Empowering practitioners: an unrealistic expectation of nurse education?

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Background. Empowerment has become an increasingly popular theme in nurse education. This is evident from the growing number of courses that claim to enable nurses to become empowered. However, this is taking place in an environment with little critical debate about the assumptions and implications for educators and students. Consequently there is a risk of creating hegemony and regimes of truth.

Aim. This paper sets out to review critically existing discourses on empowerment and to suggest a more reflexive and realistic view.

Themes. The origins of empowerment are established, together with its relationship to professional education. There is a review of the nature of power and autonomy, followed by an examination of the effects of expectations of empowering practice on educators and students. The lack of reflexivity in notions of empowerment is discussed. Consideration is given to the possibility of rehabilitating empowerment by offering an alternative conception that is realistic and reflexive.

Conclusions. Conclusions are drawn to suggest that although much of the writing on empowerment in education is insufficiently self-critical and consequently is open to censure, ideas of empowerment should not be rejected completely: they may serve to stimulate educators (and their students as future practitioners) to connect with and challenge society.

Keywords: empowerment, professional education, nurse education, critical analysis

Introduction
A recurring theme in literature on professional education such as nursing, is that of empowering students to engage with the world and to bring about change (Freire 1970, Barnett 1990, Gore 1992, Williams et al. 1995, Delanty 2001). This paper critically reviews existing educational discourses on empowerment. In particular, it questions whether empowerment is a naïve, value-laden concept that fails to consider the realities of existence in an era of supercomplexity; an era described by Barnett (2000, p. 257) as one ‘where nothing can be taken for granted, where no frame of understanding or action can be entertained with any security’.

An interrogative approach is adopted in order to challenge the themes and language in which discourses of empowerment are located. The key themes identified in this paper are the origins of empowerment, nature of power and autonomy, effects of expectations of empowerment on educators and students, and lack of reflexivity in current discussions of empowerment. These are followed by an attempt to rehabilitate empowerment through the presentation of an alternative view. From this analysis, conclusions are drawn to suggest that although much of the literature on empowerment is insufficiently self-critical, it should not be abandoned as it can serve as an inspiration to educators and students. The paper does not aim to be exhaustive or exclusive, but rather is an attempt to stimulate discussion and add to the debate.
Origins of empowerment

Gibson (1991) found the concept has its origins in radical politics and has been applied to such disparate causes as the women’s movement, Black-power faction, gay rights, AIDS/ HIV awareness, student empowerment, and the empowerment of adolescents, teachers and nurses. Despite its radical beginnings, the notion has entered popular language. It is evident in discussions of public services (Morley 1995), the private sector (Clarke & Newman 1997) and community and voluntary work (Ward & Mullender 1991). Delanty (2001) provides a recent example of implicit expectations for empowerment through university-based education (and therefore professional education situated in the university sector, such as nursing). He states that:

The university must be capable of giving society a cultural direction. The national state once fulfilled this, as the church had earlier. With the diminishing power of national culture at least to provide a sense of...direction the university can take on this role (Delanty 2001, pp. 155–156).

This is problematic. Delanty (2001) seems to be suggesting that the role of higher and professional education is not merely to impart certain disciplinary specific knowledge and skills to students, but that it must also transform them in order to provide society with a cultural objective. However, it is not clear who is to take responsibility for this or how it will be decided that such a nebulous goal of ‘cultural direction’ has been achieved.

A review of definitions of empowerment does not make this situation any clearer. For example, Conger (1989, p. 18) defines empowerment as ‘the act of strengthening an individual’s belief in his or her sense of effectiveness’. Robinson (1994, p. 7) suggests it is a ‘liberating sense of one’s own strengths, competence, creativity and freedom of action; to be empowered is to feel power surging into one from other people...specifically the power to act and grow’. Chally (1992), discussing empowerment through teaching in nurse education, views it as a connection between students and teachers and states that the teacher’s role is to transform students into caring, committed and creative practitioners. Ellsworth (1989, p. 307) advises that empowerment in education is often portrayed as being concerned with “human betterment”, for expanding ‘the range of possible social identities people may become’.

