

Empowerment and the Literacy Myth

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Abstract

While the constructs of “empowerment” and “literacy” are commonly used synonymously, this notion provides a very limited understanding of what empowerment entails. This paper documents a struggle for empowerment by a low-income community in trying to obtain funds for a community literacy project which had proven very successful and of which the people were quite proud. Through journal writing the author kept track of the experiences of this power struggle, and in documenting the scenario identifies nine signposts along the “empowerment highway”. These are divided into those that are supports for those seeking power, and those that are obstacles of the power group.

Process of Empowerment: A Struggle of Strategy

Many, who proclaim the merits of literacy, often use "empowerment" as a synonymous benefit. For example, in the introduction of his book, *Literacy and Empowerment*, Courts (1991) states: “This is book about literacy, about what mature literacy means, why so few people feel the empowerment of language and its many uses...” (p. xxiii). Equating literacy with empowerment is a simplistic and false notion of the literacy-empowerment relationship and fails to recognize the complexities of empowerment which may only be attained through an empowering process. Literacy, actually may be the antithesis of empowerment. The purpose of this paper is to describe, analyse, and reflect on a process of empowerment in one particular instance.

The Occasion of Seeking Empowerment

Gore (1992) points out that empowerment is not “property”; it is not something that is given or handed over from one to another. The power leading to empowerment is something that is expressed or carried out, and to understand how this is done, one must understand the specific context or occasion in which it occurs. The occasion for seeking empowerment in this study was an attempt by a low-income community to overturn a decision denying funding for a community literacy project. This community is home to about 150 families in a city in Atlantic Canada. Data showed that more than one-half of the children were failing in school. In the three years preceding the study, there were 17 instances of children (some children were involved more than once) who were either denied entry into kindergarten because they were deemed not ready, or repeated kindergarten. Of 43 children in the junior high school, 21 either had repeated a grade or were in a modified program. There had been no children who graduated from grade 12 in the previous three years. Yet, the Community prides itself on being active in promoting

support for its members under trying conditions. Many Community volunteers contribute in various ways at the Community Centre. They are active in the Community Garden. There have been various attempts to support children's learning. A very successful family literacy program for parents of children of pre-school years has operated for six years and was facilitated by two parents from the Community. However, various challenges face the Community: low income, transient dwellers, incorporating new Canadians, scarce resources, lack of transportation, availability of drugs to youth, and few successful role models in education.

Various programs operate through the Community Centre to raise the profile of education and to meet the needs of children and adults, especially, helping adults help children. Some of these programs were funded over a two year period, and in the third year, all programs of this nature, ten in all, were brought together into a single project, titled Community L. E. A. R. N. (Learning, Empowerment, Action, Reflection Network). It is this project which was rejected for funding.

Research Context

This study is ethnographic in nature, a main goal being to understand the contexts of those in power and those seeking power. Trueba (1993) stated that the main purpose of ethnography is to interpret the meaning of behaviour by providing an appropriate social and cultural context, and by building theoretical models or mental constructs or explanatory artifacts. I was a participant-observer since I was a volunteer in the Community and engaged in discussions with those holding power. The importance of having someone from within the context being studied, doing the ethnography is strongly emphasized by Oser (1995) who states: "To pretend to have knowledge without having it, to pretend to tell the most important things without seeing the whole, to pretend to be able to reproduce without knowing, are strictly speaking, forms of cheating" (pp.33-34). A key methodological instrument in ethnographic research is a personal journal which I kept regularly. Each page was divided into three sections: What I observe/see/hear; What I think about this; and What might happen from here. The value of such a journal is that it provides a running commentary on occurring events which when viewed retrospectively, often reveals patterns of behaviour. The context in which the power sharing initiative originated is referred to as Community (capital C).

An important factor in any context is the participants. In this study on empowerment, participants are key to understanding the empowerment process, since it is the participants who define the process. Courts (1991) states that "Power is not to be taken as a phenomenon of one individual's consolidated and homogeneous domination over others, or that of one group or class over others" (p.98). All participants have power of one sort or another. In the case of the specific occasion being documented here, there are two groups of antagonists, the Funding Agencies and their Agents, and the Community and its representatives.

