Empowerment: a definition, an indicator and a model

At a seminar in Bangkok in 1979, women from the South formulated the following aim: *"(...) the right of women to freedom of choice and to the power to control their own lives (...)"* (Schrijvers, 1985, pp. 234-235). Building upon this aim, empowerment (of women) was further defined as follows:
"(empowerment is) a process of women acquiring the experiences, knowledge, tools and techniques to be able to transform their lives and the society. Within this process transformation of the existing power relations is crucial. This definition covers different aspects of empowerment:

- *The physical: control over body and sexuality, including protection against sexual violence;*
- *The economic: access to and control over resources and income;*
- *The legal: strengthening of position within the legal system;*
- *The organisational/political: self-organisation, self-help and collective action to bring about a transformation;*
- *The ideological: self-respect, confidence and equal status vis-à-vis men. An essential part is the right of women to have access to information and know-how".*

(Claessen & Van Wesemael, 1992, pp. 14-20).

Even though the above mentioned definition of empowerment chooses a female aspect, it is reasonable to think it is also applicable to men. It can also help men to become aware of their own disadvantageous position, if and when they too do not succeed in influencing the existing power relations, let alone change them. Without this awareness, after all, one cannot speak of the empowerment of women and men.
The use of the concept of "transformation" is crucial. Empowerment entails more than just adequate adjustment. It entails the transformation of those involved and their society. Redistribution of power is central to this emancipation (see as well Paulo Freire, from whom this concept of transformation has been taken). This redistribution must do justice to the opportunities and needs of all members of society, but must take place in such a way that it does not happen at the expense of others. Everyone's freedom is limited by the moment when that freedom pushes someone else aside. Thus, freedom must be negotiable. This, however, requires that each partner in negotiations possess the knowledge and skills necessary to bring these negotiations to a satisfactory conclusion.

In this view, the five aspects of empowerment mentioned above can be divided into two categories. The first three aspects (the physical, the economic and the legal) refer to action that the participants of an empowerment programme can take in order to improve their living conditions. The last two (the organisational/political, the ideological) in this view, refer to the necessary conditions. Issues like self-respect and self-confidence (the ideological aspect) are naturally necessary for taking action.
The same goes for self-organisation (the organisational/political aspect). The description of this aspect even indicates this:"(...) collective action to bring about transformation" (Claessen & Wesemael, 1992, p. 17). Possibly, one can speak of a cyclical relationship between the first three aspects, on the one hand, and the last two aspects on the other, cyclical in the sense that they reinforce each other. Awareness for the benefit of self-respect and self-confidence and organisation building are central to empowerment. The other three aspects (the physical, the economic and the legal) are derived from these two aspects.
The term "ideological" can be misleading. It could imply that the participants must be taught a certain ideology, while it is especially issues like self-confidence, self-esteem, self-expression and self-respect that are important. These are issues that are not ideologically bound. They are linked to an individual process of development, to the development of self-awareness.

This brings us to a **definition** of *empowerment*:
Empowerment = The ability of people to direct and control their own lives

Consequences of this definition: empowered people are able to transform their lives. For transformation people need to organise one self. Therefore:

1. *Self-organisation* is the **indicator** for empowerment:
- People identify their problems
- They assess a goal or objective
- They develop a strategy
- They mobilise resources
- They start acting
- They reflect on their results

We now face the problem that also criminals, terrorists, rapists and other violent people organise themselves. If we want to exclude them it is suggested here to add the following phrase:
Self-organisation for creating a caring, responsible and safe environment

Thus an empowered person is a person who acts in a caring, responsible and safe way. By persons empowering themselves in a caring, responsible and safe way we mean the following:
- a CARING person takes care for his/her own learning process – for work (includes voluntary activities) and income – for caring tasks – and for cultural activities and sports
- a RESPONSIBLE person is accountable for and reflexive on his/her values/beliefs, motivation, rights and duties, and obligations
- a SAFE person creates physical security (shelter, food, health) and a safe social environment by the way he/she uses his/her roles, power, and the ways he/she communicates

All for him/her self and for the others whom s/he works and lives with.

These three aspects of care, responsibility and safety can be identified by three leading questions: what, purpose and why. Through these three questions it is possible to identify peoples' basic ideas about their own self-organisation in order to empower oneself:

1. *What* are the activities I care for / about?
- Describes the contents of the activities.