Such definitions, with their language of ‘strengthening’ and ‘transforming’, give rise to a vision of power as a benign property and of students as empty vessels waiting to be filled with it. As such they seem naive and may promote alternative forms of authoritarianism. These themes are developed in more detail in the section on power and autonomy below.

Freire (Freire & Shor 1987) goes further than these viewpoints, which focus on the individual. He advocates that empowerment for education must be based on social class: ‘Not individual, not community, not merely social empowerment, but a concept of “social class empowerment”’ (p. 111). For Freire, it is insufficient for students to feel free; they must go on to transform society. His statement that ‘The critical development of these students is absolutely fundamental for the radical transformation of society’ (Freire & Shor 1987, p. 110) demonstrates this. Under this interpretation, true empowerment through education can only be said to have occurred if students go on to apply their learning to a critical view of society. As a result, people (as opposed to individuals) would experience social transformation and enablement in order to achieve influence over the institutions and organizations that affect them (O'Brien & Whitmore 1989). What is not clear from this is who decides which particular form of ‘critical development’ is the right one and what happens to people who dissent from the prevailing view. These issues are discussed later in the section on the lack of reflexivity about empowerment.

These different characterizations have led to the evolution of an abstract and unclear conception. Gallie (1955) has suggested that some concepts have certain qualities that make them ‘essentially contested’. As a result, their exercise ‘inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users’ (Gallie 1955, p. 169). From the above review of literature, it is evident that this criticism applies to empowerment relating to education: it is contestable and contested. For example, the visions of empowerment given commonly focus on liberation, emancipation, energy and sharing power but they vary in their focus from individuals to wider, societal models. Furthermore, the way in which power is shared and the decision making behind that process can be unclear. The following sections seek to explore these issues.

Power and autonomy

Gore (1992, p. 57), in a critique of empowerment, notes: ‘To empower [sic] suggests that power can be given, provided, controlled, held, conferred, taken away'; and this has been supported by the definitions above. Beliefs of this nature reflect a modernist stance in which it is thought possible to plan programmes for students and, if these are followed, a desired outcome of empowerment will result (Morley 1998). Power is seen, therefore, as a rational ‘thing’ and an
inherently benign property, that operates within structurally determined limits (Lukes 1974), which one either has or does not have and which can be transferred from teacher to student. Once that transfer has occurred, so the argument goes, the student will be able to use their newly found power to intervene in events to bring about social change. Troyna (1994) supports this interpretation when he notes that:

What is immediately striking about the literature in this area is that we appear to be dealing with absolutes: the targets of...interventions begin as ‘disempowered’ (or powerless) and at the ‘end’ they either remain so or have achieved a state of empowerment (Troyna 1994, p. 10).

Such constructions of power are naïve. This criticism is endorsed by Epstein (1993, p. 12) when he states ‘power is not a “thing” which exists outside social relationships. It is structured and reconstructed in and through them constantly’. In this view, Epstein is supporting Foucault’s conception of power as an exercise symbolizing ‘a strategic situation in a given society’ (Foucault 1976, p. 21). Rather than power being an object that follows a linear pattern, with transference from the powerful (teachers) to the powerless (students), it is capillary and embedded in everyday practices and relationships. Power, therefore, exists within all sections of society and is not limited to a minority (Dzurec 1999); both teachers and students bring elements of power to their daily interactions. A simple demonstration of this is, on the one hand, a nurse teacher who is assessing students (acting as a ‘gatekeeper’ to the profession) and, on the other, a student who disrupts a class (using their power negatively to interfere with the delivery of a programme).

The notion of power as property also reflects a presupposition that there must be an agent and recipient of empowerment (Gore 1992). Within visions of empowerment in education, the teacher is traditionally cast as giver of power. McLaren (1989), for example, states:

Teachers must engage unyieldingly in their attempt to empower students both as individuals and as potential agents of social change by establishing a critical pedagogy that students can use in the classroom and in the streets (McLaren 1989, p. 221).

