

# How Good Schools Empower Students

Bryan Schroeder

## Abstract

*Today's students require educators who will guide them to think critically, grow in character, and value relationships. These students become empowered to change their world and overcome social and racial oppression and marginalization. Empowered students are those who attain skills and knowledge with their teachers, and become equipped and motivated to question the dynamics of reality around them, in order to transform and improve society. Problem-posing and dialogue-based education also empowers students to examine their knowledge and the world they live in, and train students with a voice to be heard and a perspective to share.*

The challenges that today's students face range from social class and racism to low quality educational norms. Meeting these challenges successfully requires good schools and educators who think critically to empower their students. Educators' pedagogical practices can empower students to improve society (McLaren, 2009) by enhancing the students' personal character, critical thinking skills, and healthy student-teacher relationships. Although education is "complex, non-linear and to a great extent unquantifiable" (Shaker, 2004, p. 13), and "certain pedagogical practices become so habitual or natural in school settings that teachers accept them as normal, unproblematic, and expected" (McLaren, 2009, p. 71), students deserve the best education possible. Brunson and Vogt saw empowerment as a process whereby an individual learns and grows within a social and educational context that is supporting and encouraging (as cited in Sullivan, 2002). Many students are deprived of their power and influence because of oppressive living conditions, racial marginalization, or hegemonic bourgeois norms (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009; McLaren, 2009; Ungerleider, 2004). Schools grounded in critical theory empower students with society-transforming skills and knowledge despite their exposure to oppression.

## Oppression in Education

Students' internalization of self-limiting ideological formations, given their contextual living conditions, accentuates the unknowing acceptance of their social reality in the face of oppression (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). Many students are striving to survive (Shaker, 2004) and are struggling to learn in school because they are trying to use their everyday knowledge (McLaren, 2009) as "critical intervention in reality" (Freire, 2009, p. 57), in order to respond to the problems in their world. Parents are increasingly absent in the home because they work multiple jobs to pay bills (Ungerleider, 2004). This "lack of supervision affects [the children's] conceptions of education and life" (Aronowitz, 2009, p. 117), and students become more likely to internalize feelings of defenselessness and shame as personal failure (Greene, 2009). These students have high demands of survival, which can be met when teachers assist them to think critically, in order to shift their internalized self-limiting ideological formations toward empowered and educated perspectives of hope and influence.

Social class and race issues have marginalized individuals and groups in schools for centuries because of the unequal "social distribution of power and its structural allocation" (McLaren, 2009, p. 65). Hooks (2009) emphasized the connection between the biased offering and receiving of knowledge within the prejudiced confines of social relations and values, which undoubtedly acknowledges class issues in education today. The understanding of power within society and how it influences and connects schooling to the larger social order imperatively molds working classes, and ostracizes races, to the predetermined ideology of marginalization within schools (Aronowitz, 2009; McLaren, 2009; Shaker, 2004). As the walls of domination

squeeze out the values of the working class, the oppressed begin to behave as victims and often passively accept any title, role, or biased social relation bestowed upon them (Greene, 2009; hooks, 2009). It is this social repression in school classrooms, “through the daily implementation of specific norms, expectations, and behaviors, that incidentally conserve the interests of those in power, students are ushered into consensus” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 6). Teachers need to stop conducting “their classrooms in a manner that only reinforces bourgeois models of decorum” (hooks, 2009, p. 136). For example, they need to stop rewarding students who consistently conform to the perceived approved cultural and class practices, and acknowledge the significance of race and class diversity among students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009) – and empower them by celebrating such uniqueness.

Oppression in education exists among educators who maintain styles of domination and logic of standardization, which leaves little room for critical thought (Freire, 2009; Giroux, 2009). Consequently, John Dewey believed that “for most students school is endured rather than experienced as a series of exciting explorations of self and society” (as cited in Aronowitz, 2009, p. 106), which is expected if the teacher uses a dominant force of power over students to provoke them to an attitude of powerlessness (Sullivan, 2002). Hegemony is “the maintenance of domination not by the sheer exercise of force but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school” (McLaren, 2009, p. 67). McLaren (2009) acknowledged his maintenance of the hegemony of the dominant culture, because as a classroom teacher he “did not teach [his] students to question the prevailing values, attitudes and social practices of the dominant society in a sustained critical manner” (p. 67).