We Cannot Fund ...

“We regret to inform you that we are unable to fund your proposal this year.”
(Letter from Federal Agency)

The first shock wave ran through the Community when the letter was received which declared that there would be no funding through the federal funds. In my Journal of August 30, I wrote:

There was basically shock that the proposal which we believe is superbly written and addresses very specific literacy needs and innovative solutions was not funded. People from the Community enquired about whether literacy programs would be operating the fall, and on being told that funding had been denied were very disappointed. The feeling appeared to be that anything good cannot last.

When a similar response was received from the Provincial Agency, the Community had to make a choice. To do nothing would be to be silenced, which as Powell (1999) states is one of the goals of the agent holding the balance of power. Surrey (1987) states, “The capacity to be ‘moved’ and to respond and ‘to move’ the other, represents the fundamental core of relational empowerment” (p.32). Welch (2000) adds that when you care about people, “choosing not to resist injustice would be the ultimate loss of self” (p.165). A decision was made to become active in seeking an overturn of the decision not to fund the Community literacy project. Taking an active role is described by Shor (1992) as “questioning the status quo”, and insisting “that knowledge is not fixed but is constantly changing” (p.189).

The Struggle for Empowerment

The struggle for empowerment went on for eight months. Data collected were organized as "Signposts", some of which were positive and supportive, while others were negative and hampered the journey towards empowerment. These are listed below and described briefly.

Supports Signposts

- +Identifying a Target Audience
- +Conviction
- +Stamina or Persistence
- +Enlisting Support

Obstacle Signposts

- Delays
- Linguistic Garble
- Paper Trail
- Us and Them
- Lack of Independence

+ Signpost 1: Identifying a Target Audience

A first step is to determine who your supporters are.

We felt that these were the key personnel who would be interested in the future of the Community in terms of the literacy development for children and adults, and for support of the parents and community. (Journal, September 1)

These included the Administrator Officer of the Community, the Community Project Director, school principals, and the political representative for the area. This was soon revised to exclude school principals as attempts to secure funding to support the learning of school children might be interpreted as a criticism of schools. The Community representatives met with the political representative for the area to provide background information.

+ Signpost 2: Conviction

As Gore (1992) indicates, empowerment is not something that is handed over from one to another. It relates to a specific issue in a specific context. It is important that in seeking empowerment that the power seekers be convinced of the importance, significance, and value of the issue which they are pursuing. We had no difficulty in having this conviction. Community L.E.A.R.N. was an essential part of the Community for enhancing education and literacy. After a discussion one evening on youths getting into trouble, I expressed my feelings in my Journal.

I see these youth and it makes me sad – sad that the parents feel helpless in dealing with the situation, and sad that these young lives are on the road to being wasted. Prevention is so much easier than intervention but prevention needs support. Right now, if we can provide for the very young, it is hopeful that when these are young teens, they will not be hanging around getting into trouble.

I still believe we must get the children when they are young and when the parents have more hope for them, and help support parents and children – this is enough motivation for tonight to keep me fighting for funding. (Journal, September 12).

+ Signpost 3: Stamina or Persistence

A key strategy of those in power in denying power to others is to engage in a “wearing down” process aimed at those seeking power. Power seekers must have stamina and persistence to continue. This is not always easy in light of people having many other commitments. A great source of joy to the empowered, no doubt, must occur when they realize their adversaries have given up. My comments on this and how the actions of the empowered wear down their opponents are from two Journal entries.

Stamina is a very important part of the process of empowerment. It certainly is significant to have at least two people involved as one can keep up the spirits of the other when necessary. Striving for empowerment can be a road to depression, if one continued to pursue it and not make any progress. (Journal, October 31)

And an entry from January 22 in the next year.

It has been over a month since we heard anything. Do they think we have gone? Have they gone? We just can't give up now. We have invested too much time and effort and the issue which began this is still there. Day by day many children are

headed for a life of educational failure. We just can't allow this to happen on our watch. We have to keep on.