Thus, teachers are imbued with great authority. This can be seen in discourses on feminist and critical pedagogy, where the teacher is a facilitator who acts as change agent ‘through combinations of course content and process’ (Culley 1985, p. 21) and who has ‘the power to replace self-hatred with self-love, incapacity with capacity, unfreedom with freedom, blindness with knowledge’ (Culley 1985, p. 21). Claims like these can be criticized. Gore (1992) makes the valid point that they fail to take into account workload, wider policies, social constructs and that they may raise false expectations (the possible effects of such expectations are discussed later on).

A further difficulty with viewpoints that see power as a property that is transferable through programmes of professional education is that educators who accept this belief, ironically, may be supporting a new culture of authoritarianism (Jeffs & Smith 1994). If teachers can give out love, freedom and capacity, as Culley (1985) suggests, then it is reasonable to infer that students in need of this are being reduced to the status of materials to be shaped (Morley 1995). There is an implicit perception that they need ‘expert’ help from teachers (even if that help is to work with and not for) and that this is not merely to become more knowledgeable or skilful in their chosen subject but also to become ‘better’ human beings.

Related to the notion of power, who has it and what they do with it, is the concept of autonomy. Autonomy is ‘the capacity to think, decide, and act on the basis of such thought and decision freely and independently and without...let or hindrance’ (Gillon 1985, p. 60). From this definition, it is reasonable to conclude that being autonomous means having the ability to make decisions about the course of one’s life according to a set of personal beliefs or ideas. This has resonance with empowerment in professional education because, returning to the definitions offered in the previous section, empowerment, in essence, is concerned with increasing the capacity of students to act and think autonomously in order to bring about sociocultural change (cf. Laffin 1986, Robinson 1994, Delanty 2001, Fazey & Fazey 2001, Ottewill 2001).

It is possible to distinguish between autonomy per se and the moral principle of respect for autonomy. The latter is the necessity to respect an individual’s autonomy to the extent that their choices do not infringe upon the safety, liberty or autonomy of others (Harris 1985).

The importance of respect for autonomy can be traced to two distinct philosophies: Kantian deontology and the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill. For Kant, respect for the autonomy of rational beings was a fundamental duty from which other moral conduct stemmed (Kant 1991). Mill (1998), as a utilitarian, saw respect for the autonomy of rational beings not as a duty but as a way of recognizing traits (such as liberty of thought and action), which are a means to happiness.

Consideration of these moral perspectives presents two paradoxes of empowerment in relation to autonomy. First, as already noted, in talking of ‘giving’ autonomy to students, theories of educational empowerment often imply that students who enrol on programmes of professional education...
Empowering practitioners

Effects of expectations of empowering practice on educators and students

Having identified concerns arising from empowerment in relation to power and autonomy, this section of the paper explores the possible effects of expectations of empowering practice on educators and students. These can be considered from both a macro-political perspective (social policy relating to education) and micro-political one (individual pedagogical approaches).

An example of a macro-political concern is the emphasis in recent policy on the creation of a ‘learning society’ (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 1996, National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE] 1997, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 1997, Department for Education and Employment [DfEE] 1998), in which lifelong learning is seen as the key to empowerment through social cohesion and economic prosperity, and all members of society (including educational institutions) are encouraged to participate. This has been adopted in nurse education in the United Kingdom (UK) (United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting [UKCC] 1992, 1999), where it is considered central to continued professional development, practitioner flexibility and career satisfaction. Although these positive consequences may occur, it is also possible that expecting empowerment through lifelong learning will have negative results, one of which is alienation.