Students are disempowered when they are controlled by teachers and withheld from asking questions that would augment their learning (Shaker, 2004). Freire’s (2009) statement is an accurate observation of such domination: “Education is suffering from narration sickness” (p. 52). His primary example of oppression in education is the banking concept, because “instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat . . . knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, p. 52). Through this dominant process, an ideology of ignorance is directed toward students and they inadvertently adapt to this fragmented perception of reality, do not learn critical thinking skills, and do not develop any process of cognition (Freire, 2009; Peterson, 2009). Good schools and educators who think critically are vital, because as students are provided learning opportunities that consist of critical consciousness, they will be empowered to change their reality and have the ability to make a difference in society.

### **Good Schools**

Good schools ensure that students learn and pursue their potential (Langlois, 2004). Components of a healthy learning environment include critically thinking educators, the maintenance of emotional and physical safety, and the accommodation of individual learning needs (Langlois, 2004; Shaker, 2004). “An atmosphere in which individual students are supported by the classroom community to take responsibility for their lives in trying to meet their needs within learning settings” (Sullivan, 2002, “Empowerment,” para. 8) requires an educator who is concerned for the well-being and holistic learning of each child. Student-initiated and student-centered projects are a good start toward empowerment, but good schools go beyond respectable beginnings to equip students “to think deeply, to invest mental effort in their learning” (Ungerleider, 2004, p. 21), and to experience creativity and excitement during the progression of learning (Shaker, 2004). A hunger for learning is invaluable. As students practise critical consciousness and learn with their teachers, they will develop the skills and knowledge necessary to pursue lifelong learning and reach their potential.

A good school cultivates a culture of justice and relational emphasis, in order to teach students to honour people and “to treat others as [they] would like to be treated” (Ungerleider, 2004, p. 21). The call for equality and justice (Greene, 2009, p. 95) echoes because

any worthwhile theory of schooling must be partisan. That is, it must be fundamentally tied to a struggle for a qualitatively better life for all through the construction of a society based on nonexploitative relations and social justice. (McLaren, 2009, p. 62)

Students must connect not only the academic lessons of education, but also the components of social learning, with the world they live in, in order to engage in justice-oriented causes that uphold the value of people (Ungerleider, 2004). Good schools expects students to “treat others with respect; have the ability to work co-operatively with others; appreciate and act upon the values and principles that make us human . . . ; and . . . exercise a critical intelligence that is adaptable to circumstances unforeseen” (Ungerleider, 2004, p. 21). Good educators strive to break hegemonic rule through pedagogical practices that enhance students’ experience-based knowledge for the purpose of emancipation and justice for the oppressed (Giroux, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009; Peterson, 2009).

### **How Good Schools Empower Students**

Students become empowered critical thinkers when teachers use problem-posing education to reveal and connect learning with reality, rather than a banking concept of education (Freire, 2009). Freire (2009) believed that critical thinking required intentionality and a consciousness of consciousness to support his communication-focused problem-posing pedagogical concept. Sullivan (2002) discovered that student empowerment could be enhanced by a consistent approach by committed teachers who were determined to see students empowered as positive forces to dispel race and social class issues in school. Because “critical pedagogy is fundamentally committed to the development and enactment of a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 9), these students need teachers who will widen their perspectives of reality (Greene, 2009). Good schools have teachers who are not only presenting class material that challenges the bourgeois norms, but who are also being transformed through a pedagogical process (hooks, 2009) that confirms the influence of the problem-posing education concept. As teachers aspire to understand how a student’s world is assembled, they will recognize how knowledge can marginalize or liberate the student depending on the presence of critical thinking skills (McLaren, 2009).