+ Signpost 4: Enlisting Support

Enlisting support is especially necessary for maintaining stamina. I have concluded from personal experience, and from this endeavour that it is very difficult to attain power against a power group when you are acting solo. The old expression, "there's strength in numbers" is definitely true. It was important to keep the Community informed. This was done in a number of ways. The Community may be described as "casual" in terms of peoples' relationships so there were many opportunities to talk to people in an informal way and share what was happening. Furthermore, a number of parents missed having the literacy project and enquired about it, thus providing another opportunity to share information. There were also opportunities to share information with the Board of Directors of the Community. We also decided to include a column in the Community monthly newsletter (which went to all Community members and many others from outside the Community) titled, Education Corner. My Journal entry of November 6 states:

I realize that we have not promoted Community L.E.A.R.N. as much as we could. Publicity is actually setting the groundwork for future advocacy, and perhaps this is what I had overlooked. For advocacy to be effective, a certain amount of groundwork must be done. After all if you advocate cold-turkey, then you have a double challenge, to inform the public of what you have to offer and to ask their support. When the groundwork has been done, then you can concentrate on soliciting support. What we need is a brochure on Community L.E.A.R.N. – a very effective brochure which anyone who sees should buy into the project. Hopefully this will provide more visibility and support. If the powers that be are aware of this, they might know that it is not going to go away.

There is a danger that optimism or pessimism can cloud one's interpretation of support. Early in the experience we met with the principals of the schools which the children attended. We understood from the discussion that they would support the Community L.E.A.R.N. project as an effort to support parents supporting children. We felt confident about their support and we drafted a letter which they would sign and which would go to the funding agency. However, when we went to collect the signatures, the first principal we approached expressed reservations about signing. He said that this should be talked through some more and it "may not be the way the schools want to go".

There is the old saying, "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched." I think we did. We were so excited by the support from schools or as I thought. I can understand wanting to discuss it further – but he does not seem to realize that time is of the essence. However, his point that it may not be the way the schools want to go is irrelevant – the Community wants to go this way, and will, with or without the schools' support. (Journal, October 18)

Ironically, or fortunately, at the meeting of January 29, among an extended group of stakeholders, the school principals endorsed the first recommendation of the position paper, which was to fund the Community L.E.A.R.N. project.

- Signpost 5: Delays

There are two kinds of delays – inevitable and tactical. Soon after the Community started the empowerment process, one agent went on holidays. When he returned, we learned the political representative would be away for two weeks.

Patience or impatience is a key factor in trying to attain empowerment. Everything seems to drag when there is no action, and action is needed for empowerment. I may have to work more on patience – or to use another old saying, “Rome was not built in a day.” (Journal, September 11)

We decided to meet with the political representative’s assistant to keep the momentum going. While patience might help deal with inevitable delays, tactical delays usually result in a lot of frustration on the part of those seeking empowerment. When we met with the political representative on his return, he suggested that we write two letters to two agents restating our case for funding. About a month later we received a letter from one agent, basically confirming their earlier decision. We then scheduled a meeting with the two agents only to be told when we arrived for the meeting that it was scheduled for two days later. When we did meet, we were asked to write up our perceptions of the meeting, get a list of students in school and their current status of achievement, and break down the budget according to subparts of the project. Assigning more tasks is part of the delaying tactic. Breaking down the budget according to the subparts of the project did not make any sense as a strength of the project was that person and material resources would be shared across subparts within a holistic framework. After we submitted the breakdown, we were then presented with a number of questions and were to schedule another meeting to deal with these. We asked if the questions could be forwarded to us first beforehand as it might expedite the meeting, if we had already prepared the responses. It took a whole evening (6:30 -11:00 pm) to prepare responses. Some of the questions were about discrepancies between the initial budget and the breakdown budget, which were easily explained by the receipt of some interim funds from the federal agency (and the provincial Agency knew about this), or because a new building was being opened which added to facilities costs, or because budgeting for items separately is not the same as budgeting for an overall project.

