Teacher Empowerment in a Social Context

by Michael Vavrus

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Teacher empowerment was not in vogue ten years ago when I completed my research on teacher career stages and alienation and began working as the teacher-director of a parent-governed prekindergarten through sixth-grade school.[1] However, my desire to work for a school in which parents felt a direct sense of ownership—materially, intellectually, and spiritually—sprung from an intrinsic need to have control over my work as a teacher and avoid the alienating working conditions under which so many teachers must labor. My freedom as a teacher was limited primarily by my own imagination; when events in the school were not going the way I wished, I often only had to look in the mirror to find the source of the problem.

Although the *product* of schooling continues to be a subject of debate,[2] the parents for whom I had worked were not interested in standardized test scores and measures of potential economic productivity as outcomes of their children's schooling encounters. Instead, they sought integrated, holistic learning experiences in a caring, democratic atmosphere —a work environment that frees a teacher to create and develop a curriculum meeting both (a) the emotional and cognitive growth requirements of children and (b) the need by a teacher to have primary control over the organization and implementation of the school program. In such a setting, parents, children, and a teacher are experiencing empowerment, not alienation.

Empowerment, in the fullest sense, is the response to teachers' alienation in the workplace. Full empowerment, then, must extend beyond personal satisfaction and address both the unequal power structure of the educational bureaucracy and the presumed goals of the educational process.

Teacher empowerment, however, is a new concept and experience within the public school reform movement, positively affecting only a relatively small number of teachers. Empowerment is the response to alienation; that is, its goal is to alter an administrative hierarchy that does not permit teachers' direct participation in the decisions impacting their work.[3] Just as alienation must be placed within complex social relations that determine the work of teaching, so must empowerment. Without a holistic perspective of the broad social factors that interact with teacher labor, simplistic and misguided expectations, explanations, and solutions for alienation/empowerment will be promoted.

Satisfaction/burn-out do not equal empowerment/alienation

With hopeful anticipation, I began to read the feature articles on teacher empowerment in the Spring 1989 issue of *Holistic Education Review* and was pleased by M.E. Sweeney's introductory emphasis of placing empowerment in the context of participatory decision making.[4] Although well intended, the opening articles prove to be somewhat misleading both conceptually and socially.

Job satisfaction studies historically have been more concerned with individual perceptions than with the nature of the work performed. Such studies can lead to individualistic sociobiological explanations of satisfaction independent of objective workplace conditions.[5] J. Ainsworth's study of teacher satisfaction focuses on important higher order needs such as self-actualization and autonomy. But while her essay is correct to debunk job satisfaction research that focuses on measures of efficiency, it fails to acknowledge that an individual may report satisfaction or high morale yet still not be functioning as an empowered professional. Conversely, returning to my earlier described teaching experience, there were numerous occasions on which I would not have considered myself fully "satisfied" in my work, but the objective fact that I was empowered as a teacher was a constant. Perceptions do not always correlate with the actual material working atmosphere.

Taking what initially appears to be a humanistic approach, Ainsworth announces, "I resolved not to try to correlate any results with any aspect of 'productivity.' "[6] By rejecting for good reasons traditional measures of productivity, her subjects' scores on higher order needs are left floating, not grounded to any concrete teaching and schooling experiences and outcomes beyond her personal speculations. Satisfaction and morale studies are just too nebulous to provide a handle for making policy recommendations for the creation of empowering work sites. Educators who seek alternative visions must provide alternative accounts to productivity defined as standardized test scores or economic utility. But to discount productivity entirely is to overlook that all student–teacher encounters result in some kind of social product or outcome even if it cannot be quantified.

Within this genre, burn-out studies also focus on individual perceptions, thereby confounding the term *burn-out* with *alienation* in the absence of a structural analysis of the work of teaching. More appropriately, burn-out may be a *symptom* of alienating work conditions.[7] Further limiting the usefulness of studies of satisfaction and burn-out is the existence of individuals who manage in alienating work environments to perceive themselves as satisfied or as not experiencing burn-out. As with satisfaction research, studies of burn-out use the individual for the unit of analysis—too often pointing to the misleading conclusion that the individual should focus only on intrapersonal attempts to alter his or her own state of satisfaction or burn-out, rather than also focusing on correcting oppressive working conditions.