Good schools have educators who implement pedagogical practices to empower students and improve school community “through dialogue and working collaboratively” (Sullivan, 2002, “Empowerment,” para. 4). Freire defined dialogue not just as “permissive talk, but conversation with a focus and a purpose” (as cited in Peterson, 2009, p. 313). The knowledge and perspective of each student is valuable and is the platform upon which critical thinking and learning are built. Therefore, a key role of the critical educator is to enhance meaningful communication among students and the teacher by provoking authentic thinking and unheard voices (Freire, 2009; Greene, 2009; hooks, 2009). Educators create such a context by generating “an overall positive atmosphere in the classroom and by planning very specific activities which stress self-awareness, respect, and cooperation” (Peterson, 2009, p. 311). This counter-hegemonic educational approach creates emancipatory academic and social space to draw in the students who in the past resided at the margins of the learning atmosphere and social framework (Darder et al., 2009).

A dialogue-based learning environment, coupled with acceptable critical discourse, will deconstruct dominant discourse and focus on student-relevant issues, thus producing knowledge (McLaren, 2009). As students hear their classmates’ perspectives, questions, and

opinions, the race and social class issues begin to fade, new social realities form, and students develop greater aptitudes to learn together (hooks, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009). This dynamic sharing of power establishes a worldview of interdependence based on the learning relationships between teachers and students, because a good educator is both a teacher and a student (Freire, 2009; Sullivan, 2002). Peterson (2009) described empowerment and the importance of the right dynamics within a learning environment as follows:

Empowerment does not mean “giving” someone their freedom. Nor does it mean creating a type of surface ‘empowerment’ in which one gives the students the impression that they are “equal” to the teacher. The challenge for the teacher who believes in student empowerment is to create an environment which is both stimulating and flexible in which students can exercise increasing levels of power while regularly reflecting upon and evaluating the new learner-teacher relationship. (p. 312)

Students are empowered by dialogue-based education because it promotes liberation from the established hegemonic rule, due to both the student and teacher contributing dialogue and analysis in the context of critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2009; Peterson, 2009).

Good schools recognize that the product of dialogue-based education is socially formulated knowledge that endorses the reconstruction of a student’s perspectives of reality, while the collective and individual experiences of the totality of life are reflected upon (Aronowitz, 2009; McLaren, 2009). Students are empowered to pursue suitable social goals as they become more cognizant of social relations and cultural traditions (McLaren, 2009; Sullivan, 2002), and will likely seek to establish justice among local and global communities (Giroux, 2009). Educators of good schools empower students “to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live” (McLaren, 2009, p. 77). People who search for meaning in the world look beyond themselves to gain a critical perspective of the oppression that other people are experiencing, and then strive to demonstrate honour and appreciation for people of diverse race and social class. Knowledge is constructed as students are exposed to various social conditions and experiences of people of various race and social class backgrounds. “Critical pedagogy asks how our everyday commonsense understanding – our social constructions or ‘subjectivities’ – get produced and lived out” (McLaren, 2009, p. 63), but educators need to care about people and the world they live in before they can empower their students to live justice-oriented lives based on critical thinking.

As students are empowered by the teachers of good schools to think and live differently, they become active participants in the world “in the interest of social change” (Aronowitz, 2009, p. 120; Giroux, 2009, p. 34). Developing students who will transform society for good is one goal of a good school. When empowered students act and reflect upon their world, they begin to create an environment in which oppression, hegemony, and traditional illogicality can be overcome (Freire, 2009; Giroux, 2009; McLaren, 2009). As critically thinking students grow into adult citizens, they will continue to project a better society by evaluating what exists and persistently trying to repair deficiencies (Greene, 2009), because “knowledge acquired in classrooms should help students participate in vital issues that affect their experiences on a daily level rather than simply enshrine the values of business pragmatism” (McLaren, 2009, p. 74). People with such consciousness are the result of problem-posing education and are empowered to transcend themselves by constantly seeking to understand the past in order to “more wisely build the future” (Freire, 2009, p. 59). McLaren (2009) summarized these thoughts,

