Understanding Empowerment

Everywhere I look these days, it seems, I see the word "empowerment." I see it in newspapers and magazines; I see it in the subtitles of the new textbooks on teaching; I see it in my own writing. Having been in the field of education for over twenty years, I have learned that such enthusiasm warrants great caution. Fads worry me, and I am only beginning to discover why this one is so troublesome.

In the first place, why is it always a noun? "The empowerment of teachers" is the phrase I hear and read again and again. The problem with this phrase is that the agent is missing. Making it a noun allows us to avoid focussing on who is doing the empowering. It seems to me that if someone else is empowering you, then you still don't have the power. Empowering you to do what? Who decides? I believe that educators must be the ones to appropriate power and then define empowerment for themselves. We must decide what empowerment is. We must decide what we are being empowered to do. We must decide what our students are being empowered to do.

The answers to these questions are not nearly as easy as all the books referring to empowerment would have us believe. When I asked my colleagues for information on teacher empowerment, I got a bewildering array of articles on changing the organization of schools so that teachers had more responsibility and more of a chance to move into semi-administrative positions. Neither of these opportunities really captured my feelings about empowerment. The idea of giving teachers increased responsibility for a failing system made me shudder. This would

make already overburdened lives more stressful. Increased ability to make decisions for others in traditional administrative positions did not make me feel any better. It went against all my beliefs about empowering others.

So I began to think about empowerment. If these organizational changes are empowerment, then maybe I am not so interested. And yet I am very interested in something else, both for myself and for my students. What is it? I began to search for new ideas that could ease my misgivings.

Possible Definitions of Empowerment

My first attempt was to read Gene Maeroff's book *The Empowerment of Teachers*. In it, he speaks of teacher empowerment in terms of "their individual deportment, not their ability to boss others." He speaks of the power involved as "the power to exercise one's craft with confidence and to help shape the way that the job is to be done" (p. 4). Similarly, I read in Ashcroft (1987) that "[a]n empowered person . . . would be someone who believed in his or her ability/capability to act, and this belief would be accompanied by able/capable action" (p. 143). This emphasis on the psychological state of the person contrasted with the external emphasis of organizational change and offered me a different way of looking at empowerment. Empowerment means believing in yourself and your own ability to act. Power, within this psychological definition, is thought to be an internal state of self-confidence that is accompanied by action.

On its face, this was very satisfying focus. It felt more like what I meant when I thought of myself as feeling empowered. When I feel empowered I make decisions and take action based on those decisions. I have self-confidence and feel good about what I am doing. I feel energized and full of enthusiasm. Perhaps this is why so many of us are drawn to the idea of becoming empowered. This is the definition of empowerment that is appealing to most people.

But my questioning self soon realized that this definition, though perhaps containing some necessary components, is not sufficient. If empowerment is becoming confident about one's decisions and ability to act, then we would characterize great tyrants as, perhaps, the most empowered individuals of them all. Yet this was surely not the result I was seeking. I soon realized that defining empowerment as feeling capable and taking action actually eschews another critical question: Capable of what? Acting in what way?

Those who would use their power to control others are clearly empowered in a different sense than the one about which I wish to speak. If people use their power to oppress others, then they have internalized a tyrant/rebel duality that keeps them from becoming truly empowered. They remain stuck in one side of a relationship in which neither person is truly free (Gawain, 1986). Certainly, this is not the kind of empowerment we want for teachers or students. Confidence, a sense of capability, yes, but within a context that enables persons to move beyond oppressive roles.

I thus began to expand what I am calling psychological definitions with political ones which address issues of power in society. For instance, Bookman and Morgan, in the introduction to their book entitled *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, have supplied such a definition: "We use the term empowerment to connote a spectrum of political activity ranging from acts of individual resistance to mass political mobilizations that challenge the basic power relations in our society" (p. 4). They suggest that psychological definitions which stress "individual self-assertion" and "feeling powerful" can only be achieved for many people when they become aware of the causes of their powerlessness and act to change the conditions of their lives. Power, in this definition, is assumed to be "a social relationship between groups that determines access to, use of, and control over the basic material and ideological resources in society" (p. 4).

In a similar vein, Peter McLaren, when speaking of the empowerment of students, says

> I am using the term empowerment to refer to the process through which students learn to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live. . . . It also refers to the process by which students learn to question and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture that will provide them with the basis for defining and transforming, rather I than merely serving, the wider social order. (p. 186)

From this politically aware point of view, empowerment is about changing society. It is about getting the knowledge and understanding of how things work that will allow one to transform the conditions of one's life. The assumption is that this transformation would be toward conditions of increased social justice.

