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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Frontier High School, a new school designed as an alternative to more traditional schools in its district. While the school is still clarifying its structure and philosophy, it is committed to "honoring diversity," defined in such terms as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, alternative lifestyles, and so on. The paper examines how the school's structure, curriculum, and dominant pedagogies emphasize the value of understanding and respecting multiple points of view, with a focus on student empowerment. The analysis shows that students empowered by their school experiences develop the ability, confidence, and motivation to succeed academically. The analysis draws on interviews conducted with a cross-section of one-third of the school's students (representative in terms of gender, grade, and ethnicity); the resulting data are linked with observations from classrooms and faculty meetings as well as policy statements developed by the school. The paper looks at definitions of student empowerment and how Frontier High School promotes empowerment (as knowledge, as appreciating multiple points of view, and as a social phenomenon). Data are summarized into six general findings: (1) empowerment is not an add-on to the school structure; it has been integrated throughout various aspects of school life; (2) Frontier High did not attempt to achieve student empowerment through a single means; (3) what constitutes empowerment and how it will be achieved is jointly defined by all community members, not just teachers and administrators; (4) in addition to giving students power and responsibility, faculty explicitly seek to help students think about how they would use their power; (5) empowerment is both a means to an end and an end in and of itself; and (6) empowerment is hard. (Contains 32 references.) (ND)

# Knowing and Empowerment; or, Student Empowerment Gone Good

by

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This paper looks at Frontier High School, a totally new school designed as an alternative to more traditional schools in the district. While the school is still clarifying its structure and philosophy, there is a commitment to "honoring diversity," defined in terms of race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, alternative lifestyles, and so on. This paper examines how the school's structure, curriculum, and dominant pedagogies emphasized the value of understanding and respecting multiple points of views, intellectually as well as socially, and thereby promoted a "knowing" of the intellectual world that is uncommon for high school classrooms as well as a "knowing" of each other among students that has been characterized by many students as atypical.

I maintain that these two dimensions of knowing (academic/intellectual and social) promoted student empowerment in two ways: The first concerned knowledge itself--seeing it as a complex, socially-constructed phenomenon shaped by one's world view rather than as a hard and absolute conception (Banks 1993). The second involved the social realm. Through interacting with one another in ways that they hadn't previously (e.g., cooperative learning, group projects, Socratic seminars, and teamed service learning assignments), many students evolved a sense of empathy and respect for one another and came to appreciate persons and

viewpoints somehow "different" from themselves--thereby gaining access to fuller understandings of various social realities (e.g., "druggies," "socials," "skaters," and gay/lesbian/bisexual lifestyles,. In turn, coming to know these "heretofore others" and to interact with them to develop new intellectual understandings led to greater information exchange among students throughout the school and, as such, further enriched their appreciation for their course work which I, in turn, link with a greater sense of empowerment by students.

## Methods

This analysis draws on interviews conducted with a cross-section of one-third of the schools' students (representative in terms of gender, grade, and ethnicity), and links these data with observations from classrooms, and faculty meetings as well as policy statements developed by the school. To address the inevitable question of, "Why these data," I offer an explanation largely derived from "realist" conceptions of validity (e.g., House 1991; Maxwell 1992). As Joseph Maxwell (1992) wrote:

> All qualitative researchers agree that not all possible accounts of some individual, situation, phenomenon, activity, text, institution, or program are equally useful, credible, or legitimate. Furthermore, the ways in which researchers make these discriminations do not pertain entirely to the internal coherence, elegance, or plausibility of the account itself, but often refer to the relationship between the account and something external to it--that is, the phenomena that the account is *about*. Validity, in a broad sense, pertains to this relationship between an account and something outside of that account, whether this something is construed as objective reality, the constructions of actors, or a variety of other possible interpretations (pp. 282-83).

In this study, validity centered on the question of student empowerment. Decisions regarding whose voice to represent, what contexts to describe, and what issues to raise were all linked to the goal of "understanding" issues related to knowing and student empowerment. In doing so, I assumed, as Ernest House (1991) has argued, that "events are the result of a multiplicity of causes, [therefore]

explanations usually identify a number of interacting causes that joined together to produce the event..." (p. 6). To honor this assumption and as previously noted, this paper seeks to link data from a variety of sources--including school policy statements, student interviews, and classroom observations.

I should also acknowledge the "alternative" nature of the student and teacher population at Frontier High. On the one hand, one might argue that these persons, precisely because they had self-selected to become involved in this school, represent an atypical student population, and that they were therefore more likely to embrace alternative ways of schooling, including making student empowerment an institutional priority. On the other hand, I encourage the reader to consider the variety of interrelated and complementary ways in which Frontier High sought to promote student empowerment, in particular, the fact that student empowerment was not an add-on to what the school already did. Rather, Frontier High sought to integrate elements of student empowerment into various aspects of school life.

## How Am I Defining Empowerment?

In large part, I embrace aspects of Jim Cummins' (1994) conception of student empowerment. As he described "empowered" students:

> Students who are empowered by their school experiences develop the ability, confidence, and motivation to succeed academically. They participate competently in instruction as a result of having developed a confident cultural [and I would add "personal"] identity as well as appropriate school-based knowledge and interactional structures (p. 331).[1]

While Cummins identified a framework for promoting empowerment among students from "dominated" social groups, aspects of this framework--in particular, his conceptions of empowering curricula and pedagogy--seem appropriate for *all* students. Cummins (1994) wrote, for instance, that empowering pedagogy "promotes intrinsic motivation on the part of students to use language actively in order to generate their own knowledge" (p. 330). Such pedagogy is

"reciprocal" and "interaction-oriented," as opposed to being "transmission-oriented" (p. 333).[2] Further elaborating on this conception, Cummins explained:

> A central tenet of the reciprocal interaction model is that "talking and writing are means to learning" (Bullock Report, 1975, p. 50). The use of this model in teaching requires a genuine dialogue between student and teacher in both oral and written modalities, guidance and facilitation rather than control of student learning by the teacher, and the encouragement of student/student talk in a collaborative learning context. This model emphasizes the development of higher level cognitive skills rather than just factual recall, and meaningful language use by students rather than the correction of surface forms....[all of which] are consciously integrated with all curricular content rather than taught as isolated subjects, and tasks are presented to students in ways that generate intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation. *In short, pedagogical approaches that empower students encourage them to assume greater control over setting their own learning goals and to collaborate actively with each other in achieving these goals* (p. 337; emphasis added).

Implicit in Cummins' framework is a critical element of the empowerment process, an element addressed specifically by Elvira Lima and Marineusa Gazzetta (1994), that is, an understanding of *how* one creates and uses power:

> [Empowerment] demands more than giving people time and space to express themselves....Though expressing oneself is an important component of a process of empowerment, it cannot be accounted for as the main or only component. Empowerment depends greatly on oriented reflective action. In order to develop autonomy each individual must have knowledge about the instruments and processes through which one gains a voice in a given society (p. 236).