With "natural teacher empowerment" S. Gilmour lures the reader into the idea that "letting go" in a positive Zen-like manner will transform teacher alienation. In fact, change is reduced to a process that apparently happens if the individual simply is imaginative and acts on new perceptions.[8] I welcome her vision of an enlightened teaching staff informed by an awareness brought on through a meditative posture to daily encounters,[9] but the social parameters within which one has to operate still must be identified explicitly and described concretely. As in the satisfaction and burn-out studies, Gilmour focuses on the individual teacher by stating that "varying degrees of empowerment will fit for individuals at different stages of life."[10] If empowerment is the process of overcoming alienation, then such reasoning suggests that different intensities of alienation, too, are acceptable for teachers. Unfortunately, the reality throughout the United States is that teachers are faced with principals who hold paternalistic attitudes toward them and who wish to control the type, extent, and manner in which teachers might become full partners as professionals in the decision-making process affecting all aspects of their labor.[11] R.S. Brandt, executive editor of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, notes that school managers generally resist infringements on their power and support teacher participation based on "the degree of teacher discretion . . . determined not by institutional policy but by the generosity and goodwill of individual administrators."[12]

Hopeful calls for trust between teachers and administrators discount the existence of power within all social relations, including those in the schooling enterprise.[13] If to empower is understood to mean to invest with power, then calls for "natural power" only serve to obfuscate the structural barriers limiting teachers' access to the power in controlling the nature of their work. Although natural power may be "a simple process,"[14] empowerment in the political domain is a complex one and involves the struggle and commitment by teachers seeking to exercise pedagogical wisdom within the latitude generally granted someone with professional status.[15] By confusing an intrapersonal notion of empowerment with the power-infused nature of the schooling production process, the current movement for teacher empowerment is rendered socially impotent.

A. Langberg briefly addresses the issue of power, but presents it only in the extreme of an ensuing

failure from a total power turnover to teachers. At this early stage of the current teacher empowerment movement, it appears that where teacher involvement in school-level decision making has been greatly expanded beyond the norm, teachers are recognizing that they do not want to be responsible for all decisions administrators traditionally handle, but just those that most directly impact their work as educators.[16] The reality of the existence of power in social relations demands that any policies and procedures restricting the exercise of the pedagogical judgment of teachers must be acknowledged as alienating for teachers and as the major obstacles for teachers in attaining empowerment.

Preservice teachers enter their career with the anticipation of developing the whole child as well as with the expectation of participating in the decisions that affect their labor.[17] Yet, in their teacher preparation programs, most teachers were never informed of the sociopolitical history and rationale of the bureaucratic arrangement of public schools, which contribute to the current alienating working conditions of teachers. Nor were they told that their ability to express their authenticity and creativity through the central vocational experience in their lives would be eroded by asymmetrical power relations that do not allow them to be full participants in their own work. Without confronting the nature of bureaucracy and power and the contradictions found within various calls for empowerment, especially as related to the development of holistic learning opportunities, discussions of teacher empowerment remain aloof from the material working conditions facing teachers each day.[18]

Collaboration and teacher empowerment

Once teachers are permitted to enter the public arena in which decisions about schooling are made, the nature of teacher empowerment shifts to the logistics of participatory decision making among teachers who traditionally work in isolation from their colleagues and rarely have the opportunity to discuss pedagogical issues of substance with fellow teachers. To the need for teachers to interact openly and collectively with other teachers, Langberg, Rich, and Sweeney suggest positive alternatives in the Spring 1989 issue of *Holistic Education Review.*[19] Such varied perspectives on how teachers, through collaboration, may interpret their work comprise a critical dialogue within teacher empowerment—one in which teachers may name and overcome alienating work situations.