The concept of alienation has its origin in Marxist theory. Marx (1959) used the term to describe his perception of a shift in the meaning of work (as a result of capitalism) from being a means of creative self-expression to a non-creative and ultimately alienating and dehumanizing activity. This can be applied to lifelong learning as a route to the elusive goal of empowerment:

- Social policy is placing greater emphasis on continuous learning as a means to achieving economic prosperity. A possible consequence of this is loss of control over the nature of education and its delivery: it shifts from being valued for its own sake to being desired for the outcomes it can deliver. This is evident in the notion of credentialism, where what is of primary importance is the level of qualification obtained and not the content (Dore 1976). Subsequently, students may have few positive feelings for their education, as it becomes merely another commodity to be bought and sold.
- Further changes in social policy have led to an increased focus on individual responsibility and, at the same time, a loss of stability in the labour market (Clarke & Newman 1997): students are in competition for employment, their
qualification is the means to obtain that work and there is little sympathy or support for those who fail. There is little incentive, therefore, for students to cooperate with one another and consequently they become isolated from each other.

- Instead of lifelong learning being treasured, it develops into a lifelong sentence. Loss of creativity and cooperation means that, far from being empowered, humanity becomes alienated from itself.

An example of a micro-political concern is the individual pedagogical approaches used within classrooms (Ellsworth 1989). Pedagogy can be defined as ‘a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices...These evaluative criteria include the extent to which a community of learners is empowered’ (Shrewsbury 1987, p. 6). This definition highlights the significance of pedagogy in discussions of empowerment in education.

In nurse education in the UK over the last 15–20 years, experiential/facilitative pedagogy has become dominant (see, for example, Quinn 1995). Such an approach can be characterized as concerned with the education of equals and it emphasizes learning from student-centred experience, with teachers fulfilling a facilitative role that meets students’ needs (Moore 1989). This model reflects the argument that empowerment will occur for both students and the clients they eventually work with because social systems are a product of the individuals who comprise them, and an educational approach that focuses on equals is the most appropriate form of socialization to this end (Moore 1989).

At the same time as acknowledging the potential for benefits, there are inherent dangers in this form of pedagogy. First, to return to Foucault (1980), it can create and perpetuate ‘regimes of truth’. Under the definition of experiential/facilitative pedagogy given, it is clear that some types of learning and teaching will be favoured, for example, knowledge and skills arising from practice-based experience. Although this initially seems a positive step (integrating theory and practice), one must accept that the ‘theory–practice gap’ works both ways (Murphy & Atkins 1994). Practice therefore will not always offer the best experience; educators and students have to remember to ground their teaching/learning in critical theory.

Another issue is the tendency to oversimplify views of power. In short, not all students (even those with defined similarities) are the same and not all will use their ‘voice’ in an equitable manner. Reflecting on my own experience as a student and a gay man sheds light on this. As an 18-year-old student nurse, I attended a lecture on human sexuality during which a peer expressed the opinion that ‘all queers are perverts’. The lecturer did not challenge this statement, perhaps believing that in a room full of equals there was no need. It is arguable that the homophobic student had been empowered and had used their ‘voice’ to express an opinion. This brings into question whether pedagogy for empowerment gives equal opportunity and power or only the appearance of them. The classroom cannot be taken in isolation but is a mirror of the same power differentials and prejudices that exist in the wider world.

A further potential effect is the psychological demand such pedagogical approaches may exact. Walkerdine (1986), in a review of progressive pedagogy in primary schools, suggested that there is a psychic economy in classrooms that use ‘liberating’ experiential/facilitative philosophies. The teacher is expected to be passive towards pupils, serving their needs. This can be even more costly in professional education. It is my experience that students are encouraged to articulate their own past as a learning source and that as adults they can often raise deeply emotional issues (for example, bereavement, divorce, abuse). Often, however, there is little time or resources to deal adequately with such complex needs. There are greater numbers of students (Scott 1998) with increasing competition in the university sector and expectations that lecturers, as academics, will have high research outputs; all of which place pressure on teachers and students to deal appropriately with any issues that surface. It is ironic that progressive, empowering pedagogy, because of its demands on teachers, may result in them suffering and feeling disempowered. This latter point is relevant because it seems logical that people who do not feel themselves empowered are unlikely to empower others.