Further, although America's cultural predisposition of viewing so much of social life in individual terms (Bellah et al., 1985; Henry, 1965; McQuillan, n.d.) leads many people to understand empowerment as largely an individual phenomenon, in accord with Lima and Gazzetta (1994), I see it as a dialectical process that involves the social and the individual. That is, while empowerment "always implies the possibility of a transformation of individuals' lives," this transformation also holds the potential to "have an impact on the lives of other community members" (p. 237).

Finally, in terms of empowerment, the reader should keep in mind that, like Cummins (1986), I too see empowerment as a "mediating construct influencing academic performance and as an outcome variable itself" (p. 332). Therefore, the following discussions of empowerment can be somewhat complicated by the fact that I conceive it as both a means to an end as well as an end in and of itself.

## How Does Frontier High School Conceive of Empowerment?

Very much in line with the previous description of empowerment, the design team[3] that defined the "Student and Staff Outcomes for Frontier High School" described how they sought to realize the goal of creating "thoughtful" community members[4]:

> They question what they know and how they know it.
> They question what others claim to know and how they know it.
> They are curious about societies, cultures, and the natural world.
> The are committed to continuous inquiry and a lifetime of learning.
> They constantly reevaluate and refine a set of moral values.

Frontier High also sought to graduate students who were intellectually and socially "proficient." As the design team noted in the document previously cited:

> [Proficient persons] have the skills, subject area knowledge, and understanding to pose questions, to solve problems and to learn what they do not know.
> They have developed standards of quality that drive them toward excellence.
> They effectively communicate and collaborate with others, including individuals with backgrounds and perspectives that are different from their own.

In a statement of school goals entitled, "The LEARNING ENVIRONMENT at Frontier High School," the Frontier High design team described the four most prominent elements of the school's educational philosophy. In outlining the school's first priority, a "focus on student learning," the team noted:

> The focus of Frontier High School is excellence in student learning. This will be reflected in all the school's policies and practices including the use

of resources, the evaluation of staff, and the account the school gives of itself to the community, the district, the state.

The school's second goal, to create "a democratic learning community," spoke to the school's "social" conception of empowerment:

> The school is a democratic learning community in which everyone is a learner, everyone is a teacher, and everyone willingly accepts responsibility for supporting, encouraging, and assuring learning by their peers. Students and staff participate in decisions about learning and the learning environment. They share in the responsibility for maintaining the school community.

Closely tied to the school's fundamental goal of promoting student learning, Frontier High also sought to promote "high expectations" among all community members:

> The staff, together with students and parents, identify skills, conceptual understandings, habits of mind, and knowledge that all students demonstrate in order to progress through the program and graduate. Support is provided to enable all students to achieve these expectations. The environment is safe and joyful and encourages students to persevere in the face of difficult tasks....

The fourth goal addressed by the design team concerned a respect for "cultural diversity." As they wrote:

> The learning community cultivates the ability of all its members to see issues and situations from many perspectives. The histories, stories, world views, and contributions of various cultures are an integral part of the curriculum.
>
> The school promotes the joyful development of personal and cultural identity. Within this rich mix, students learn to value, respect, and understand their own and other's identities. Students mix and group easily for learning and for play.

Implicit in these descriptions of the learning environment at Frontier High is a conception of empowerment much like that described in the previous section. For Frontier High, empowerment certainly entails students developing intellectual skills and having a grasp of essential knowledge, what the design team termed

"excellence in student learning." Quite simply, they assumed that knowledge is power (Freire, 1972, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Frontier High faculty also assumed that empowerment is a social as well as individual phenomenon, one that entails additional responsibilities in a community where "everyone willingly accepts responsibility for supporting, encouraging, and assuring learning by their peers." Further alluding to the social nature of this process, students are not expected to realize these goals solely by themselves. Rather, "support is provided to enable all students to achieve." And finally, because of the nature of the contemporary world, the design team considered it appropriate to emphasize one skill that seemed logical and fully in accord with their related goals, that is, "the ability of all [community] members to see issues and situations from many perspectives."

## How Does Frontier High Promote Empowerment?[5]

### Empowerment as knowledge

Frontier High faculty have sought to meet the goals identified by the design team through various means. One of the more prominent has been to view empowerment as closely tied with developing the intellectual skills and understandings that would allow students to succeed in society. In line with this goal, the school has created various contexts in which they have sought to give students a "voice" or "say" in school-related matters--the assumptions being that exercising their voice in the school community would be a learning experience for students, and that allowing students input into determining various aspects of school life would enhance their commitment to their education. As the principal commented during the radio interview:

> [What makes students learn] is connecting to each and every kid and finding the thing that carries them, gives them the reason to do the work of learning, because that's our bottom line....It's not just our philosophy,

it's what we know from the research: you learn when you make the effort to learn something. So every kid has to find a reason that they're willing to make an effort to learn something.

For instance, when thinking how they could structure the final two years of the high school experience so that it would best serve the interests of their students, faculty brought students into the dialogue, after faculty attempts to create and agree on what such a structure would look like had stalled. In a meeting to solicit student opinions, students received a handout that read:

IN LIGHT OF THE YEAR WE'VE HAD TOGETHER....

1. If next year this school could be everything you wanted it to be for you (on the wonderful side), what would it be like? What would engage you the most? What would you most like to do?

2. What would this place look like or what would need to be offered here, for you to feel like you could meet the expectations adults have of you and allow you to have what you need in order to get on with the next step in your life?

Before discussing these issues, the faculty moderator shared with students the general "ground rules" faculty use in their meetings:

First, expect uncertainty so you'll need to learn to cope with it. Don't expect that one person has all the answers. Some ideas will need to be explored from various perspectives. Second, offer your opinion even if you're not totally comfortable with it. Third, listen to others. Be open and give serious consideration to what other students say so that they'll be encouraged to take risks. Fourth, remember that there are constraints on what we can do, such as graduation requirements and parents' expectations. And fifth, focus on plans and solutions, not blaming anyone. Keep asking yourself, 'What can we do here to make things as good as possible?'[6]

Two particular aspects of giving students a voice in this context are noteworthy: First, students were involved in making decisions directly relevant to their education. And second, faculty helped students think about *how* they might effectively enact their power. They did not assume that they could delegate power to students and that students would unproblematically understand how to use it effectively (McQuillan & Muncey, 1991).

Many students also felt that they had a say in determining what was studied in their classes--once more, linked in part to motivating students to commit themselves to their course work. Reflecting a perception that was common among students I interviewed, one young woman noted the input that she felt she had in shaping the school's curriculum:

> You basically design your entire curriculum. You talk with teachers and you tell them what classes you want to take for next semester and if they think it's worthwhile, they'll help you design it....I was talking with a teacher who did a film class and we were talking about doing another film class that would go a little more in-depth.

Throughout their interviews, Frontier High students alluded to the say that they had in the life of their school. Typifying this perception, one young woman noted:

> If I feel frustrated about anything, I usually go to [my advisor] and talk to him about it and he'll bring it to a staff meeting or I'll bring it to [the principal]. I don't get to make all my choices. I have a say, and people listen to me. Sometimes I feel like teachers don't take my opinions into consideration, but then I understand that there are so many different opinions to everything that it's really hard.

