Philosophical perspective

Empowering Educators through 'Emancipation': A Philosophical Appraisal on the Concept of '*Power'* in Education

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Abstract

In modern educational system, the word empowerment has long been utilized to denote the process in which individuals within the educational sector advance their skills necessary to effectively solve their own challenges by creating effective strategies. However, in literal sense, the concept of *empowerment* centralizes the role of power as a basic theme and draws attention to *alienation* of an agent form the power to enact the appropriate activity. An educational system which alienates educators from ownership of the activity, above all, will force the agent to develop a psychologically detrimental effect of powerlessness. In relation to alienation of ownership which is the primary cause of powerlessness, educators also experience a sense of meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement which prevent them from finding purpose or significance from the activity of teaching and learning. This research primarily investigated the factors and practices which contribute to different forms of alienation in the education sector such as alienation of educators from their work, their learning, teaching process, and from themselves and their students and other teachers. Consequently, it aimed to articulate the fundamental correlation between educators' alienation form the educational system and the negative outcome of the quality of education. The study, therefore, adopted an exploratory research design and employed a qualitative research approach which heavily relies on secondary data sources such as books, scholarly articles, research articles and other publications. Finally, it is argued for the reconceptualization of emancipation in the education sector and its enduring potential in the empowerment of educators.

Key Words: Alienation, Empowerment, Emancipation

1. Introduction: Power and Empowerment

The concept of "empowerment" has been utilized across various disciplines, with each field attributing a unique interpretation aligned with its specific focus. In policy documents on gender equality and empowerment of women, it is widely used to refer the process of gaining access and developing one's capacities with a view to participating actively in shaping one's own life and that of one's community in economic, social and political terms (Jahan, 2010). In relation to management, it is conceived as a motivational practice that aims to improve efficiency by enabling opportunities for participating and engaging in decision making process (Wójcik, 2017). On the other hand, economic empowerment is widely referred as the process of shifting from exploitation to expanding choices and opportunities for achieving independence, stability, skills, and progress in all aspects related to one's economic well-being (Charm, S. et al., 2023).

In education, however, the definition of empowerment assumes a number of factors and takes a diverse understanding. From the students' side, it is conceptualized as the educators' will to give control over the learning process to students, so that learning becomes a collaborative effort, rather than a mere indoctrination of the teacher that is imposed on the students, while Teachers' empowerment, defined, is a process whereby educators develop the capability to take charge of their own professional development and resolve their own problems (Lawson, 2011). As Short (1994) claimed, empowered teachers believe they have the skills and knowledge to act on a situation and improve it. Generally, in education, empowerment has been theorized as the passing over of decision-making to educators in the educational relationship between teachers and student, and administrators and teachers (Deacon & Parker, 1995).

Still some scholars use the concept of empowerment referring to the process which involves an implicit transformation of power from government to the teacher and from the teacher to the student, and the possibility of equalizing of the power discrepancies between them (Deacon & Parker, 1995, p.114). This entails that power and empowerment are intricately connected concepts. At the heart of the process of 'em*power*ment', there is power. The specific apprehension of the nature of power relation in education should be the prior condition in the process of empowerment. Hence, this paper seeks to explore the concept of power from a philosophical perspective, emphasizing its profound role in shaping educational structures and practices. By engaging with the philosophical underpinnings of power, with a particular emphasis to Paulo Freire the discussion

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highlights the how power dynamics influence knowledge production, teacher-student relationships, and the broader goals of education.

2. Conceptualizing Power: Philosophical Foundations and Implications in Education

Power is an ancient and ubiquitous concept in philosophy. Great names in philosophy from Plato and Aristotle to Machiavelli and Hobbes devoted a good deal of attention to the concept of power (Dahl, 1957). Before examining the connection between power and education, it's crucial to reassess how some prominent philosophers have defined and conceptualized power.

Plato's conception of power is the derivative of his metaphysical theory of *Forms* and also associates it with the knowledge of these transcendental realities (Smith, 2019). Stating that knowledge and truth as essentially connected concepts. Though Plato (2004) did not use the phrase, in his *The Republic* he underlines that knowledge is power. At the end of the fifth book of the Republic, he presented knowledge, belief and ignorance as powers in which they have something towards which they are naturally predisposed and something they produce. Knowledge pertains to what truly exists, opinion involves things that both exist and do not exist, and ignorance concerns things that do not exist at all (Smith, 2019). Aristotle, a student of Plato, built upon his teacher's foundational ideas while also establishing his own distinct philosophical perspectives conceptualizes *power* as a source for change which orders the physical world insofar as it is a world of changing things subject to causation. He characterizes power as similar to disposition, ability, or tendency.