This is not a process of empowerment, this is like fighting a bloody battle and the other side has much stronger forces than we have. I now estimate that we have each spent about 240 hours in total which, could be more profitably spent on other important activities. (Journal, December 11)

Christmas then intervened and it was not until more than a month later (January 24) that information was received that the proposal had gone back to the Funding Committee and an updated Financial statement was now requested from the Community. A meeting of

the larger group of stakeholders met on January 29. A position paper was prepared stating the concerns and providing recommendations. There seemed to be general consensus at that meeting that Community L.E.A.R.N. should be funded. We left, thinking or hoping that funding would be forthcoming. It would soon be February, almost a year since we started the proposal process.

- Signpost 6: Linguistic Garble

Linguistic or language garble refers to confusing or contradictory language which often causes the power seeker to go 'round-in-circles', rather than move the issue forward. The reason given for the rejection by the Federal Agency for not funding Community L.E.A.R.N. was that it was "delivery" based. We checked the description of previously funded projects by the Federal Agency and discovered many which were as much "delivery" based as Community L.E.A.R.N. In fact, descriptions of some of the funded projects contained the word "delivery". This raised the question of when is delivery not delivery? Some weeks later the Federal Agency phoned the Community to invite us to submit a different proposal for \$20,000 which was available.

We discussed drafting a different proposal for this invitation but could only think of using parts of the original proposal, even though it had been rejected, since this is what made sense to us as community based literacy. (Journal, September 2)

Four of the ten components were funded by this money. Shortly after we had a letter from the Provincial Agency which read: "Since the (Community) is being offered (by the Federal Agency) the total amount requested under the revised budget, it would appear this issue has been resolved." But the issue was not resolved. Why would the Provincial Agency think for a second that \$20,000 for four components would resolve a request for over \$40,000 for ten components? Their letter also suggested that we had been given help by the Federal Agency in crafting our "revised" proposal. This was not so.

Whether language garble results from misinformation or misunderstanding, or is deliberately crafted to control a situation, it still constitutes a weapon on the part of the empowered to keep the disempowered in a subservient and defensive position.

- Signpost 7: Us and Them

Courts (1991) maintains that those in power belong to the same club. "They will form an unincorporated repository of power" (p. 62). It became very obvious early in this power-seeking experience that there were two distinct groups – those in power and their supporters, and the Community or those seeking power. We very early questioned the agenda of the Provincial Agency.

We wondered what was the real agenda of the Agency Funding Committee. It seemed as if they were trying to find ways NOT to fund literacy projects as opposed to recognizing good literacy projects and finding funding for them. In fact, we wondered if the Community was low priority, or if parents helping

children at school age level, or forming positive home-school partnerships was a low priority. The Community has been most innovative in its programs; as far as we know, it has a one- of- a kind family literacy program for parents and teachers of school age children. (Journal, August 30)

While the other signposts explain **how** the group-in-power may deny power to others, they do not explain **why**. The make-up or constitution of the group-in-power may explain why. Being part of a group means that you know and understand this group and have allegiance to it, and simultaneously, you know less about groups outside of this one. If a person has not lived nor spent considerable time in a low-income community, her/his understanding tends to be indirect and academic versus direct and personal.

Wilber (2000) explains group structure or make-up in terms of the group members' level and breadth of understanding issues. He identifies eight levels of understanding, and four areas of breadth which reflect a holistic notion of people and the contexts in which they live and from which they derive values, etc. For example, if one views the funding of Community L.E.A.R.N. as simply implementing an adult literacy and family literacy project, and not also as an issue of social justice, then the person's views are limited, and decisions and actions result from that limited vision. In terms of levels of understanding, Wilber considers Level 6 as the level at which participants in a group rely on rules, regulations, and policies to direct and explain behaviour. The significance of rules was very obvious in the actions of the provincial agency group. Very early in this scenario, we were told that the proposal did not follow the rules of the Federal Agency. A reason given for denying funding from the Provincial Agency was that there was on record, a "rule" that more than two positions would not be funded. Yet, another project funded in the time frame of Community L.E.A.R.N. had more than two employee positions.