In ending her remark, this student raised a related issue tied to student voice. That is, as students have come to realize that they can have a voice in school matters, it has become apparent to many of them that other students and faculty also have a voice that should be acknowledged. Alluding to the Socratic seminars held in her advisory, the same student went on to discuss her appreciation for multiple points of view:

> I really like [Socratic seminar]. I think that was something that has helped me to communicate and to get my opinions out....I really like the idea of hearing other people's ideas. For me, I want to learn more about other people's ideas. And that helps. Listening to other people. Not just talking about my own point of view....Here, I feel supported and supportive. If I look at someone who doesn't have the same points of view as me, it's not like, 'Hey you're wrong and I'm right.' Usually, if I tell someone I don't agree with them, they're really defensive about it. But here if I say that, people say, 'That's cool, but I don't agree with you either.' I really feel that there's a lot of working together.

Finally, in order for students to feel that they have voice, it seems that there would need to be examples of how faculty and administrators had responded to concerns students had voiced. The following remarks by the same student as previously quoted describe two instances of where she felt her voice had been heard:

> I wanted new juniors to come to [Frontier High] next year and I planned that whole thing [which included recruiting and interviewing interested students and setting up a 'new student' orientation session for the following fall] and talked with teachers and was able to let 15 new juniors come in. [Initially, the school planned to expand as it has but there was no provision made for adding juniors to the existing sophomore class at the end of the first year of school.] And that was really interesting because it was something that I'd been pushing for the whole year and I got it done....I was also part of the Inverness [Street] and Wellington [Road] project where we planned a building for [a lot site] and won first place [in a city-sponsored competition to design a building for that site]....Me and Sandy [one of her partners in the project] were really upset...because we thought that they'd actually put our ideas into action and they ended up paying architects to really do it. So I felt it was just a blow-off thing to make students feel that they were needed for this, but they really weren't. And when I saw the first place ribbon [that we had won] and I turned around and said, 'Does this mean that they're really going to build it?' and they were like, 'Ah no,' I was pissed....We had computer graphics, we had vision statements. We worked for two weeks straight every day after school for at least two hours. So we really thought it was something they were actually going to take under consideration.
>
> And now we're working to push this all the way until we definitely have no choice. We're going to make whoever is in charge of the buildings on Inverness and Wellington listen to us. We're going to talk to City Council. We're going to do as much as we can. And I kinda gave up after a week of trying. I had other stuff to do and I kinda gave up on that whole thing. But [our photography teacher] was talking to [one of my partners in the project] last week and I was sitting there. And he has been trying to get a youth center in [town] for the last ten years. So he was the one who actually pushed us and said, 'You guys have to really fight for this'....I really like the fact that an adult came up to me and said, 'You guys got to keep on fighting.'

Moreover, in the classroom, many teachers attempted to allow students a measure of input into determining what they studied and what form assessments of their learning might take. An assignment from a social studies course entitled "Origins and Generations" offers some idea for how a team of three Frontier High

faculty sought to balance students' freedom to define a research project for themselves, including the medium in which it would be presented, with the faculty's concern for maintaining academic standards. To provide an overarching structure to guide student work, the team set out a detailed plan, running from October 18th through November 5th, for students to follow in completing the project. The plan itself identified specific class times when students could work on their projects. It also specified when topics had to be selected, when students would conference with teachers about their work, when "work in progress" sheets were due, when performance exhibitions would be presented to the class, and when a self-assessment of the entire experience would be handed in.

Under this calendar was a note which read:

> What follows may appear structured and it is! It is our way of creating a process where you can do rigorous investigation related to the themes of "Origins and Generations" and help you stay on task to make useful decisions as a learner and investigator. HOWEVER, there are also real opportunities for choice, including the topic you investigate, how much you want to learn, the way you demonstrate or exhibit what you learn, the amount of writing you submit, where you conduct your investigation, and when you are off campus. We are comfortable with this balance between your freedom and our sense of the responsibilities that accompany any freedoms. Are you? Please also know that this is early in the life of Frontier High School. Increasing freedoms are available as students demonstrate a willingness and ability to handle those freedoms.

Following this note were guidelines that students were to use in the initial stages of their planning, guidelines which provided students with a structure and direction to follow, but which also accorded them the right to make a number of personal decisions related to the project:

PART I: PRELIMINARY PLANNING

1) At this point, what is the topic you wish to explore?

2) What is it that interests you about this topic? Be as specific as possible.

3) What do you now know about this topic? What resources can you identify right now that could help you to conduct this search (books, people, other)? Any teacher ideas?

4) What beginning questions and "sub-topics" can help you get started on this project? What questions would you like to answer by the end of this investigation?

5) Which specific "Origins and Generations" essentials[7] do you plan to focus on while doing this search?

6) Which specific "affective" essentials do you plan to work on while doing this search?

7) What is your intended plan for demonstrating what you learn during this search? This is your planned "exhibition" and it can take one of many forms. Any costs or special materials/technology to consider?

8) What skills do you have that will help you to be successful in completing this project?

9) As you think about your experiences in school and when doing projects such as this, where do you think you might "screw-up" in completing these tasks? Be honest!!

10) Any other concerns or items for you to consider at this point?

In addition, this assignment included a space for signatures from the teacher and the student's parent, and room for "parent comments."

As students began to work through their projects, the teaching team designed a set of guidelines that were intended, once again, to balance teacher direction with student autonomy. As the directions read:

PART II: Work in Progress

1) What additional questions about your topic do you have now that you have worked on your investigation?

2) What are five significant things that you now know about your topic that you didn't last week? Write them clearly and concisely.

3) Identify (in correct form) two sources you have used so far in your investigation.

4) What problems have you encountered in your investigation so far and what do you plan to do about these problems?

5) What success have you had so far in your investigation?

6) Either in the space below or on a separate sheet, carefully outline your "exhibition" for this investigation. If it is to be a paper, what is your working outline? If it will be a video or computer-based exhibition, what components will it include and how will it be organized? If you intend to do a "live" performance, describe your plans for it as carefully as possible. If some other plan, provide as clear a picture of what you intend to submit or "do." ALSO, where will you include writing in your final product if your exhibition is not a formal written paper? This might be notes you will submit, a clear summary of limited length, a careful description of the investigation process or something else.

Relative to the issue of knowledge as power, the guidelines just presented suggest how at least one teaching team at Frontier High sought to ensure quality work while still according students a say in defining the work that they would do--in effect, seeking to preserve their academic standards while motivating students and encouraging them to take ownership of their work by giving them a say in the work they produced. The teachers, for example, wanted to be certain that students understood the topic that they would investigate as well as what aspects of the topic they might focus on. As students began to work on the assignment, the team posed questions that would provide a sense for what "progress" students were or were not making. They also sought to assess whether students had an understanding of what their "final product" would look like. In turn, students could select a topic to research, determine what form their final presentation would take, and organize their time and resources to complete the work.