St. Thomas Aquinas, commonly treated as having a Christianized philosophical view of Aristotle (Omoyefa, 2007), describes power as a principle of operation, whether it be an action or a passion. He further maintains that a principle should not be understood as a subject acting or undergoing an action, but rather by which an agent acts or a patient undergoes an action (Field, 1984). In '*The Soul'*, a translated work of Aquinas;s *De anima,* power is categorized in to three: passive powers, active powers which are capacities to act, and powers which are actions (Rowan,2009, p. 151).

Passive power, according to Aquinas, refers to being's capacity to receive an act from an external agent. For instance, clay has the passive power to be shaped into a pot by a potter. A sculptor's capacity to shape a piece of marble into a statue can be the best example of active power. Active power, on the other hand, refers to the capacity of a being to bring about change or to actualize

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something else. Powers which are actions, the last category of power, are related faculties or capacities that are directed toward performing specific acts or functions. These powers, he describes, are inherent in beings and enable them to engage in particular activities (Rowan, 2009).

Even though the first known realist political thinker Niccolo Machiavelli did offer an explicit definition of power in his 'The Prince' as well as 'Discourse to the Method', he asserted it finds itself in the ability of imposing calculated action for staying in power. In contrast, Thomas Hobbes, in his work "Leviathan", describes power as the means to secure personal benefit and achieve future goods. This understanding of power emphasizes the ability and skills to assure personal benefit "*to obtain some future apparent Good*" (Flathman & Johnston, 1997).

The poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault and the humanist thinker Hanna Ardent treat power distinctively as a product of relations. According to Foucault, emphasizes that power is not something one possesses; rather, it is generated continuously from moment to moment, or more precisely, within every interaction from one point to another (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). He, therefore, conceives power as fluid within society, which implicates in negative or positive results (Pinto & Perera, 2017, p.5). In a relatively similar manner, Hanna Aredndt argues that power is differentiated from individual strength, force, authority and violence, and goes to define it as a product of collective consent (Arendt, 1969).

The concept of power has indeed been less emphasized in the philosophy of education as compared to fields such as political science, sociology, and feminist theory (Foucault, 1977; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988). Historically, philosophers of education such as John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau have concerted on ideals of democratic education, individual development, empowerment and moral education (Dewey, 1938; Montessori, 1912; Rousseau, 1912). Though these themes are related to power, the explicit analysis of power relations have not been the primary focus of these philosophers (Nyberg, 1981). However, this should not be understood as the concept is totally absent from philosophy of education.

Education, as a collective and multifaceted activity, is fundamentally shaped by the interactions among various stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations working in education, policymakers, school administrators, teachers, and students. These interactions inherently involve power dynamics that influence decision-making, resource allocation, and the shaping of

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educational practices and policies. The power relations among these parties not only define their roles and responsibilities but also add layers of complexity to the ontological nature of education.

In his advocacy of the activity of education as political in nature, Paulo Freire in '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed'* extensively discussed the nature of power dynamics in education and the role of education in transforming the unjust power structures within society (Freire, 1970). Influenced by Marx, he viewed society as a dynamic, ever-evolving system through which power is woven. Moreover, like Foucault and Ardent, Freire appears to view power as a collective construct. However, that power, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally, oppresses, creating social structures, institutions, ideas, and myths that sustain the wealth, way of life, and power of oppressors at the expense of the oppressed.

As a pioneer of critical pedagogy, Freire borrowed his views from critical theory that conceives society as divided and hierarchical based on power relations and education as a tool used by dominant groups to legitimize the unjust power arrangement (Avinash, 2014). For him, knowledge is not neutral, rather reflects historical periods where certain groups wield dominant power over others (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 27). Hence, he views traditional education, the banking system, as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression and mirrors the contradiction within society to the learning process;

> *...the teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; the teacher thinks and the students are thought about; the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly; the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined; the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply; the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher...* (Freire, 1970)

Freire's famous metaphor for traditional education as the '*banking method*' makes education as the teacher's sole property than collective engagement that is a manifestation of alienation in education. Freire further argues that education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.

3. Alienation and Contradiction in Education

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In a philosophical context, the term 'alienation' was initially introduced by the German philosopher G. W. Friedrich Hegel to highlight the estrangement of human life that is one of the most important and fruitful legacies of his social philosophy (Sayers, 2011). However, Freirean concept of 'alienation' in education differs from Hegel's philosophical stance, which plays a crucial role in the phenomenological development of consciousness. Instead, it is rooted in Marx's theory.

