Agency and Empowerment in Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education

This entry provides an overview of the concepts, agency and empowerment, and their link to diversity in education. An exploration of the concepts and the processes and outcomes associated with them is used to present the challenges and possibilities of making them critical to meeting the needs of a culturally diverse K-12 and post secondary population in the USA.

A major challenge faced in exploring and making use of the ideas associated with the concepts is the multidimensionality and complexity of the concepts and educational institutions’ focus on standardization, testing, and accountability. Agency refers to the freedom to do whatever one needs to in order to achieve goals or values that one views as important. Empowerment refers to the ability to gain power to, power over, power with, or power from within, in spite of opposition from those with whom one interacts. Empowerment is sometimes viewed as synonymous with agency, and at other times a sub-set of agency, a precondition to agency or an extension of agency. This entry’s definition of empowerment, a concept that Paulo Freire introduced in the 1970s in the Latin American context, is just one of many. Solava Ibrahim and Sabina Alkiree point to 29 of the many definitions of empowerment and make a proposal for internationally comparable indicators of agency and empowerment. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the many indicators could go a long way in assisting researchers and policy makers interested in making the connections between agency and empowerment and human and economic development.

Agency is directly connected to all aspects of the individual’s wellbeing, self-esteem, autonomy, and self-efficacy. Its two main dimensions according to Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory are intentionality and behavior. Human agency is often perceived as personal. When scholars
look at it from this perspective, there is focus on the cognitive, motivational, affective and choice processes through which agency exerts its effects. Albert Bandura advises that human agency can also be proxy and collective. In proxy agency, individuals and groups use persons who have power and influence in the society and or communities to act on their behalf to achieve the desired results. Collective agency is an option for those who believe that some goals are more easily attained through people’s shared belief in their collective power to achieve desired results.

There is also the less talked about social and material modes of agency that are not located in the subject. Scholars like Karen Barad and Charis Thompson who are doing work on reproductive technology are re locating agency in material contexts. Judith Butler, a postmodern scholar, believes that there is an invariable interaction between human and non-human elements in the sense of agency. To adopt this attitude will be useful in that it takes away from what Albert Bandura refers to as the contentious duality between the various theories and perspectives on agency. The diversity in terms of the various approaches and perspectives should empower instead of disempower. Agency can either affect the empowerment process or be affected by it.

If the individuals/groups believe that they have the power to achieve their goals, can make choices, decisions and affect change, then there is the possibility of a feeling of empowerment. Educators are faced with the challenges of meeting the needs of a diverse population for freedom to be and become agents in their communities and in the society. It is therefore mandatory that students be given the opportunity to develop knowledge, abilities, and skills, that will enable them to control and develop their own learning and be academically empowered. This requires an approach to teaching that values critical thinking and metacognition and recognizes the importance of identity in the psychological empowerment and well being of ethnic minorities who are often the ones marginalized and stigmatized. Lisa Molix and Ann Bettencourt have
found a positive relationship between group identity and psychological empowerment especially as it relates to ethnic minorities. However, educational systems tend to be often more concerned with standardized testing than academic or student empowerment and or critical agency. This does not provoke educators to make empowerment and agency their focus.

There continues to be a need for empowered educators who can facilitate the development of democratic citizens of every creed, and ethnicity that have the freedom to act, think critically and make choices that will bring about changes in their lives and others in the communities. Researchers like Sereyashi Basu found that the task of enabling some of the same students who are considered to be critical agents to be empowered academically and psychologically is not an impossibility. And if it is, the research shows that educators and researchers can learn about the possibilities by looking at the impossibilities and pitfalls.

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Further Readings


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Bell, V. (2010). New scenes of vulnerability, agency, and plurality: An interview with Judith
Butler. *Theory Culture Society*, 27, 130-152