2. What is the *purpose* of these activities I am responsible for?
- Identifies the objectives;
- Assesses personal responsibilities;
- Makes people accountable.

3. *How* do I implement these activities in a safe way?
- Identifies ways of safe communication and interaction;
- Identifies the resources to be used (i.e. physical and human resources, methods, assessment procedures, etc.).

As a part of their Development Education Leadership Teams in Action programme (Delta) Anne Hope and Sally Timmel from South Africa have developed a triangle which identifies the basic needs – economy, the values and beliefs, and the community decisions of participants (1984 – 1996: 59). Their triangle ánd the ideas described above were fundamental to the development by IES of the Empowerment Triangle (ET). The Empowerment Triangle is the basic tool implemented by IES, for training, facilitation and monitoring & evaluation purposes. Sound and comprehensive indicators for Care, Responsibility and Safety are developed each time again together with the participants / beneficiaries.

Care, Responsibility and Safety could also be considered as the *Hands, Head* and *Heart* of empowerment.

Empowerment Triangle © Rogier van 't Rood
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Learner Centred Approaches

It appears that there are some general misunderstandings about the issues of learner friendly and lerner centred approaches in education. Many educational professionals tend to think that learner friendly is more or less the same as learner centred. Therefore it is important to make a clear division between these two approaches:

- *Learner friendly approaches*: the teacher behaves in a safe and respectful manner towards the learner, regardless of their gender, without any abuse or physical punishment. The learners feel safe, encouraged and happy in school; their performances improve gradually and the dropout rates decline.
- *Learner centred approaches*: the teacher challenges the children in a safe and respectful manner to develop (together and individually) their own solutions to problems given, thus encouraging co-operation, the development of life skills, their analysing power, their capacity to organise themselves. The children feel safe, encouraged, happy and empowered in school, and have more fun; their performances rise significantly and the dropout rates decline even more (also see Vigotsky: Constructivism).

Life-skills competencies

It is a general assumption that education should teach the pupils or students (boys and girls) how to participate effectively and satisfactory in their society. In other words: education should teach them how to become a *responsible* person, who takes the obligation to be accountable for relatives, for the development of the society, and for the maintenance of the environment. It also teaches them how to achieve appropriate living conditions and health, hence helping them to *care* for themselves *and* for those who are depending on them, like elderly people, children and the disabled. Finally it teaches them how to create *safe* living conditions, through honest, peaceful and righteous attitudes and behaviour.

In order to enhance the life skills competencies (or values) of responsibility, care and safety, it is necessary to make the pupils acquainted with real life situations, hence strengthening their problem solving capacities. For solving problems it is necessary to organise oneself. Through processes of self-organisation people learn to deal with problems in a satisfactory manner. This can only be achieved through child-centred approaches: the child friendly approach might still be teacher centred and knowledge based, while the child centred approach is empathically problem and process oriented. The children learn themselves to analyse a problem, to develop strategies and to mobilise resources to solve them, and to evaluate the outcomes critically. This way they strongly enhance their life skill competencies. In other words: they learn how to empower themselves. Empowerment is understood here as a process by which people learn to achieve control over their own lives and resources, through self-organisation.

A paradigm shift from teacher centred towards leaner centred approaches could be enhanced and supported by a better understanding of some constructivist concepts. One of these is the Empowerment Triangle (ET), for building self organisation competencies and thus empowerment, through step-by-step classroom learning experiments.

The ET is an easy to adapt educational instrument, which helps people to organise themselves, in order to create the necessary life skills of responsibility, care and safety. It also identifies (in a comprehensive manner) the objectives, contents and approaches which are necessary for the development of self-organisation competencies.

In general the ET is a quality classroom leadership instrument that helps educational professionals to develop and assess processes of self-organisation (empowerment) in education. It helps to develop and understand the goals through the *purpose-question* (gives the objectives and responsibilities: the *head* of

empowerment), to identify and to describe the necessary tasks and activities through the *what-question* (gives the contents of activities people care of: the *hands* of empowerment), and to develop the path towards the coherent implementation and assessment of the activities through the *how-question* (gives safe methods, approaches and assessment procedures: the *heart* of empowerment). All with regard to the final goal, that is the empowerment of the students or pupils, and of the teachers themselves. To put it differently: through the three leading questions (on purpose, what and how) teachers become more focussed on their tasks, at the same moment enhancing their professional consciousness (head), their professional competencies (hands), and their professional ethics (heart). To put it simply: be fully accountable for your actions (head), do what you do to the best of your abilities (hands), and do it with zeal (heart).