Marx's idea of alienation centers on his view of labor as an essentially human activity of self-objectification. As Erich Fromm (1961) states, for Marx, the product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object and turned into a physical thing; this product is an objectification of labor. Since labor is essentially a human activity, it is also s 'species-activity'. Marx implies, here, that man is naturally species-being. Moreover, he argues that man is active and productive being who grasps and embraces the objective world with his own powers. Alienation, therefore, refers to the state in which a man does not perceive himself as an active agent in his hold of the world, but rather finds that the world (including nature, others, and themselves) remains foreign and distant. As Fromm writes, it is when " labor loses its character of being an expression of man's powers; labor and its products assume an existence separate from man, his will and his planning." (Fromm, 2004, p. 83).

In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx goes further to assert that there are four dimensions of alienations in a capitalist form of production. These are ; (a) alienation from the product of labor; a state in which the object the worker has produced owned by another, (b) alienation from the labor process; whereby the process of production becomes no more self-expression but a forced activity (c) alienation from the self or from the human essence; when one an individual feels disconnected from oneself or a loss of self and (d) alienation from alienation other people or from society; refers to the coincidence of separate and competing "enlightened" self-interests.

Paulo Freire (1970), in '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*', discusses the condition of *alienation* from the perspective of the relationship between students and teachers in the traditional system of education. However, this notion of alienation in education cannot be fully understood, without revisiting his conception of the nature and purpose of education.

Just as Marx viewed labor as a fundamentally human activity with significant social implications, Freire similarly sees teaching and learning as human experience with profound social consequences. Like, Hannah Arendt who conceives the essence of education as *natality*, his social pedagogy defines education as a social action in which the individuals and society are constructed (Shor, 1993, p.24; Arendt, 1969). In the traditional education which he considered as the 'banking method', nevertheless, education turns out to be a system of delivery for lifeless bodies of knowledge. In another word, education becomes a system whereby educators are alienated from the teaching and learning process; where learning becomes a forced activity. Generally, Paulo Freire (1970) defines alienation in the context of education as a condition where individuals are estranged from their own capacity for critical thinking and self-awareness, resulting in a loss of agency and disconnection from their true potential and social reality.

Sidorkin (2000), an educator and philosopher, claims alienation in education is characterized by individuals distancing themselves from knowledge and learning, finding all aspects related to learning increasingly meaningless. Consequently, leads to a lack of interest in the learning process, which gradually becomes dull and unpleasant. This advocacy of Sidorkin is closely related to the dimensions of alienation which are introduced by the influential American sociologist Melvin Seeman. In fact these dimensions are more applicable to the conceptualization of alienation in education (Erbas, 2014).

In his seminal work, "*On the Meaning of Alienation*," published in 1959, Seeman identifies five categories of alienation which are extracted from the work of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Adorno: powerlessness; meaninglessness; normlessness; isolation; and self-estrangement (Healy, 2020). Powerlessness, he maintains, refers to the belief that a person's 'own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes or reinforcements' one wants (Seeman, 1959). To put it differently, it is a state in which the individual lacks any control over his/ her own product or activity of production. Hence, in the context of education, when students believe that there are not many things that can be done at school in order to affect their future or feel themselves as empty vessels to be filled with facts (in Freirean terms) and when teachers sense their teaching as a forced activity than self-realization or they are estranged from the process and a feeling of powerlessness arises. The contradiction, here, is that learning is an activity of the teacher and the student, but not owned by neither of them. In brief, '*it is their activity, yet not their activity*.'

According to Seeman, meaninglessness pertains to an individual's sense of confusion about the events they are involved in or the lack of clarity regarding what they are supposed to believe. This dimension is derived from 'Adorno's treatment of prejudice' (Healy, 2020). When students perceive that the course content and curriculum are inadequate in preparing them for their future careers or when teachers could not be able to establish a relationship between the studies and the real life experience, a sense of meaninglessness emerges (Erbas, 2014). In Freire's expression, when learning has no 'epistemological relationship to reality', then it becomes meaningless (Shor, 1993). A clear contradiction arises here: students learn but do not understand the purpose of their learning, while teachers teach but lack a clear understanding of why they are teaching.

Low expectations for social inclusion and acceptance often manifest as feelings of loneliness or experiences of rejection and repudiation. This feeling, Seeman argues in his "*On the Meaning of Alienation*", refers to the dimension of alienation called isolation (1959, p 492). In another word, when individuals 'assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society', isolation arises (Healy, 2020, p.8). Within the framework of education, this dimension of alienation will contrast the goals and values of education in a given society with the rewards it offers. There is no doubt that education is highly valued in many societies, however a disconnection ascend when it comes to the reward value.

