

## Empower Literacy, Empower Lives

American politician and public education reformer, Horace Mann, once said “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the greatest equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery”. While I believe education has the potential to be the great equalizer, I also believe it has become the great divider. Knowledge is power and those who are educated have the potential for great success. The problem, however, is not all public education has been created equal. For example, the opportunities and resources available to teachers and students in more affluent communities is not equivalent to those available to teachers and students in low-income communities. Teachers and students in low-income communities do not typically receive the same level of community and home support as those in more affluent communities. Although inhibiting, these limitations and inequalities can be overcome with empowering literacy. To empower someone means to give them power, strength, or confidence to take control of their life and their rights. When we empower students through literacy, we equip them with the power they need to determine their own futures and the confidence they need to challenge pre-determined social roles and norms. Empowering literacy means inspiring students through meaningful learning experiences to be problem-solvers, independent and creative thinkers, and lifelong learners equipped with the skills necessary to achieve their goals.

Jean Anyon, an American education researcher, professor in Urban Education, and civil rights and social activist, studied five fifth grade classes in various elementary schools throughout northern New Jersey. The schools she studied ranged from the richest to the poorest schools. Her findings were published in Patrick Finn’s book *Literacy with an attitude: Educating*

*working-class children in their own self-interest* (1999). Anyon (Anyon, 1981 as cited in Finn, 1999) shared how social class affects education. She found that education was tied to what society was preparing students for in the future. In each school she studied, she noticed an underlying theme that determined how students were taught. In the wealthiest school, which she referred to as the “executive elites”, the theme was “excellence”. These students were being prepared to be future leaders. For those in the school she referred to as “affluent professional”, the theme was “individualism/humanitarianism”. These students were being prepared to create and design new things because they would be the future artists and scientists. Anyon described the theme for those in the “middle class” school to be “possibility”. These students were expected to follow rules and procedures and were taught that, if they were obedient, they would be successful. Much like their parents, these students were being prepared for service professions such as teachers, police officers, nurses, etcetera. Those in the “working class”, were described with the theme of “resistance”. Many of these students were often in “fight or flight” mode because they learned to resist authority.

Having attended “middle class schools”, student taught in an “executive elite” school, babysat for a family with children in an “affluent professional” school, and teaching in a “working class” school, I believe Anyon’s findings to be accurate. Empowering literacy seems to be most prevalent in the “executive elite” and “affluent professional” schools. In these schools, education must be empowering because the students in these schools are being prepared to hold powerful positions. Empowering literacy tends to be less prevalent in the “middle class” schools because these students are being taught to be obedient and submissive rather than powerful leaders. Empowering literacy is even less apparent in the “working class” schools because these

students are taught to resist those with power since they believe they will never be the ones in power themselves. As Sonia Nieto stated in her video “Language, Literacy, & Diversity” (2016) “Education is not colorblind, gender blind, language blind, ability blind, or socioeconomically blind”. Education is a reflection of our society. It is not blind to our differences. The diversity in our society is reflected in our schools.

I do not believe teachers, students, principals, or parents are directly to blame for this but I do believe these inequalities exist because of the way teachers are instructed to teach students. I believe the government's involvement in education has the greatest impact on our education system. Standardized tests have taught our students to believe that they are either intelligent and prepared or they are not. Many high-poverty, urban districts are labeled “ineffective” or “failing”. In some states, teachers are rated on a similar scale and their ratings are determined based on a checklist provided by the state and completed by their principals. The great divide in education also comes from privatizing education. Finland has become one of the world's leaders in education. They once had an education system similar to that in the U.S. and they were ranked closely to the U.S. based on global education ratings. In Michael Moore's film, “Where to Invade Next” (2015) Finnish teachers explained that students in Finland go to school 20 hours per week, have minimal homework, and the teachers say their main concern is their students' happiness. They want to teach their students to learn what makes them happy. Students are given time to play and socialize at school and at home. They have the shortest school days and school years in the western world. During a faculty meeting in a Finnish school, the teachers agreed that the fastest way to change the education system in the United States would be to eliminate standardized testing. The minister of education described how schools will change when the best

school becomes their neighborhood school. When the “executive elite” students attend the same schools as the “working class” students, money gets put back into the school because the “executive elite” and “affluent professional” parents will ensure their children receive the best education possible. Privatizing education ensures that the rich will get richer and many of those living in poverty will stay poor. Whether social class’ influences in education have been accidental, intentional or inevitable, the differences certainly exist and these differences impact students’ access to education that is empowering.