Self-organisation competencies

The process of building a self-organisation competency among pupils unfolds itself by answering the same leading questions, assuming that there is a problem which needs to be solved:

1. Face the problem, by thinking about it:
> a. Why is this problem hindering me? (motivation)
> b. Why do I want to solve this problem? (obligation or purpose)
> Now the head is watching the problem.
2. Tackle the problem, by describing it:
> a. What are the elements of the problem? (description)
> b. What are the origins or reasons of it? (analysis)
> Now the hands are grabbing the problem.
3. Feel the solution, by developing a strategy:
> a. How do the steps look like, which I should take? (strategy)
> b. How can I get the necessary help needed to solve the problem? (necessary resources)
> c. How do I know that I have been successful? (evaluation)
> Now the heart is overwhelming the problem.
> Then: act! After having developed answers on all questions, the pupils start acting, in order to solve the problem given.

Afterwards they evaluate the problem solving process, by asking themselves:
1. Did I achieve the purpose: is the problem taken away?
2. Am I able to describe what I have done: did I obtain new knowledge and skills?
3. How do all involved feel now: is everybody satisfied?

If there is any negative answer: re-develop the problem solving process from the beginning onwards and start acting again, until a satisfactory situation has been achieved.

Leaner-centred competencies

Finally, the ET helps teachers to internalise the following successive leaner centred competencies, for purposes of effectiveness and for being a role model for the pupils (the future citizens):

A. On responsibilities (the head element):
- The teachers are responsible for guiding a process of awareness, empowerment and development;
- The teacher has a strong and well developed capacity for mature critical self-reflection;
- The teacher stimulates the thinking of the pupils, without any interference from personal prejudices, irrational loyalties, traumas, hang ups, fears or irritations on the side of the teacher;
- The teacher facilitates self-reflection about the own positions, qualities, problems, needs, and opportunities by the pupils. During this, the teacher makes careful observations, whereby he or she tries to allow everyone to express him or herself individually.

B. On care (the hands element):
- The teacher assumes an inquisitive position;
- The teacher should not be suggestive in any sense, because this would pre-empt the pupils and

take away their chance of putting forth a thought, expression or idea;
- The teacher is always well-prepared.

C. On safety (the heart element):
- The teacher makes never use of physical punishments;
- The teachers must take the answers and expressions given seriously at all times, even if they themselves do not agree;
- The teachers should realise that pupils have their own truth and reality, a truth which is appreciated without prejudice and should be valued according to its own merits. Without this appreciation pupils will fall silent. Thus, they must never experience rejection and must be shown trust and respect at all times.

Seen from this angle teachers must have freed themselves fully from any prejudice to gender-aspects and/or from any (irrational) loyalties related to nationality, race or even religion. Prejudices and loyalties that could hinder the full understanding of gender equality and of peace and respect at all levels.

Prejudices and irrational loyalties enforce *exclusion*: meaning that the other human being who does not belong to the same sex, nationality, race or religion could be treated with less respect. And thus women abuse is still close and disrespect, discrimination and hatred are just around the corner.

It is a great challenge for each and every teacher to establish a climate of *inclusion*: meaning that all human beings, irrespective their sex, race or background, should be treated with equal respect, not looking at the others' *ascribed* (given) positions, but only by giving full value to his or hers individual and *achieved* qualities and competencies. Only then abuse, discrimination and worse can be avoided or eradicated. Only then processes of peace building and peace maintenance, empowerment and development can be fully fostered and facilitated.

This pedagogical approach is emphatically leaner-centred, aiming at enforcing learners' self-esteem, self-confidence and the development of a positive and realistic self-concept (self-image), and thus aiming at enhancing individual empowerment and the capacity to organize one-self for future development. Furthermore this approach aims at creating an environment which allows respect for characteristic and sometimes differing cultural features. By using a leaner-centred approach, teachers try to accommodate and support every individual leaner and its specific needs and possibilities.

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