Again, in my own life, becoming aware of the possibility of working to end social inequality has been empowering for me. As I have begun to question the very assumptions under which I work as a professor of education, I have begun to feel energized by my work for the first time. There is no question in my mind that, for me, the commitment to social change has empowered me to act.
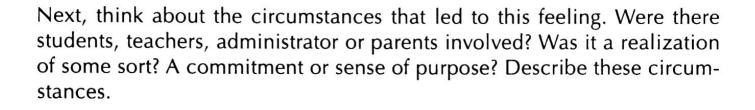
Moreover, these political definitions of empowerment take into account the purpose of the power being accrued; they speak of feeling powerful as coming from knowledge and action that works against the unequal distribution of resources, and they answer the question of "empowerment for what?" Empowerment is to improve the conditions of one's own life *and* the conditions of other lives, especially those lives limited by discrimination and social injustice.

Activity 1.1[1]
DEFINING EMPOWERMENT FOR YOURSELF

For this activity, find a quiet space. You may wish to get yourself a journal for the activities in this book, or you may wish to write in the space left here. Just make sure you have a pencil and somewhere to write or draw.

Now, close your eyes and think of a time when you felt "empowered" as a teacher or educator (whatever that means to you). Let yourself feel those feelings again. How does it feel? How does your body feel? How do your emotions feel? What are you doing? Stop and list some words to describe the feeling of empowerment.

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1. In order for this book to be useful to you, the reader, in your own process of empowerment, it seems essential that it be more than a monologue from me to you. To help you get involved and to develop your own opinions regarding the topics discussed, I have included what I am intending to be empowering activities. These are not meant to be dry academic writing experiences, but, rather, opportunities for you to go deeply within yourself in order to really change in ways you determine are best for you. Thus, though it is tempting to read on, figuring that you might do the exercises later (and later seldom comes), it would probably be best to take time when you come to these activities to become actively involved in responding to the ideas I have presented.

Next, think about the circumstances that led to this feeling. Were there students, teachers, administrator or parents involved? Was it a realization of some sort? A commitment or sense of purpose? Describe these circumstances.

Finally, did you take action as a result of feeling so empowered? What kind of action? Or did you change as a result of this feeling? In what way?

Now, look back over what you have written. Describe what teacher empowerment means to you at this time.

Defining Power and Domination

For me, all this thinking about empowerment seems to come down to definitions of power and domination. It seems to me that one's definition of empowerment depends fundamentally on one's definition of power . . . and since empowerment is in some way opposed to domination, this should also somehow figure in. I want a definition of empowerment that works against all forms of domination.

So what is domination? I would define it as "power over." (When someone asserts power over us, we experience it as oppression. Thus, domination and oppression are two sides of the same experience.) Though domination is sometimes limited to systematic asymmetrical relations of power at an institutional level, I think that it is important to expand this to include any individual power relations in which one person has "power over" another. (Of course, this may involve more than persons; the attempt to dominate nature is the most important example of this.) (See Merchant, 1980; Griffin, 1978). This seems to be the most predominant definition of power in our society (Kreisberg, 1992). Indeed, one colleague of mine says that she has a visceral negative reaction to the word "power." I suspect that this is because she associates it exclusively with "power over." (How do you feel when you hear the word "power"? Why?)

In the competitive world in which we live, there is an assumption that either you have power over me or I have power over you. We are constantly urged to a mentality of "one upmanship" (Schaef, 1981). Unfortunately, this power-over mentality depends on the objectification of others, that is, we must see them as objects to be manipulated in order to have power over them. Thus, it results in a fundamental estrangement from our connection with other living beings. Feminists, and others, have argued convincingly that this mentality is responsible for much of the suffering that we see today, because it isolates us from community and from nature (Kreisberg, 1992; Merchant, 1980).

To overcome this, we can look to the concept of "power to" or "power from within" (Starhawk, 1982). We can replace the myth that says that some people have worth and some do not with a belief that each person has inherent value; each has his/her own truth and this truth must be respected. With this belief system, the need to have power over others as objects can be abandoned for an emphasis on self-expression and fulfillment and a commitment to this for each person. This "post-

instrumental" value system would result in collaborative rather than dominating relationships and a respect for diversity within a sense of unity (Balbus, 1982).