**Empowerment as appreciating multiple points of view**

In attempting to promote empowerment among the school's students, Frontier High faculty have also sought to help them appreciate the multidimensional nature of knowledge, as well as the multidimensional nature of people's views of the world. One specific means by which the school sought to do this was through "advisory"--cross-grade, relatively small forums (usually including no more than 15 students) in which students could address a wide range of issues, including such classroom-based concerns as grading policies and such school-wide issues as graduation requirements. A document entitled, "Teaching and Learning at Frontier High School," described the advisor system:

> Each student will have an advisor who helps weave the web between all the individual components of a student's program to insure that each student has a well balanced and high quality program that promotes mastery of the discipline essentials that are the basis of graduation. The advisor will also work with each student to insure that the needs of the 'whole' person are being met.

One aspect of advisory included "Socratic seminars." As the previously cited document described these seminars:

> Three times a month students will convene in Socratic seminars led by their faculty advisor. The purpose of a Socratic seminar is to explore the ideas, issues, and values in important texts chosen for their richness of ideas. The faculty member leads the seminar by asking questions that encourage students to do the work of interpreting the texts and to justify those interpretations to their classmates. Seminars provide a powerful tool for developing reading, writing, listening, speaking and thinking skills. We see them as a major means for developing high level literacy among all our students.

In seminar students debate the "meaning" of various selected "texts," which have included a *Harper's* article, "America Skips Schools"; an African folks tale, Allah Will Provide; O. Henry's, The Gift of the Magi; readings by Confucius and Lao Tzu; a documentary critical of U.S. involvement in Panama, *The Panama Deception*; and the popular film, *Philadelphia*.

A "debriefing" of a Socratic seminar in one advisory points to a number of features about these forums that Frontier High was trying to promote. The text for that day was, "The Censors," a short story by Luisa Valenzuela. The story was set in a fictitious, repressive society in which the central character got so wrapped up in his position in the Post Office's Censorship Division that he catches a letter he had sent to his secret lover (having lovers was illegal in this story) and feels compelled to turn himself in to be executed by the State. After students finished their analyses of the day's text, they reflected on aspects of the seminar itself. The teacher began the debriefing of the lesson by asking: "What did you observe about the seminar? What would you do differently if we were to do this over again?" The advisory then went around the entire group and each participant addressed these general questions. During the course of this debriefing, students brought up the fact that their present advisor was new to the group, and they contrasted his actions during advisory with their previous advisor.

Students #1: It think it's a stupid story.

Teacher: What's your evidence?

Student #1: It's unclear and I had to speculate about a lot of things. It kept you guessing and that got frustrating. We had no clue what it meant.

Various students: We did!

Student #2: We just had lots of different opinions.

Teacher: What would make it better: more or less confusion?

Student #2: It's OK to have confusion.

Student #3: I think that the text was interesting but I feel that in a seminar we should all talk and direct our ideas toward each other. You [to the teacher] directed it. [Our previous advisory teacher] didn't do that. We could go off on whatever topics we wanted with him.

Student #4: I think that this reading was not good for seminar and not many people participated because of that, not because [our previous teacher] wasn't here.

Student #5: I liked the reading....I liked it better than other readings. The seminar was more organized [than when our other teacher directed it], but you did talk and kept it going. It used to be [with our other teacher] that it was us who kept the seminar going....

Student #6: I didn't really *like* the reading but it was better than others that we've done. I should talk more during the seminar.

Student #7: I didn't like the reading. It doesn't have much potential. We need more *real* seminars. We should read something important and relevant, not just a story.

Student #8 [who did not participate at all in the seminar]: I didn't participate because I was not interested in the reading.

Student #2 [to student #8]: What *is* interesting? You often say that.

Student #8: I haven't found it yet.

Teacher: Here are my observations: I did keep things going. That was an accurate observation. I did it on purpose, because it's important to me that people refer to the text. [The guidelines for Socratic seminars used by Frontier High encouraged participants to ground their comments in direct references to the text being used for that seminar.] And you did that well. These are not intended to be bull sessions.

Student #7: What do you mean?

Teacher: The seminar today was not to just talk about censorship but to tie it to a better understanding of the text. You did good work today. There were a lot of good insights.

Student #9: The government had some reason for kidnapping her [i.e., the central character's lover]. Next time, I'll have my 'ticket.' [To participate in seminars, students had to do the reading and prepare a ticket that was an assignment designed by the teacher and used as a means to ensure that students did the reading and had begun thinking about the text.]

Student #4: I liked the reading but I don't think that it was good for seminar. I thought that we did OK, but I was annoyed because it seems that lots of people are saying that the seminars are driven by you [the teacher], but I don't know if [our previous advisor] never did that. I remember him asking other questions

too. That's annoying me. I noticed that a lot of people say that you [the teacher] talk the most. It's not like that never happened with [our previous advisor]. I don't see why it's such a big deal.

Student #10: It was confusing and I didn't like the text. If I had been in the seminar [she was excluded from participating because she hadn't completed her ticket], I would have had nothing to say.

Student #11: I pass.

Student #12: The seminar was boring. We need more debating.

Student #13: There were too many different possibilities. It was too open-ended.

Teacher: For future seminars, I would love to get some ideas from you and let you choose the texts that we use. So think about what else we might use as "texts" for the seminars.[8]

After class was dismissed, student #4 stayed behind to talk with the teacher. Apparently upset about students using their previous advisor to criticize the teacher, the student told him, "I think that it's rude when people say, 'That sucks. [Our previous adviser] didn't do it that way'."

A few points about this seminar are worth noting: First, students expressed many different opinions about various aspects of the reading that they had done (although the data do not substantiate this). Second, while some students easily accepted the notion that there were multiple possible interpretations and understandings (Perry 1995), others students felt uncertain and uneasy about not having clear meanings.

Third, students not only expressed different opinions about the reading but they did likewise in debriefing the experience itself. Some students "liked [the particular reading] better than other readings." Others felt that it didn't "have much potential," and that the reading was "not good for seminar." Students also raised some potentially sensitive topics, perhaps the most sensitive being to suggest that their advisor had been overly directive in the lesson itself, and then to have other students challenge their peers who made this suggestion. A student even

questioned the student who had said that he didn't find the reading interesting, asking him what he would find interesting.

Fourth, it seems revealing that students were able to express a range of opinions on the text for that day, the role of their adviser, and the effectiveness of the seminar itself, and to do so in an agreeable and respectful fashion. As one student from this advisory commented during an interview later that year: "[Socratic seminars] are fun. They're good. It's like one big argument and then after you're done you're like, 'Gosh, that was great!' And you're friends with everybody again. "

In addition, as with the meeting intended to help define what Division II would be, faculty helped students understand and reflect on *how* they were using their power and voice, in particular, students' ability to support their ideas with reference to the day's text. This teacher did not assume that students necessarily understood such processes. Finally, different students viewed this forum differently. Not all students found this forum useful or empowering. Some students participated a great deal, almost as much as their advisor. Others, who had submitted a ticket (which would imply that they had done the reading), nonetheless chose not to participate at all. And others, as their behavior suggested (i.e., a lack of participation in the seminar), and their comments reinforced, had little interest in and saw no value in analyzing the text for that seminar.

