

# Classroom Discussions of Power

Lynn Fischer

**If we identify ourselves in terms of our own innate power, we see ourselves not as victims or predators, but as potential contributors to the betterment of the environment and society.**

When I asked a class of second graders why some children tease new students in class, a little girl in the front row raised her hand and replied, "I think its because we want to see how powerful the new kid is."

This second grader describes an age-old ritual practiced regularly among people everywhere, the creation of a pecking order. We all know it well. One way or another the group sizes up its members. Sometimes a leader will emerge. Sometimes a scapegoat will be identified. We see this behavior within wolf packs. It is an effective method of group survival in a hostile environment. We sort out the "winners" from the "losers" and follow the "winners." In this way we attempt to increase our chances for collective survival. Is this form of social organization reflective of human nature itself? The sad events at Columbine High School might prompt one to consider this question carefully. The young men who did the shooting seem to have been treated as scapegoats by a group of athletes in the school. We will never know how much that treatment contributed to their desperate measures. Yet, in an age in which teen violence is a major concern and violence is spreading across the globe, one thing seems clear: We must begin to question the social conventions that encourage us to see ourselves as either winners or losers, righteous or evil, powerful or powerless. In the words of Caroline W. Casey (1998), "Domination is an evolutionary dead end."

We, as a human family, have dreamed for generations about operating according to principles of equity, fellowship, and cooperation. Educators are exploring new, more democratic instructional approaches and strategies for waging peace in the classroom (Kreisberg 1992; Kashtan 2002; Lantieri and Patti 1996; Eisler 2002).

In my work as a public school peace educator, I have faced the predominant "win/lose" cultural



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paradigm in many forms. For example, students consistently absorb media messages equating power with domination, violence and wealth. Hierarchical power struggles among staff and administrators undermine trust and inhibit authentic communication. Clashing beliefs about power held by students and teachers of diverse cultural backgrounds are constantly at play. Mediation often eases these tensions, but for the most part, the underlying power dynamics that cause them are seldom addressed. What seems to be needed is a new way to talk about power, a kind of power literacy.

### Broadening Conceptions of Power

Erich Fromm (1947) was among the first to draw important distinctions with respect to types of power. He distinguished between *power over* and *power to*. *Power to* is inherent human potential; it is our power to be productive people. In contrast, *power over* is social domination that inhibits the realization of human potential.

I propose the term *innate power* as another dimension of thinking about inherent human potential. Innate power is the power that can't be taken from us. For example, Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for many years. He was denied the *relative power* to work and live freely. Yet, his writings and work as a national leader (Mandela 1994) demonstrate that he was able to cultivate his innate powers despite his circumstances. Most of all, these are the powers of compassion, wisdom, and courage. It is our capacity to empathize with one another, understand how things work, and face our own fears that define us as human beings. If Mandela had identified himself in terms of his relative power then he would have seen himself as a powerless victim of an oppressive regime. He would have been accepting the conventional *power over* social dynamic. Instead he saw himself in terms of the power that cannot be taken from one. He perceived himself as an innately powerful human being, engaged in a critical struggle. He then reframed the situation using a collaborative rather than a competitive paradigm. He therefore successfully translated his innate powers to the relative powers of negotiation, liberation, and profound contribution.

The understanding of our relationship to power is central to our understanding of our relationship to the world. If we identify ourselves in terms of our own innate power, then we see ourselves not as victims or predators, but as potential contributors to the betterment of the environment and society.

### Classroom Explorations

In a public elementary school in New York City, I asked students in a fifth grade class to write on a piece of chart paper all the words and phrases that came to mind when they heard the word "power." The response was energetic to say the least. For every

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idea that was expressed ten more would arise. Among them were "God, love, violence, the FBI, weapons, the government, parents, community, knowledge, schools, computers, the media, money, poetry, sports and gangs" (Fischer 2002).

I asked the students to name the powers that no one could take from them. What emerged was deeply heartening to me. It was a web of words like "the power to ... learn, love, communicate with my soul, determine who I will become, heal, think for myself, make choices, listen." We then began to reflect upon the ways in which we habitually empower or disempower ourselves and one another in the context of human relationships. The students came up with a striking observation: when we took the time to listen carefully to one another, it not only empowered the speaker but the listener as well.

I've done this work with teachers, parents, and students of varying age groups. We've written and told stories about people, places, and practices in our lives that tend to help us engage our innate powers of empathy, wisdom, and courage. We've constructed mission statements citing the ways we could raise the levels of empowerment in the group itself.

## Identifying Cultural Messages about Power

I'm defining culture as a collective interpretation of shared experience that finds expression. For example, a traditional culture, over the course of generations, develops myths and folklore expressing the ways in which the people of that culture experience the mysteries of the cosmos, the powers of nature, social relationships. Those experiences are interpreted and expressed through art, religion, social customs,

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political practices. Contemporary cultures arise when a particular group of people share an experience and begin to collectively express interpretations of common themes within that shared experience. For example, the youth culture that emerged in the 1960s was defined in many ways but there were central themes and trends that distinctly characterized it.

Cultural studies in power literacy education focus on helping the learner to explore the meaning of culture through clarifying and constructing one's own cultural lens. One way to do this is to observe the cultural influences that impact one's self-image and behaviors. For example, in my work with the fifth graders we often discussed the messages we get from the media about power and violence. I asked them to reflect on their own beliefs on the power of caring versus the power of violence. They constructed power myths based on their experiences of innate powers.

One of these myths involved a female deity who was summoned to assist a farming community beset by drought. A male deity who was jealous of her power chided her and said that she was too old and feeble to help the community. Her power began to fade until she remembered the love she had for her sister. Her power was restored. She saved the community by causing a healthy rainy season and achieved immortality in the process. By constructing and presenting stories about inherent human power

the students learned about the function of essential elements of culture as they defined and empowered themselves.

## Conclusion

We have become a society of enormous complexity. Children need to understand their cultural influences, the messages they are getting from the media about who they are and what makes them powerful. They need assistance in working with the emotions that arise when they are tricked into feeling powerless. Children also need to learn the ABC's of economic, political, and environmental systems—and where relative and innate power reside within these systems.

Children need to know that they are never powerless. As Dorothy learns in the Wizard of Oz, power does not lie in the hands of the man behind the curtain, but within our own capacities to love, think for ourselves, and face our fears.

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