Moreover, radical belief in the dignity and humanness of every person is inherently empowering because it applies to the self as well as to others. Pat Collins (1990) makes this connection when she says

> Empowerment involves rejecting the dimensions of knowledge, whether personal, cultural or institutional, that perpetuate objectification and dehumanization. African-American women and other individuals in subordinate groups become empowered when we understand and use those dimensions of our individual, group, and disciplinary ways of knowing that foster our humanity as fully human subjects. (p. 230)
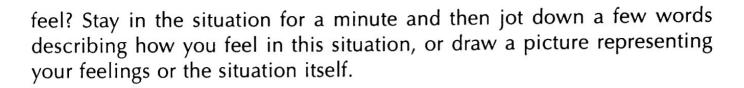
Empowerment comes from finding the power-from-within or power-to within us and rejecting models of power that imply power-over. To do this we must respect all people as fully human and self-actualizing and reject the temptation to objectify or to think of some humans as more fully human than others.

In *The Empowerment Book*, David Gerson and Gail Straub express it this way: "You will learn how to harness to passion of your mind and create your fullest expression of being human. We call this empowerment" (p. 5). Empowerment is finding your deepest human self and manifesting it in the world. It is respecting and promoting this for each person, for it is only through valuing this for all persons that we can truly expect it for ourselves.

Activity 1.2
EXPERIENCING POWER AND CONTROL
IN YOUR CLASSROOM OR SCHOOL

Find a quiet place and decide whether you wish to write or draw for this activity. Make sure you have the material you need.

Now, close your eyes and picture a time when you felt that you had to control your students (or teachers). It may have been a time when you were giving an assignment, monitoring their completion of an assignment, or just trying to keep order and quiet while you transmitted information. How are they reacting? How do you feel? How does your body

feel? Stay in the situation for a minute and then jot down a few words describing how you feel in this situation, or draw a picture representing your feelings or the situation itself.

Now, think of a time in which you were allowing students (or teachers) to make choices of their own. They may be deciding what they want to learn or do, how they want to do something or when. How are they reacting? How do you feel? How does your body feel? Jot down a few words about what you want to remember about these feelings or draw a quick picture of yourself in this situation.

What does all this tell you about power and domination and how you and your students feel about it? Which situation made you more comfortable? Why?

Power-With

Another way to look at the power-from-within that respects the human-ness of others has been suggested by Seth Kreisberg in his book *Transforming Power*. He suggests that "power with" is "characterized by collaboration, sharing, and mutuality" (p. 61). This is the form of power that is embedded in relationships. Each person in the relationship is empowered through relations of mutual respect. The power is "jointly developed" (Follett, 1924) because people are "developing their capacities by working together" (p. 71). Kreisberg's (1992) study of six teachers working together in the Boston Area Educators for Social Responsibility from 1984 to 1986 supports the possibility of developing these empowering communities in which power is experienced as co-agency through consensus, mutuality and respect for each individual voice. In that group, each member felt included, each was listened to fully even when he or she dissented, and decisions were made by consensus. Members reported feeling empowered in various ways by their participation in this group.

It seems that when we experience this power individually, it is experienced as power-to or power-from-within. When we participate in empowering communities, (which may indeed be necessary in order for us to empower ourselves—see chapters 8 and 9), then it is experienced as power-with. Power-to and power-with are just different expressions for the kind of power that respects the independent subjectivity of self and others. Neither of these can really exist without the other; we cannot sustain power-to without some sort of empowering community and we cannot participate in a truly empowering community unless we are able to hold onto our power rather than giving it away to a leader. To stress this interdependency I use the term power-to/power-with, Power-to/power-with reminds us that work in our classroom and community must involve sharing, mutual respect and collaboration if it is to be empowering for any of us as individuals.

Empowerment and Will

Finally, it is important to remember that respect for the dignity of all includes respecting our own self-assertion as well. Asserting our human will, or power to, is an essential part of being empowered and need not result in the domination of others. In *The Act of Will* (1973), Roberto Assagioli has developed a psychological theory of will that describes the kind of person that expresses his or her own humanity while also re-

specting that of others. He suggests that the truly effective will involves a balanced working of at least three components:

1) *Good will:* an awareness of "ethical considerations," a consideration of the needs of others, a "sense of love and compassion." (p. 15)
2) *Skillful will:* "the ability to obtain the desired results with the least expenditure of energy" (p. 15); practical knowledge and the ability to use it.
3) *Strong will:* the strength to use the will when necessary. This is only one aspect and, "when dissociated from the others, it can be, and often is, ineffectual or harmful to oneself or other people." (p. 15)

If these are out of balance or weak, there is a problem with will.

Tyrants exemplify overages of skillful and strong will combined with a very weak good will. They can get things done but they have little concern or respect for the rights of others. (Actually, this combination is encouraged for men in our society, who are expected to be "tough.") Overages of good and skillful will, with a weakness in strong will, will result in a person who is concerned about people and able to get things done but unable to assert him or herself in difficult situations. The third possibility, a weakness in the practical will, would probably manifest as a strong and compassionate person who has little common sense and thus accomplishes very little.