An effort to promote appreciation for multiple points of view was also apparent when the school created "theme groups" as a way to debrief students' experiences at their "service learning" sites. In line with the school's efforts to be part of the local community, the design team made service learning a part of the school's curriculum. As a document, "The LEARNING ENVIRONMENT at Frontier High School," noted:

On a weekly basis students will be expected to participate in volunteer activities in the community. These experiences, chosen by students on the basis of their own interests, will allow students to gain a deeper understanding of how their community works and of the expectations that the community has of its members. Reflection on and learning from these experiences will take place in students' advisories. Over time, we anticipate that students themselves will initiate major service learning projects that address the community issues that they believe need attention.

To help students reflect on their service learning experiences, the faculty designed the following activity:

Critical Incident--From Another Point of View

Think about some memorable incident/situation in which you were involved at your service placement, something that marked a moment of success, failure, satisfaction, frustration, sadness or humor.

1. Describe the incident or situation (enough so another person could basically grasp what happened).

2. How else could it be described or interpreted? That is, how might someone else have viewed the same situation differently, or acted differently, from the way you did?

3. How would you evaluate the outcome or effect of the situation or incident? Good or bad--and for whom?

4. How might someone else evaluate it differently?

Again, as with much of what Frontier High has attempted, this effort addressed multiple goals identified by the school and associated with aspects of empowerment. That is, it not only helped students to consider how they might view their experience from an alternative point of view, but it offered them the opportunity to reflect on the nature of their service learning experiences, and it offered them a chance to provide faculty with feedback on their satisfaction with service learning.

Empowerment as a social phenomenon

A third dimension to how the Frontier High design team conceived of empowerment involved the "social" nature of this process. Rather than viewing empowerment as a largely individual phenomenon, Frontier High appears to have approached this educational goal as an interactive, social experience. In the classroom, for instance, students are often required to work as a group. In many instances, students have been ambivalent about such groupings, especially when they felt that they were being asked to do more than their "fair share" of the work. Yet, quite a few students also acknowledged that over time, they learned to work more effectively in a group context. Alluding to her class's effort to be part of the Bicentennial Project, a national social studies contest where teams from schools compete against one another based on projects that they design, one student noted, "[For the Bicentennial course] we got into groups and one of the people was really hard to work with and that taught me a lot about how to work with people and...I actually became friends with this person." Offering a similar view of being required to work closely with her peers, another student reflected on what it was like to "make friends" at Frontier High:

> I think it's a lot easier to make friends here. You're closer to a lot more people because it's so small and you need to get along with these people, and you need to become friends with everybody....Because if everyone in the school doesn't get along, you're going to have too many conflicts and the school isn't going to work. A lot of times we have partners or small groups [in our classes] and you have to get along with the people in the groups, otherwise, it's not going to accomplish anything....Sometimes I find groups difficult but we try to work around it....You just kinda have to deal with other people and concentrate on the project that you're doing rather than the person sitting next to you bugging you.

In turn, learning to work with others helped a number of students to see the value of alternative points of view. As one student remarked in an interview:

> Everyone seems so open-minded here. I talk to some people and I realize that if I were at [another high school in the city], I wouldn't even think

about talking with any of the people in that group, because it's already been decided subconsciously in people's minds that this is one group, and someone else is in another group, and you don't really exchange among the groups. And it's not like that at all here....

*Are there cliques at Frontier?*

There aren't really cliques here. It's more like groups of friends. It's not like there are boundaries. There are no boundaries at all. There are the people who go out and party every weekend, and then there's the group of people who take their schooling first. But it doesn't divide itself along those lines.

Two other Frontier High students alluded to comparable experiences and perceptions at the school:

You work together. It's like a family here....In the beginning, people were really uptight because we have such a variety of people here. And people used to be really close-minded to a lot of things, like the purple hair thing and piercing all over your body. And now they are really open-minded to it because they see that those people are not really that much different from them. It's just the way that they look that's different. They're normal people on the inside, most of the time....At the beginning of this year, I was very, very, very homophobic. I did not like gay people at all. If one came near me, I would just freak out. But I found out that a couple of my friends are bisexual and we talk about that. I talked about how, if they're happy that's fine, but if they're going to push it on me, I'm not just going to sit there. I'm not that way. Because I've been hit on by women and I try and be nice about it and say, 'Sorry, I'm not like that.' We talked about if someone keeps pushing you, what you'd do. I can say, even if it was a guy, I'd do the same thing.

In the beginning it scared me a little because it seemed like everyone here was on drugs. I thought that that was a major part of the school. And it's really not. It really changes your perspective on things because you think people, just because of what they might do weekends, it makes them a bad person, or not the best student. And it's really not true. It doesn't really matter here if you smoke [legal and illegal] or not. It doesn't really matter. I've never been really pressured or felt any pressure [to do so]....When I first came to Frontier High I had to walk through the smoking section and it seemed like the entire school was there. What people do in their free time that concerns drugs doesn't really concern me anymore because it doesn't really affect what they do here. [empowerment]

Moreover, in promoting empowerment on a group level, trust seems to have been a critical factor.[9] Speaking to this issue, and how the structure at Frontier High promoted trust for him, one young man noted how he found socializing easier here:

> It's easier [to make friends at Frontier High] because it's a lot smaller. You're around people a lot more. Like [at my previous school], I might have one 50-minute class with one person, and you don't really have time to talk during the class so there's really no way to get to know people. But since we do all the group stuff, this one guy I didn't know, but we happened to have all our classes together and we got to know each other. At [my previous school], the only way I got to know people was talking with them during class, which you weren't supposed to do, and going to lunch with them. At [that school] last year I would sort of judge people by their labels. Like I'd say, 'Oh skaters, skaters are bad.' Or 'smokers,' or 'jocks,' or 'gangsters.' Here, in my advisory, there's a gangster and he really isn't that different than me. So I guess I still label him, but I don't judge students by their labels....because I know them now. Before, I never really got to know other students. I didn't really want to. I didn't have the chance to, or the opportunity to. And I think it was the same with them. But since I'm around them all the time now, sometimes if I want to go hackey-sack with people out in the smoking section, I can do that. And even though I don't smoke, that's fine with everybody. Nobody really cares. Last year, at [my previous school], if I ever walked through the smoking section, I just sorta felt uncomfortable.

Making a comparable evaluation of the school, another student explained why he preferred going to a "smaller" high school:

> I'd rather be at the smaller school because, to me, having it smaller and more compact, I find that a little easier as a learning environment....In some classes, it's so small, that you're not afraid to speak out because you see these kids everyday. You know everybody. You know their last names.