Drawing the aspect of normlessness from Durkheim's idea of anomie, Seeman explains that it is a condition in which 'social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behavior'(1959, p.787) . Individualism becomes so extreme that people stop considering or caring about the concerns, needs, and aspirations of others (Healy, 2020). In relation to the teaching – learning activity, this dimension points to those factors that would stand against the collective nature of education.

Finally, self-estrangement, an aspect which Seeman considers the most problematic for description and usage, conveys a sense of 'the loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in work and the failure to be fulfilled by the activities in which one is engaged.' (1991, p. 351). Pertaining to education, this aspect of alienation alarms educators to be curious about the 'inherent value of education…' which aligns with Aristotelian axiom 'All men by nature have the desire to know" the pride that the learning activity would generate.

For Freire (1973), the fundamental effort of education must be to liberate the society from the existing contradiction for it is a means to construct active individuals and society who question and transform. An education system which orients students and teachers to accept the existing contradiction within a society, contradicts the very purpose of education to empower the impoverished. Hence, as Freire claims, any attempt of empowerment in education necessarily begins by resolving the contradiction within itself. It must start with reconciling the poles of the contradiction, particularly between teachers and students so that both are simultaneously teachers and students (Shor & Freire, 1987).

4. Empowering Education through Re-conceptualizing Emancipation

The concept of emancipation tends to be associated with great names like Jean Jaques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx in the latter half of the 20th century (Szumlewicz, 2012). In his essay '*What is enlightenment?*'', Kant considers emancipation as a restoration from man's 'self-incurred immaturity', while Rousseau refers to his famous assertion that "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains". However, this research re-conceptualizes Karl Marx's philosophical account of emancipation which claims for the refurbishment of humanism.

The entire trajectory of Marx's thought, from his early Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 to the later works of the critique of political economy, was committed to the goal of human emancipation (Fromm, 2004). According to Marx and Engels (1978), true human freedom is achieved when individuals no longer see themselves as separate from their societal roles or powers. Emancipation is realized fully when people integrate their social and political identities into their daily lives, thus recognizing their individual capabilities as part of a collective social strength (p. 46).

In light of this conception, it can be remarked that at least seven key assumptions underlie Marx's view of emancipation (Susen, 2015). In the context of education, however, emancipation as a means of empowering educators, centers on only three of these assumptions; *restoration*, *transformation*, and *self-initiation*.

Marx's conception of emancipation emphasized that human beings have the capacity to the recover themselves form the detrimental sources of power which alienated them which can be referred to as restoration. Every restorative action should be preceded by the knowledge of the arrangement

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and practice of power in a society (Freire & Shor, 1987). Accordingly, every activity which aims at empowering education should primarily focus on the arrangement of power within itself. The power organization between students and teachers, teachers and standardized curriculum, teachers and school administrators, school administrators and policy makers, should be taken in to consideration so as to make a restorative measure.

No great imagination is required to determine that the aim of education is to empowering people (UNESCO, 2017). However, a disempowered and alienated learning cannot be able to empower and transform society. Thus, emancipation as a restoration should also involve a negotiation between the parties which take part in learning that would replenish the students and the teachers with the power to determine their learning and involve their own creativity in the curriculum. This makes emancipation not only empowerment, but also a humanizing activity a de-humanized practice of traditional learning.

The transformative aspect of emancipation is often associated with Marx's the last thesis on Feuerbach '*the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.'* (Marx & Engles, 1978). In alienated education, a significant contradiction exists between the study content and real-world problems. Such an epistemological disconnection is the main source of meaninglessness in education. Since education is a human activity, using Marx's own expression, there should be 'the real re-appropriation of the human essence by and for man.' In another expression, education as a necessarily human activity ought to aim at changing the existing condition of man.

A self-initiated emancipation, as Marx maintained, is a genuine emancipation (Susen, 2015, p.149). It is, in fact, a genuine empowerment. This implies that the process of emancipation should not be imposed 'from above'. Pertaining to education, emancipatory project which is imposed '*from above*' to empower students and teachers is like an '*old wine in a new bottle'*. Re-conceptualizing Marx's notion that a class "*in itself*" (which exists as a class) needs to convert itself into a class "for itself", knowledge as a mission of both the students and the teachers, they ought to be aware that their action has a significant role in emancipating education.

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This paper is free of conflict of interest.

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