At the January 29 meeting which included an extended group of stakeholders, another person from the Provincial Agency took the offensive with regard to our position paper and defended provincial policy, regulation or practice. The Community was told that if the proposal were reconsidered, this would violate the rule of no-appeal, and then other groups denied funding might ask for similar consideration. The presence of other groups who might appeal or how they would know our proposal would be funded, was not entertained.

- Signpost 8: The Paper Trail

"Death by paper is quiet, painful and very slow" (Taylor, 1996, p. 133).

There was a long paper trail in this empowerment process and included: The *Grants for Literacy Project Guidelines*, financial statement of the Community Centre, initial proposal, acknowledgement of receipt of proposal, rejection letter 1, rejection letter 2, part of initial proposal resubmitted, re-drafted budget 1, re-drafted budget 2, breakdown of budget into sub-components of project, letters requesting meetings, letters refuting reasons given for denying funding, several letters within the Agency and between Agency and Community, project brochure, position statement, etc. What is the purpose of

all this paper? Taylor (1996) states, “‘Facts’ are never *value* free. What is written and not written recasts people’s lives. Print is used quite literally to decide who lives and who dies” (p. 9). Print on paper is very much rule governed and those in power use it to deny power to others, while the disempowered often gullibly hope, that their marks on paper may make a difference to the power structure.

Denny Taylor’s book *Toxic Literacies* (1996) “is about those of us who have the power and privilege to control the text and about those who live in poverty and are controlled by it” (p. 14). Her book could have been written for the Community L.E.A.R.N. project and the efforts of a low-income community to empower itself. Literacy is not empowerment in the sense that when you become literate, you become empowered. Literacy as paper text may become a weapon of power when it is used by those already in power. As mentioned above, facts are never value free and, even when they are not facts, they are referred to as facts, as information not to be questioned, and if they are questioned, not to be responded to. The Provincial Agency never responded satisfactorily to challenges to three of the four reasons for rejecting the proposal. Their response to the fourth challenge became repetitive, the funds are earmarked for adult literacy only, and even if the project is to benefit adults who benefit children, they do not apply. As Taylor says, “... texts (written documents) are political constructions that do not represent reality. They are no one’s actuality” (Taylor, 1996, p. 238).

- Signpost 9: Lack of Independence

One of the drawbacks in a small province/territory is that everyone knows someone who is in power and is often dependent on that power for benefits. It is the old story of who will bell the cat? The Community is not independent of those in power in terms of its subsistence; in fact it depends very much on the power or goodwill of others – the Provincial Agency, or charitable or religious groups. Consequently, one is hesitant to “rock the boat” or “bite the hand that feeds one.” It is often the perception rather than the reality which dictates belief and action or lack of it. But perception is reality. One always has to question the consequences of seeking power, of speaking out, and there are many tales of unfortunate consequences. Consequently, only very few feel independent enough or are willing to take the consequences of challenging power and injustice.

Conclusion

Power is too often understood within a simplistic paradigm. One notion is that literacy is power, and unfortunately the hopes, we, as educators, often build up, are dashed when people are faced with the reality of power. Power exists above and beyond literacy; it is political. Certainly, literacy may be considered power at an elementary level, when considered as a skill in understanding and using print. But this is minimal power in bringing about change.

The nine signposts along the highway to empowerment, identified in this study, show how complex the process of seeking power, actually is. The support signposts show which resources those seeking power may capitalize on, while the negative signposts

show the obstacles they must be prepared to face and challenge. Unfortunately, a power struggle, regardless of literacy levels, does not always result in attaining power. Hinchey (1998) points out that power and powerlessness are not based on intelligence and hard work (nor literacy level). They often simply occur by virtue of one's privileged or unprivileged position. Taylor (1996) adds that those in power ignore the 'facts' of the challengers and proceed blindly to promote their own reality. Unless the disempowered should find another form of leverage to seek power, the end result is fatalistic and the disempowered remain in a powerless position.

While this study was conducted in a particular context, the implications of the nine signposts in seeking empowerment are relevant in a wide range of contexts: social, economic, educational, political (at different levels), and religious.

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