In conceiving of empowerment as a social phenomenon, there was also a clear sense that teachers would be part of that process, most fundamentally by providing students with support that would help them to become empowered. Speaking to their relationships with teachers, student remarks suggest that for many students teachers provided critical support. The following comments are typical:

The teachers will support you if you need it, but also leave you alone to do your work on your own....I like being able to talk to the teachers, being able to just go up to my advisor and sit down at his desk and start talking with him about what's going on with my class and stuff like that. The teachers are so open that you can just talk with them for hours about things....I usually meet with my advisor once a week or every two weeks. But this morning I just walked into the teachers' office and sat down and started talking to him about my biology project and how that's going and stuff outside of school.

[The teachers] try to help you with whatever you need. They listen to you and try to understand. You can be a lot more open with them about anything....because you know them better, not a lot better, but you know that you can just talk to them and that they'll understand because they're always around because you're in this classroom with a teacher not just for 45 minutes sitting behind a desk but a couple hours talking to them.

There's always going to be your student at any school who wants to speak up and regardless of that, some of them will be shut down. It will be hard for them to make their voice heard or it will be hard for them to make a meeting with the principal or whatever. But I think those students that do speak up, when they came to Frontier High School, they showed the other students that that's possible. That they can just walk in, literally just walk into the office and say, 'I need to sit down and talk to someone about my needs and my desires for my future.' And a teacher would drop everything that they had and literally just sit down and talk, and they wouldn't make you feel like you were making them inconvenienced or pulling them away from something that they were doing, because really, they treated you like you were the first priority. That's what we feel school should be about. And if we're here to learn, then our learning really is the first priority.

During a local radio interview with teachers, students, and the principal from Frontier High, a faculty member linked the support Frontier High provided its students to how the school's structure was designed to reflect this priority:

The first thing is just what kinds of priorities you create for your time. So yeah, you do have lots of pressures for how you should be using your time, but it is, in fact, the case that if your priority is: 'I want to respond to students' needs first and foremost,' then other things tend to be the things that go on the back burner....And since there's always going to be that kind of decision, that's the way you make the decision. So I work, for example, with students on a publication that's a monthly student news and commentary magazine....And, the class itself is basically structured around individual conferences with students, so that the students are in

the class working for two hours daily on the writing, layout and publication of this news magazine and because each student is engaged individually or in groups of two or three in their various writing or layout projects, then basically, my teaching is primarily a process of going from student to student or group to group. And if I think about all of my teaching during the day as that kind of process, then it makes it easier for me to make contact with individual students. I don't have to think to myself, 'Where am I going to find the time?' All of my time is structured around that [priority].

The specific form this teacher support often took was what the school and others have termed "personalization" (Muncey & McQuillan, n.d.; Newmann, 1989, 1993; Sizer, 1984). In the radio interview alluded to previously, the principal addressed this aspect of life at Frontier High:

> What we do is, we organize the day differently. we organize teachers' time differently and one of the guiding principles is personalization....Actually, most teachers don't have that many different kids that they see or have some sort of contact with in a substantive way. We have longer blocks of time, teachers spend more time with a smaller number of kids....We also use adjunct faculty to allow our faculty to have more planning time. And it's often during the planning time, when teachers are at their desks thinking, that...their student walks up and says, 'I need something,' and that's when the teacher says, 'Well, let's talk.' And they either talk there or they go for a walk around the block. I know there are times, I've done it and I'm sure other teachers have said, which is, 'Not right this minute, but can we do it tomorrow?'

In a document entitled, "The Vision Statement of Frontier High School," the school's design team identified personalization as a central goal for the school and described the concept as follows:

Personalization

> Students and their families are known and valued and the insight, understanding, and knowledge that parents have of their children is used to help students succeed.
>
> Students' unique experiences, strengths, prior knowledge, and different rates of learning are the starting points for teaching and learning.
>
> The curriculum combines student interests with district goals and faculty expertise.

Students have choices in the content and pacing of their learning.

Students demonstrate what they have learned in a variety of ways including writing, art, music, movement and other forms of expression.

Describing the faculty support that she sensed and how that helped her come to an understanding of herself as a learner, one student remarked in an interview:

> I don't think that it was anything that people sat down and talked with me about. I don't even know if it was just me growing up or because of this school....But coming here, I began observing...how I did things. And I think it was more because teachers were treating me as an individual. And so I had to stop and think, 'If I am an individual, I have to find out what my writing styles are, my styles of doing my homework.' Everything like that. It was more like teachers stopped and said to me that this was how I was doing things, and that I might want to consider doing them differently. They treated me as a person. I remember at the beginning of the year feeling so good to know that teachers would walk down the hall and say, 'Hey Emily, How are you?' I'd never had that before. That was really cool, to actually know that teachers really knew my first name....At [my previous school], by the end of the year most teachers would know my name, but they would never address me. They would never talk to me in the halls or find out how I was doing.

Commenting on changes she experienced, another young woman noted:

> I'm learning how to communicate with people....In seminars, we're learning how to work together as a group.....I've learned to talk with teachers and have found out that they're really understanding. They give me a different view on adults...At [my initial high school] I never really had a chance to talk with my teachers individually. If I did, it was like once. And I never talked to my counselor. It seemed like I was on my own. If something was going wrong, I had to worry about it. There wasn't anybody to help me. If I had a project missing, it was up to me to get it down and lots of times I didn't do it.

## VI. General Findings

The data presented thus far are admittedly limited; nonetheless, I would argue that Frontier High students had a greater sense of empowerment than students in most typical American high schools, and that some general findings

apparent from this preliminary data examination are instructive about various issues related to empowerment.

**Finding #1: Empowerment is not an add-on to the school structure; it has been integrated throughout various aspects of school life.**

As various researchers have found (Cummins 1994; LeCompte & deMarrais, 1992; Lynd & Lynd 1929; McQuillan & Muncey 1990), efforts to empower students often entail creating a new structure that is intended to accomplish this purpose, rather than rethinking the nature of what goes on within the school and considering how empowerment might be promoted through existing structures and practices. In contrast, Frontier High has made student empowerment a dimension to many aspects of their schooling.

**Finding #2: Frontier High did not attempt to achieve student empowerment through a single means.**

As the previous glimpse of a Socratic seminar suggested, not all students found this forum useful or empowering, while others did. In essence, this points to the fact that empowerment is often differently experienced and interpreted by different individuals; which in turn highlights the need for schools that wish to promote empowerment among their students to offer students multiple forums for doing so. (Much as one might think about utilizing various teaching/learning strategies so as to acknowledge a range of learning styles among students [Gardner, 1983, 1993]). At Frontier High, students could exercise their voice in advisory or in one-on-one meetings with their advisors. In addition, many students felt that they had considerable say in determining what went on in the school's classrooms. And when the school encountered problems deciding just what Division II of the school should look like, students were brought into the process.

**Finding #3: What constitutes empowerment and how it will be achieved is jointly defined by all community members, not just teachers and administrators.**

As previously mentioned various times, many students felt that they had a voice in defining what their education would be, while teachers sought to ensure that the work students did was of academically rigorous.