Lack of reflexivity within visions of empowerment

The issues considered above demonstrate that discussions of empowerment in education often fail to be reflexive. Reflexivity, in this context, equates to the ability of accounts or theories to refer critically to the beliefs contained within them and to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

McLaren (1989) confirms the lack of reflexivity within visions of empowerment when he suggests that educational discourses may be perceived as empowering simply because they challenge dominate paradigms rather than because of the particular beliefs they contain. Sawicki (1988) criticizes educational theories for their shallow perceptions of what counts as empowering and states that ‘no discourse is inherently liberating or oppressive’ (p. 166). Consideration of empowerment in the light of postmodern theory can support this. Postmodernism encourages suspicion of meta-narratives or grand theories, such as empowerment, because
of their tendency towards oversimplification and inadequate portrayal of a world that is in flux and fragmentation (Lyotard 1984). Discussions of empowerment (as already noted) typically fail to recognize the fluidity of power and polarize groups, privileging some over others [one class over another, teachers over students (and vice versa), one approach to education over alternatives]. There is therefore a danger of creating a Foucauldian ‘regime of truth’ – where one oppressive norm is substituted for another with little critical thought.

The lack of reflexivity in discussions of empowerment may worsen the problems outlined in previous sections. Gore (1992) suggests that it encourages the creation of a ‘them’ and ‘us’ culture in education in two ways. First, the application and construction of empowerment in the literature is often implied rather than explicit; authors frequently start from a position where they assume that their interpretation of empowerment is the ‘correct’ and accepted one and that anyone who disagrees is, by default, an oppressor (Troyna 1994).

Secondly, as already noted, un-reflexive use of empowerment can privilege teachers whilst undermining students. It can encourage teachers to set themselves apart from their students and ask what ‘we’ (educators) can do for ‘you’ (students). This creates the impression of certainty and hegemony, where one group has the right to dominate (Gore 1992); for example, ‘liberating’ educators exerting control over policy and practice.

**Possible rehabilitation of empowerment within professional education**

This section of the paper goes beyond the criticisms outlined above and tries to offer a reconstruction of empowerment as a worthwhile concept within professional education.

The antithesis of empowerment is powerlessness. It instinctively feels wrong to advocate such a state, as it is contradictory to the values of self-determination and personal growth which are often (but perhaps wrongly) assumed to underpin professional education (Mann 2001), such as nursing. Although this paper criticizes the presuppositions and naivety often found in discussions of empowerment in education, as a teacher and practitioner I hope that student nurses have the opportunity to develop the ability to be self-directive and critical thinkers through their education. A need for such aptitudes is recognized by Barnett (1997a, 1997b, p. 35).

Epistemologically, the modern world is fundamentally problematic. We have become aware that formal knowledge systems contain their own debatable presuppositions, that academic definitions of knowledge are unduly truncated (focusing on propositional knowledge at the expense of pragmatic interpretations) and that knowledge in modern society has a recursive quality such that it always eludes full comprehension...

Sociologically, too, the world is epistemologically problematic. Our social epistemologies are now moving very fast, as cognitive definitions give way to more operational definitions. At the same time postmodern society celebrates difference and local perspectives (Barnett 1997b, p. 35).

Consequently, there is a need for professional education to help students develop the competence and confidence to engage with a world that is constantly changing and question the assumptions within it. To this end, an alternative definition of empowerment to those discussed previously is given here:

**Empowerment is the process by which people, organizations, or groups...**

(a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing on the rights of others, and (d) support the empowerment of others in their communities (after McWhirter 1991, p. 224).

This definition has a number of positive aspects. It encourages an understanding of power relationships (rather than promoting a simplistic view of the transfer of power), supports the need to question the world and one’s role in it, as well as recognizing the imperative to use one’s autonomy and abilities within the context of acknowledging that of others. It challenges educators, students and professionals to be critical whilst grounding this demand in the realities of day-to-day existence and minimizing the theoretical flaws and unrealistic expectations of the other definitions given earlier. By adapting psychological theory (Bandura 1977, 1989, 1997, Egan 1994, Fazey & Fazey 2001), it is possible to translate this into a basic model of empowering practice in professional education.