Knowledge is relevant only when it begins with the experiences students bring with them from the surrounding culture; it is critical only when these experiences are shown to sometimes be problematic (i.e., racist, sexist); and it is transformative only when

students begin to use the knowledge to help others, including individuals in the surrounding community. Knowledge then becomes linked to social reform. (p. 80)

There are many obstacles to overcome for one person to transform society, but good schools empower students with the context, skills, knowledge, and character to take action and live out their hope and vision for a better world.

### **Analyzing Empowered Students**

Empowered students are students with character, liberated critical thinkers, and people who value relationships. Aronowitz described a component of empowerment as “the process of appreciating and loving oneself” (as cited in McLaren, 2009, p. 77). Students who are empowered have a high level of self-esteem and love for themselves. They demonstrate self-awareness and humility, which translates as someone who has recognized what

society as made of them, how it has incorporated them ideologically and materially into its rules and logic, and what it is that they need to affirm and reject in their own histories in order to begin the process of struggling for the conditions that will give them opportunities to lead a self-managed existence. (Giroux, 2009, p. 47)

Students of character have perseverance, integrity, honesty, and patience. They pursue their goals passionately because they have been empowered and motivated to lead purposeful and fulfilling lives (Sullivan, 2002).

Liberated critical thinkers are people who, in the midst of cognition, experience freedom to break through the obscurities of hegemony and bourgeois norms that stifle passion and compromise hope for the oppressed (Greene, 2009; Freire, 2009). Empowered students are those who learn to question and transform, rather than accept and serve (McLaren, 2009). Therefore, past barriers are demolished while modes of inquiry and critical examinations of reality fuel a newly imagined life of affirmative pedagogy (Giroux, 2009). Education becomes the practice of liberty for the empowered student, and achievement of any personal goal becomes attainable (Freire, 2009; Sullivan, 2002).

An empowered student values people and pursues relationships. The power in relationship can be positive or negative, but students who learn well with others maximize the potential for social change by understanding their own incompleteness, the power of interconnectedness, and the dynamics of exploring greater possibilities of transformation (Darder et al., 2009; Greene, 2009). Mutual humanization requires trust in other people and partnership with people in critical thinking and dialogue, in order to optimize the potential for social change (Freire, 2009). Empowering education produces students who wholeheartedly approach living in relationships with others while not succumbing to a perceived need for control in relationship; finding such a balance is the beauty of partnering with people to accomplish great things and requires a lifetime to discover.

### **Conclusion**

The threat of hegemonic rule and systematic oppression perseveres, but the goal of transforming society will be met as good schools empower students to think critically and question the dynamics of the reality that surrounds them. Social class and race issues are minimized as students' need for power is satisfied through gaining “power-with peers or the teacher rather than gaining power-over them” (Sullivan, 2002, “Importance of Student Empowerment,” para. 2). Good schools have evidence of student learning, justice-oriented perspectives that seek a better quality of life for everyone, and school cultures that foster relational learning between teachers and students. Problem-posing and dialogue-based

education empowers students to examine their knowledge and the world they live in, and gives students a voice to be heard and a perspective to share. Socially constructed knowledge becomes potential power for transforming society to overcome oppression and deconstruct systems of marginalization and domination. Empowered students are students of character, liberated critical thinkers who value others and believe in the power of relationships. Students' possibilities in life will be widened (Aronowitz, 2009) as educators in good schools strive to empower, influence, and learn alongside students for the purpose of transforming society and leading functional and fulfilling lives.

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## About the Author

*Bryan Schroeder is currently working on his master's degree in educational administration. He is in his eighth year as an educator and fifth year as an administrator at an independent school in Brandon, Manitoba. Bryan grew up in Elm Creek, Manitoba, has been married to Amanda for 11 years, and has two beautiful daughters.*