The empowered person must have a balance among these three types of will. He or she has compassion for others, seeing them as fully human and as having worth. He or she has the strength and practical knowledge to actualize him/herself and to encourage this in others. Do you have a sense of your own development in relation to these three aspects of will? Do you feel strong enough to stand up for what you believe? Can you be practical and get things done? Do you tend to act in the best interests of others? This may give you insight into where you wish to concentrate your energies in empowering yourself. Take a minute and jot down ideas about how you might strengthen any weakened aspect of will you find in yourself.

Empowered Educators[2]

All of the notions I have discussed in this chapter seem, to me, to supply a piece of the puzzle called empowerment. All must be included in any definition of empowerment. All are involved in my purpose for writing this book . . . so let me attempt here to put all this together into a working definition of empowered educators:

> Empowered educators are persons who believe in themselves and their capacity to act. They understand systems of domination and work to transform oppressive practices in society. They respect the dignity and humanness of others and manifest their power as the power to actualize their own unique humanity. They are strong, practical and compassionate as they work individually and with others to support the self-realization of all persons in their classrooms, schools and communities.[3]

There is something very satisfying to me about this definition. Of course, no one can meet this ideal all of the time, but it seems to me that it can serve as a goal or inspiration to help us achieve the real personal growth that has drawn us to the word "empowerment" in the first place. We must avoid being sidetracked by partial definitions that leave us feeling disillusioned yet again. Most importantly, this description includes the opposition to domination or power-over mentality, the power-to actualize one's highest self, and the power-with that comes from working with others. It also reminds us of the empowering of others that automatically results when we are empowered ourselves.

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2. I have used the word "educator" rather than "teacher" to avoid contributing to the division between teachers, parents and administrators, all of whom can empower themselves to work for change and all of whom are educators.

3. It is also interesting to see how this definition can be translated to apply to students:

> Empowered students are persons who believe in themselves and their capacity to act. They understand systems of domination and work to transform oppressive practices in society. They respect the dignity and humanness of others and manifest their power as the power to actualize their own unique humanity. They are strong, practical and compassionate as they work individually and with others to support the self realization of all persons in their classrooms, schools, and communities.

What kind of curriculum would result in this kind of student empowerment? (See chapters 4–6.)

My experience leads me to suspect that empowering ourselves as teachers or educators is the first step toward empowering our students. Moreover, it probably requires at least three recursive stages: First, we must come to understand the systems of domination that operate in the lives of teachers and students in our schools. I have attempted to describe some of these systems part 1 of this book. Such things as bureaucracy, scientific rationality, internalized domination, isolation and sexism all work to disempower educators in their daily lives. Tracking, labelling, cultural privilege, and the overemphasis on schedules, rules, cognitive tasks and competition are examples of power-over practices that disempower students.

Secondly, we must decide what we really value, our deepest beliefs about the dignity and worth of each person and how these can be reflected in our educational practices. In part 2 of this book, I have provided some suggestions for empowering alternatives to our present educational practices. These include such things as emphasizing process, sharing authority, encouraging voice, redefining multiculturalism and integrating forms of knowledge.

Finally, we must find ways to manifest our vision and support ourselves in these efforts by creating empowering communities. The third part of this book contains suggestions for self and community empowerment. Teachers who have read this book have told me that reading or at least skimming these chapters (7 and 8) before reading chapters 1–6 helps clarify one's direction as one reads the earlier chapters.

Part Three concludes with descriptions of five teachers who exemplify the definition of an empowered educator given in this chapter. Each of these teachers is in a unique situation and yet, taken together, these descriptions provide a compelling picture of the possibilities inherent in teacher and student empowerment. To ground theory in reality, I have used examples from these teachers' lives throughout the text.

The process of empowerment requires us to be willing to change, and we cannot change by thinking and analyzing alone. We must enlist the help of our feelings, senses and imagination as well. Indeed, a basic premise of this text is that neither we nor our students can or should devalue or isolate these natural psychological functions. To do so would be to deny our wholeness as persons. (See chapter 5.) Thus, the empowering activities provided in this book will encourage you to think, sense, feel and imagine and to draw and/or write to connect with those

thoughts, sensations, feelings and images as you go through what I hope will be the liberating process of empowering yourself to make positive differences in your own life and the lives of others. These activities will also encourage you to connect with others in dialogue and community, for we cannot empower ourselves without the support of other empowered persons. Power-with is the community experience of power-to and provides us with the ground on which we can stand.