Finn (1999) wrote “...there is empowering education, which leads to powerful literacy, the kind of literacy that leads to positions of power and authority. Second, there is domesticating education, which leads to functional literacy, literacy that makes a person productive and dependable, but not troublesome” (Finn, ix-x). Empowering literacy means preparing students, regardless of their social class, for positions of power and authority. Individuals tend to resist the things they feel they are unable to achieve. I believe if teachers can empower students, especially those in the “working class”, much of the resistance to education and authority will weaken as their belief in themselves grows stronger. Empowering literacy means more than powerful instruction, it means giving students the power to determine their futures. Unfortunately, most “middle class” and “working class” students often experience what Finn described as “domesticating education”. Their literacy skills are “functional” and these students are prepared to be “productive” members of society but, because they have not experienced empowering literacy, they do not cause “trouble”; they have been taught to be obedient rather than powerful. Perhaps we, as a society, are afraid to allow the “middle class” and “working class” students access to empowering literacy because it may lead to them having powerful futures.

As teachers, our role is to empower our students and prepare them to accomplish their life goals. Students will feel empowered if their learning experiences are inspiring and meaningful. We must prepare our students to be problem-solvers, independent and creative thinkers, and lifelong learners. Rudd (2012) said “Teachers can impact that process by engaging students in literacies that they value and extending invitations to group memberships that will build meaningful, participatory worlds” (p. 691). In Lynn Rudd’s study, she witnessed an outstanding example of empowering literacy in a low-income, urban school that used poetry as an intervention for students who struggled academically and behaviorally. Her research findings proved that empowering literacy is not just for the “elite” or “affluent” schools. It can be accomplished by any teacher willing to empower his/her students to reach their full potential.

Empowering literacy practices are creative and meaningful. In the classroom, there are simple changes teachers can make to improve the power of their activities and lessons. As a teacher committed to creating opportunities to empower my students, these are some of the ways I plan to incorporate empowering literacy practices into my classroom. Instead of assigning specific texts, I will select relevant, appropriate, good fit books for my classroom library and allow students to make their own choices. This is so important because empowering literacy means empowering students and one of the best ways to do that is by giving them choice. Choice allows them to make their learning their own which helps prepare students to be lifelong learners. As a teacher committed to empowering literacy, I will also provide more opportunities for project-based learning. Interactive projects that relate to the content allow students to be creative. Through project-based learning, students also develop social skills such as cooperation and collaboration, which are vital for many occupations. Instead of creating ability groups based

on a single set of data, I will consider the whole child when grouping students. I will also adjust groups frequently so that students are working with peers who also struggle or excel at that specific skill rather than always being in the same reading group based on their reading level. I will help my students feel confident in their reading abilities by differentiating instruction. Material that is too simple will bore students and material that is too difficult will frustrate students. In order to help students feel empowered, they must feel challenged without being overwhelmed. This can only be accomplished with material that is differentiated to meet each student's individual needs. When choosing books for my students, I will consider their interests and experiences. I will also consider if the characters in the book “look like them”. In Adichie’s (2009) TED Talk on “The danger of a single story”, she explained her experience as a young Nigerian girl growing up reading British books with only white characters who looked and lived differently from her. She said “...I had become convinced that books, by their very nature, had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I, personally, could not identify” (Adichie, 2009). Students will feel most connected to characters and stories with which they can relate.

The International Reading Association (2012) quoted Moore (1999) stating “Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st Century will read and write more than at any other time in human history” (p. 3). This growth in reading and writing is largely due to the expansion of technology. Because I am committed to powerful literacy practices, I will not only incorporate technology into my lessons but will also be sure to provide students opportunities to utilize technology to enhance their learning. Because I know students learn in a variety of ways, I will create learning stations in which students explore topics in multiple ways. Although students will

be required to complete each station throughout the week, I will allow students to take control of their learning by allowing them to choose which stations they complete each day. I also believe students feel empowered when given the opportunity to share their work and their learning with their peers. For this reason, I will frequently create opportunities for students to talk about texts, share their ideas, and showcase their work. Finally, I will strive to make meaningful connections that are cross-curricular as often as possible. Literacy does not just include reading and writing. Literacy is a necessary component across content areas and it is my responsibility to make these connections as often as possible so students recognize the importance of literacy in all areas rather than a set of isolated skills specific to reading and writing.

When we empower students through literacy, we empower them to make the most of their lives. Ultimately, we want our students to feel empowered to accomplish their short-term and long-term goals because they have the confidence, knowledge, independence, creativity, and problem solving skills needed to determine their own future. To prove our students have the power to overcome adversity, we must first prove this to ourselves. A lack of resources, parent support, or student resilience can not be seen as obstacles, but rather as opportunities. In order to empower students, they must know there are going to be people who doubt their abilities, tell them they can't do something, or that they aren't good enough. They must know that voice will never come from their teacher but when they do hear these things, they will hear their teacher's voice reminding them that these people are wrong because an educated person is a capable person and an empowered educated person not only has the knowledge but also the attitude to do whatever they believe they can accomplish. The best way to empower our students is to teach them to believe in themselves and in their abilities. We must inspire our students to be lifelong

learners because the only real route to justice and equality is through education. Students who are empowered are unstoppable. If we can empower our students through literacy, we will empower our students for life.



## References

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