Rather than unquestioningly accepting authoritarian structures or retreating into privatized experiences of freedom, interpreting lived situations is a means for teachers to understand the meaning of teaching and schooling. Collaboration does not suggest predetermined responses to fixed relations among participants. "To collaborate," J.C. Conoley explains, "implies joint responsibility and action to accomplish a task. Further, collaborative relationships are nonhierarchical and are based on complementary skills and goals."[20] In such an arrangement, administrators no longer set the agenda for teachers, rather teachers determine it themselves.

As in phenomenological research, teachers become subjects of their work as opposed to being merely objects. Collaboration breaks down the concept of teacher as technocrat and opens up avenues for teachers to work critically as creative curriculum developers. In an atmosphere of dynamic decision making, the traditional outcomes and means of schooling are called into question and reformulated more in line with the humanistic goals teachers originally envisioned when they entered a teaching career. Professional accountability is substituted for bureaucratic accountability within the process of demystifying one-dimensional, linear, and social models of schooling.[21]

Empowered teacher/empowered student

Eventually, the public debate on teacher empowerment must attend to the product of schooling, including the kind of learning experiences provided to and instilled in students. Calls for tying school restructuring projects to measures of student learning, for example, are attempts to restrict empowering actions within the ideology of accountability, because learning in this instance is defined by the unholistic use of fragmented standardized tests. Empowered teachers must produce empowered students or risk perpetuating alienating schooling experiences for young people. Out of teacher empowerment grows empowered children who are perceived "as active, not only reactive, organisms. . . . [who are not] passive memorizers of educational scripts to which they make no original contribution, and which do not expand and enrich their day-to-day experiences."[22]

To provide holistic learning opportunities for students involves the creation of alternative means for structuring public schools that eliminate alienating conditions for both teachers and students. The goal of schooling becomes the promotion of "human dignity" conceptions that are "judged against each other, and their ambiguities and contradictions in turn enrich their further assessment and development."[23] Through collaboration, teachers can address issues such as what it means to be a teacher seeking to enrich the whole child while infusing the curriculum with concepts of human dignity. This is neither a simple project nor an Utopian one.

Teacher empowerment holds the potential for transforming the public school and allowing holistic

practices to compete with utilitarian modes of instruction. The political *zeitgeist* of back-to-basics and lists of cultural things-to-know will not be overcome easily as schools continually are blamed for the economic weakness of multinational corporations. In national reports to improve schools, the plight of the alienated, unempowered teacher is revealed.[24] But to allow teachers the power as decision makers may pit the empowerment movement against vested political interests to maintain the status quo. However, a dent has been made in the belief system that considers the current goals and structuring of public schools as natural and normal. Support for teacher empowerment from concerned parents and citizens can widen this opportunity for teachers. Through this opening, teacher empowerment issues can expand the dialogue on what it means to educate the whole child in the social context of human dignity.

Notes

1. M. Vavrus, *The Relationship of Teacher Alienation to School Workplace Characteristics and Career Stages of Teachers* (Institute for Research on Teaching Research Series no. 36. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1979).

Created in the early 1970s by parents dissatisfied with the opportunities and authoritarian atmosphere of the local public school district, the Valley School is a private, "alternative" one-room school in a continuing ownership by parents of currently enrolled students. Located in Elkins, West Virginia, in the Potomac Highlands adjacent to the Monongahela National Forest, I was employed by the school from 1979 to 1982.

2. See "What to Teach . . . Reform Turns Finally to the Essential Question" *Education Week* (May 17, 1989), pp. 1, 8, 10.

3. G.I. Maeroff, *The Empowerment of Teachers: Overcoming the Crisis of Confidence* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988); and M. Vavrus, "Alienation as the Conceptual Foundation for Incorporating Teacher Empowerment into the Teacher Education Knowledge Base," in *Proceedings to the Association of Independent Colleges of Teacher Education National Forum on Teacher Empowerment* (University Press of America, in press).

4. M.E. Sweeney, "Celebrating Teachers," *Holistic Education Review* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1989), p. 32.