Bandura (1977), for example, identifies four ways of promoting self-efficacy in others and these are a plausible basis for educational empowerment. He suggests providing positive support, using encouragement and constructive persuasion, offering opportunities to observe other’s effectiveness and enabling people to master tasks or knowledge successfully. Egan (1994) develops the ideas of Bandura and others to create a process-centred approach. His method uses a participative rather than directive model, and encourages the sharing of ideas and the recognition of limitations as well as teacher acting as a consultant to students as a route to empowerment. The latter may involve...
listening, observing, collecting data, reporting observations, teaching, training, challenging, coaching, providing support and offering suggestions; it is a collaborative process that, when applied to education, does not rob students of their responsibilities but supports them (after Egan 1994).

As a basis for nurse education, these theories equate to teachers working with students as facilitators (neither taking over the learning process nor taking on students’ responsibility for their education), identifying realistic goals (which must be relevant to the course the student is enrolled on) and planning the use of resources to maximize opportunities to meet goals.

This approach is open to critique. First, it is questionable how it differs from other facilitative pedagogies outlined earlier. The difference is that this section of the paper creates a vision of empowerment in professional education that does not see itself as existing outside of human relations and, therefore, attainable as a single entity which, once acquired, is held forever by the successfully empowered. It accepts empowerment as a concept that has to be engaged with and reconstructed in each circumstance. The limitations and criticisms outlined here are embraced as part of the challenge: the approach is reflexive and realistic.

Secondly, applying the work of Bandura (1977, 1989, 1997) and Egan (1994) to this context can be criticized. Both focus on cognitive processes as a way of creating behavioural change in psychological treatment and counselling rather than education, and are therefore of questionable relevance. They may give too much attention to making people feel good about themselves: something which professional education is not always about. Said (1994), for example, suggests that intellectuals should be challenging and abrasive in their role as facilitators, even if this is unpleasant. The idea is that the resulting dissonance will stimulate critical thought and new ideas and that this, in turn, may bring about empowerment as teachers and students use the power flowing within such dialogue to confront existing orthodoxy and any ideas that may replace it. This is compatible with the model outlined above: witness Egan’s use of the consultant as someone who deliberately challenges.

Furthermore, there is evidence that concentrating on psychological processes helps students to develop their capacity for autonomy (a key facet of empowerment). For example, a recent study by Fazey and Fazey (2001) suggested that there is a correlation between nurturing positive perceptions of competence, motivation and locus of control and students’ ability to engage with their learning and develop autonomy. Although Fazey and Fazey’s (2001) research is methodologically imperfect (it uses a convenience sample of first year undergraduates drawn from only one university and so may not be generalizable to the wider student population), it adds to the resonance that the approach to empowerment given in these paragraphs may have.

The aim of this part of the paper was not to offer a definitive answer as to what empowerment in education is or how one ought to achieve it (if it can be achieved). Rather, it was to go beyond the criticisms made previously and create an alternative conception that provides a more robust and realistic approach to empowerment in professional education. In this sense, it has been an attempt to rehabilitate empowerment.

Conclusion

The notion of empowerment goes to the heart of the purpose of professional education in the university sector, such as nursing. It raises the question of whether the goal of professional education is to enable students (as future professionals) to bring about social change, or merely to provide students with certain discipline-specific knowledge and skills. The former is open to criticism as over-ambitious, simplistic and insufficiently self-critical, whilst the latter may lead to mediocrity and an inadequate confrontation of oppressive orthodoxy. By attempting to rehabilitate empowerment, I have tried to overcome these two difficulties. In conclusion, although much writing on empowerment in education is naïve and consequently open to censure, ideas of empowerment should not be dismissed because they may serve to stimulate educators (and their students as future practitioners) to connect with and challenge society.

References

Issues and innovations in nursing education

Empowering practitioners


