathematics.
2. Create a Teacher Self Assessment Tool at the end of the survey so that participants can receive instant information and recommendations based on teachers’ experiences of their own professional growth and empowerment.
3. Publish and provide findings about teachers’ empowerment and professional development explicitly to professional development providers, school districts, and other networks.

TEACHER EMPOWERMENT SURVEY
The survey can be found online at www.empoweredteacher.org