**Finding #4: In addition to giving students power and responsibility, faculty explicitly sought to help students think about how they would use their power.**

As Lima & Gazzetta (1994) recently observed:

> Empowerment comes...from having access to formal knowledge and having access (and understanding) of forms of human activity that lead to the acquisition of formal knowledge....Acquiring the methodology to construct knowledge is a key to empowerment because, once we understand how to learn, we are not as dependent on experienced teachers or mentors to guide us (p. 247).

At Frontier High students were assisted in thinking about how they used their power in various ways. In a meeting of 10th grade students to plan the structure of their program for the following year, a faculty member provided students with guidelines used by the faculty to help them reach decisions. In a Socratic seminar, the teacher emphasized how students should support their arguments through references to the text being used. When students were to choose a topic to study in their social studies class, the teachers provided them with guidelines for thinking about how they might make such a selection.

**Finding #5: These factors are interrelated. Empowerment is both a means to an end and an end in and of itself (Cummins, 1994).**

For instance, at Frontier High the school structure allows faculty to personalize students' educational experiences and to support students in the work that they undertake. In turn, personalization has helped some students develop their "voice." This sense of having a voice/say in school matters then leads students to sense a measure of empowerment. Ideally, increased empowerment has

led students to assume additional responsibilities at the school site, and so on. When asked whether she found Frontier High "easier or harder than her prior school," one young woman provided some sense for how various factors related to empowerment could be interrelated:

> I can't really say whether it's harder or easier. I can say that it's been really hard for me this year because I've worked really hard, and I didn't really work very hard at any other school....So I guess it is harder because I'm doing work now and actually taking it seriously. But it's easier in a lot of ways because people will help me if I'm struggling....mostly my teachers. For instance, the last couple weeks have been really stressful because I'm in this play and I have practices every night from seven 'til ten and I have this job and final projects for the year and I've been really stressed out about all that. Like math is something that I didn't put as a priority in the last two weeks and [the math teacher] said, 'OK, I understand that you're busy, but you need to get this done and I'll help you with it'....It was nice to have that support rather than teachers saying, 'You've got to do it. I don't care. You're the one that decided to take on the play.'

Finding #6: Empowerment is hard.

The empowerment process seems to be riddled with tensions that have to be balanced in order for empowerment to occur. To introduce this discussion, I feel that it is useful to consider some rather lengthy remarks made by the school's principal during the radio interview alluded to previously. In her comments, one gains a preview of the various topics that follow regarding the challenges of empowerment:

> I think one of the lessons I've learned is how incredibly hard it is to treat young people as people, and to respect them individually, and to be committed to them, and to take on the challenge of finding out what it will take to get each and every one of them, who is a completely different person from the others, to find a reason to invest in learning....You can't assume that there's a simple way or one way to get kids bought in. For some kids, it's the personal relationship with the teacher; for some kids, it's being given the freedom to not do anything and have consequences in the sense of grades and conferences with parents...just be given the freedom to choose not to do something and to recognize that truly freedom is on their side, and they're not being coerced. It's myriad, every kid is a different story and that's what makes it really hard because we do

public education. We do mass education, there are millions of students in America, there are millions of teachers. How can you organize schools to respect the fact that kids are people and each one of them is different and I think that's our challenge--how do we create both a structure that is a structure so it has some predictability, it has a schedule and yet it's flexible enough to take on what each and every kid brings to you and go somewhere with it....

And I understand why people choose not to take that task on, because it's an endless, bottomless task and one of the things you have to realize is you won't do it perfectly, not every kid is going to have every need met. You can only approximate it, because we all have to have lives as the adults in the building. But there's a logic for some people saying, 'I teach history and some kids get it and some kids don't.' There's a logic. It's not what I choose to do in my life, but the other choice is really getting involved, getting deep down, nitty gritty with kids and really getting them to learn. That's hard, hard, hard work. Incredibly rewarding, but really demanding....At first, I thought, 'Oh, you get interesting topics, you get advisory, you get different things, and you go out in the community...and then it'll magically happen.' And it isn't magic....So that's my meta lesson: how much harder this is than I ever imagined.

One of the fundamental tensions associated with empowerment is simply the fact that quite often empowerment entails assuming additional responsibility, and not everyone welcomes such opportunities, or perceives such situations as "opportunities" at all. Indeed, some measure of ambivalence is common in any situation where someone is being empowered. During the radio talk show alluded to previously, a Frontier High student discussed his ambivalence:

The best thing about this school is you can take more credit for your progress and your work, more than any other place that I've come across. I've always felt the reason that I've made progress [in school] was because of my teachers or because of my parents or just because I was sort of in a phase. And now I am starting to realize that my progress is sparked by me, by only me. And the downside to that is that you need to take full responsibility for your digressions, your downfalls, your failures, and that's real hard for kids to face. Because at [my previous high school] or middle school, I was always able to tell myself, 'It's because a teacher didn't like me,' or 'because I've missed a lot of days of school or whatever.' And here they give you the chance to make all those things up. So if you make a failure, that's always hard for me to face, especially here. So those are the best and the worst things for me.

Another tension that seems virtually inevitable in instances of empowerment concerns the degree to which those "doing" the empowerment, provide structure and routine for someone to follow, contrasted with the amount of freedom to fail that people are provided. Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992) raised this concern by posing the question, "[H]ow does a teacher 'make' students autonomous without directing them?" (p. 100). In a similar vein, Alissa Shethar (1993) reflected on her efforts to empower a prison inmate she worked with through a literacy program:

> He expected me to be a teacher and presented his work to be corrected, but as soon as I did, he was frustrated. His writing was being made into material 'to be corrected.' As he said much later, 'I hate it when people gotta do something for you, when people use the words that are supposed to be good for you. I want people to know that I have those words' (p. 363).

A Frontier High student spoke to this same issue when he described how much homework he did:

> We do really have a lot of work. It's just up to the student to do the work because they can put out as much work as they want....[Frontier High] is not just some place where you can go and slack off, as some people think. You can make it as hard as you want. If you really want to learn something, you can learn it. But you won't be assigned tons and tons of homework, like you might at [might previous high school] because you have to assign yourself it. You'll be assigned homework, because we actually do have a lot of homework. But it's a different kind of homework than at [my previous high school]....It's not in textbooks and stuff like that. It's a little bit more where you actually have to use your brain and think about more real life things.

Two other students offered comparable observations:

> I don't really have that much homework. If you have a project, you have to work at your own pace. You kinda have to assign your own homework. You can wait until the last day to try and get everything done that night. Or, you can pace yourself over different nights. It's up to you....I usually do my work over time. There have been a few occasions where I waited until the last days....Last year, it'd be the teacher assigning all the work: 'By tomorrow you have to have this much done on your

project.' Here it's like, just as long as you have it done by the deadline, you can work at your own pace.

You can learn things from everything that we do, but it's a matter of whether you want to learn it now or not....You can make it hard, but it can be pretty easy if you want it to. You pretty much assign yourself the amount of work you'll do, although teachers do assign work. But you can do a hundred times more work than you do at [my previous high school], it's just how much you assign yourself to do. At the same time, you can make it really easy and not do any work at all.