5. R. Schacht, *Alienation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, 1970); R.D. Arvey, T.J. Bouchard, N.L. Segal, and L.M. Abraham, "Job Satisfaction: Environment and Genetic Components," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 74, no. 2 (1989), pp. 187–92; and J. Ainsworth, "Teachers' Higher Level Needs Satisfied," *Holistic Education Review* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 33–36.

6. Ibid., p. 35.

7. A.G. Dworkin, *Teacher Burnout in the Public Schools* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); and M. Vavrus, "Reconsidering Teacher Alienation: A Critique," *The Urban Review*, 19, no. 3 (1987), pp. 179–188.

8. S. Gilmour, "A Natural Approach to Teacher Empowerment," *Holistic Education Review* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 37–40.

9. I support the posture of the sacred warrior: "For the warrior, every moment is a challenge to be genuine, and each challenge is delightful. When you let go properly, you can relax and enjoy the challenge." Chogyam Trungpa, *Shambhala, The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1984), p. 79.

10. Gilmour, "A Natural Approach," p. 38.

11. Maeroff, "The Empowerment of Teachers."

12. R.S. Brandt, "The Reasons for Reforming Schools," in *Schooling for Tomorrow: Directing Reforms to Issues That Count*, edited by T.J. Sergiovanni and J.H. Moore (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1989), pp. 378–382.

13. Gilmour, "A Natural Approach," p. 39; and C.H. Cherryholmes, *Power and Criticism: Poststructural Investigations in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988).

14. Gilmour, "A Natural Approach," p. 38.

15. For longitudinal perspectives on the professional status of teachers, see W. Waller, *The Sociology of Teaching* (New York: Wiley, 1961 [reprint from 1932]); D. Lortie, "The Balance of Control and Autonomy in Elementary School Teaching," in *The Semi-Professions and Their Organizations: Teachers, Nurses, Social Workers*, edited by A. Etzioni (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 1–53; and L. Darling-Hammond, "Policy and Professionalism," in *Building a Professional Culture in Schools*, edited by A. Lieberman (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988) pp. 55–77.

16. A. Langberg, "Key Issues for Teacher Empowerment, *Holistic Education Review* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 40–42; and Maeroff, "The Sky's the Limit," *Education Week* (December 2, 1987), pp. 1, 18–19.

17. K.R. Howey and N.I. Zimpher, "Program Change and Assessment in Teacher Education," a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education in Anaheim, CA, March 1, 1989; M.W. McLaughlin, R.C. Pfeifer, D. Swanson-Owens, and S.M. Yee, "Why Teachers Won't Teach," *Phi Delta Kappan* (February 1986), pp. 420–426; and Vavrus, *The Relationship of Teacher Alienation.*

18. M. Vavrus, "Contradictions Within Teacher Empowerment and School Restructuring for the Development of Holistic Learning Environments," *Practice: The Journal of Politics, Economics, Psychology, Sociology, & Culture* (forthcoming).

19. Langberg, "Key Issues for Teacher Empowerment"; J.M. Rich, "Self-Renewal as Faculty Development," *Holistic Education Review* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 44–47; and M.E. Sweeney, "Conflict, Group Processing Skills and Decision Making: Implications for Teachers," *Holistic Education Review* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 48–51.

20. J.C. Conoley, "Professional Communication and Collaboration among Educators," in *Knowledge Base for the Beginning Teacher*, edited by M.C. Reynolds (Oxford, U.K.: Pergamon Press, 1989), pp. 245–254.

21. A. Wise, "Professional Teaching: A New Paradigm for the Management of Education," in *Schooling for Tomorrow: Directing Reforms to Issues That Count*, edited by T.J. Sergiovanni and J.H. Moore (Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 1989), pp. 301–310.

22. M. Yonemura, "Reflections on Teacher Empowerment and Teacher Education," in *Teaching, Teachers, and Teacher Education*, edited by M. Okazawa-Rey, J. Anderson, and R. Traver, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review, 1987), pp. 281, 277.

23. Cherryholmes, *Power and Criticism*, p. 176.

24. *Tomorrow's Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group* (East Lansing, MI: Holmes Group, 1986); and *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy's Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986).