When Frontier High was created, faculty sought to make students an integral part of creating the school in their day-to-day lives. In retrospect, a teacher on the design team remarked on what he now saw as a rather naive sense of what students could do:

The metaphor for September was 'rehearsal.' We wanted to invite kids to help create the school, its climate, many things about it. In the best situation, few students can do that. And our 9th graders needed more direction than that. It was too amorphous. We'd all taught 9th graders and the flag should have gone up that this isn't what 9th graders do. But we felt like students were joining us in a 'learning adventure.'

Students, too, had a sense that initially the school accorded them too much power. As the following remarks suggest, if schools give students additional power and responsibility, students are liable to abuse or misuse this power:

At first, I think that the school gave students way too much power over what went on and in the beginning students thought that it was a slack-off school and it didn't work out too well. Now, it's settled down and people are beginning to realize that it's not a slack-off school, but it didn't work out at first....There was too much student power in terms of what went on at the school. Almost every class was designed by students, so only a few students liked them or they were misinterpreted.

Some teachers are really, really devoted to their students and push them to that extra level. And some here are laid back and say, 'Come on, do your work. I don't want to send you to [the principal].' They are nice and easy with them. Those are the ones that kids take advantage of because they see that you don't stay on top of them....[They are] a little easier going, and kids see that, and say, 'Gee, he's not on my back.' And, 'He's not harassing me to get this done'....So they take advantage of it.

A third dilemma associated with most efforts at empowerment centers on the question of, "Who defines empowerment?" Speaking to this tension, LeCompte and deMarrais (1992) noted that efforts to empower others are likely to "trap the change agent on the horns of a relativistic dilemma, where they are unable to define for the oppressed the conditions of their oppression without seeming to impose those definitions upon those they feel need liberating" (p. 25). Ellsworth (1992) and hooks (1986/1987) made comparable points, maintaining that women (or any "oppressed" member of society), for instance, should not have to take the lead in delineating their predicament for society. Yet, if men (or other "privileged" persons) assume this responsibility, might they run the risk of "silencing" women (or others)?

Furthermore, if one allows those "being empowered" to define what constitutes empowerment, the "empowerer" may not find that easy to accept. In terms of formal education, Brandau and Collins (1994) provide a sense for why teachers may find this particularly difficult. Citing their research among rural, working-class Americans, they wrote:

> Several teachers tell of students who plan to follow in their parents' footsteps and point out that *they* never graduated from high school. A second grader told his teacher that his father could not read and 'he does just fine.' The reading specialist [in that community] recalls that years ago a third grader told her that he would not be needing to know about paragraphs, because he was going to get a job in his father's service station. That third grader, now 20 years old, never graduated from high school, but he has a 'good job' at a city service station (his father no longer operates one) and is perceived as successful by himself and other community members (p. 124; emphasis in original).

Brandau and Collins (1994) go on to assert that:

> The whole notion of education leading to better jobs rests on a middle-class assumption of what 'better' jobs might be. This assumption is not always shared by poor, rural, working-class people who know that mainstream, professional jobs require moving away, often to a metropolitan area....In poor communities, competition and achievement

> do not play the same role that they do in middle-class communities, and so achievement cannot simply be assumed to be a high priority in school, except of course, in the view of the teachers. Most families [in the community studied] seem to view school as a community gathering place, a place for important ceremonies and social events, but not as a place to strive for economic security or social mobility through academic achievement (p. 131).

Another reason that educators might find empowerment difficult to enact and may approach such a goal with ambivalence concerns the very real possibility that empowerment of some may lead to the disempowering of others. In his effort to empower third grade students through literacy, Lensmire (1994) found that some of those who became skilled writers used what they wrote to reinforce existing, informal social hierarchies within the class. In effect, empowering some students, mostly those from relatively privileged backgrounds, allowed them to further ostracize the class's unofficial outcasts.

I have no data to support any comparable developments at Frontier High but one could envision a comparable scenario when the additional 15 juniors that were to be added to the existing junior class this year came to the school. That is, these older students might band together on the basis of their common grade affiliation, a not uncommon development in American education where one's high school experience is often defined in terms of her or his graduating class. The question then becomes: How do these students use their solidarity?

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[1] While I focus on Cummins' conception of empowerment, many of his ideas reflect conceptions of empowerment that have been proposed by others. For instance, Freire (1973, 1985), Freire & Macedo (1987), and Greider (1992) link knowledge and power, including the development of a "critical" understanding of one's world. As Freire and Macedo (1987) wrote, "Progressive educators who advocate literacy for empowerment define literacy as a change in collective consciousness, a new way to read the 'word and the world'" (p. ). Tying her description of empowerment to a similar conception of literacy, Alissa Shethar (1993) observed in her work with a prison inmate, "Through dialogue, the student progressed from the passive-learner role to a presentation of self as knowledgeable expert; from a

denial of his prison group-membership, he progressed to a critical analysis of the power structure it represents" (p. 357).

[2] Outlining the "transmission model," Cummins (1994) wrote:

> The basic premise of the transmission model is that the teacher's task is to impart knowledge or skills that she or he possesses to students who do not yet have these skills. This implies that the teacher initiatives and controls the interaction, constantly orienting it toward the achievement of instructional objectives (p. 336).

[3] When Frontier High was created, a number of teachers from the school district and the woman designated as principal of the school as well as faculty from a local university and some consultants were designated the "design team" and undertook much of creating the philosophical, and some structural, underpinnings to Frontier High.

[4] In outlining how "empowerment" was conceived by the Frontier High design team, I refer to the goals as intended for all "community members"--not just students--since the design team felt that many of the goals the school sought to promote among students were equally valuable for faculty. This is much in line with what Lima and Gazzetta (1994) wrote:

> [E]mpowerment is not something that is given to somebody by those who hold power in society. Empowerment is more a conquest that equally affects all those involved in the process. In the specific case of empowerment through educational action, it means that the process is one that transforms people who have the formal knowledge and people who are acquiring formal knowledge (p. 237).

Addressing a similar point, Seymour Sarason (1990) argued that those involved in reforming American schools should realize that many of the same recommendations that have been made as to how schools might improve the lives and learning of their students are applicable to teachers as well.

[5] In my view, Frontier High seeks to promote student empowerment in more ways than I discuss. However, because of the focus of this paper, I do not attend to all the means by which they might promote student empowerment.

[6] This meeting was interesting because students were rather dissatisfied because it was held after normal school hours. In fact, one major recommendation that emerged from the meeting was that the school should not hold such meetings after normal school hours; rather, if the faculty and administration want students to participate, they should make it easy for students to do so, not an add-on to their existing plans.

[7] In designing their course, this team of teachers sought to have students master certain skills and gain an understanding of what they considered essential topics associated with the course. This question and the following question were intended to get students to reflect on their work in terms of those specific course goals.

[8] In the course of the year, students suggested at least two texts that were used in the Socratic seminar, the documentary, *The Panama Deception*, and the popular film, *Philadelphia*.

[9] For an insightful discussion of the challenge and tensions associated with promoting trust at the university-level, see Ellsworth, 1992.