

# WITH EYES TO SEE



## INFUSING JUSTICE AND PEACE: EMPOWERMENT

ideas for  
teachers  
  
who want  
to  
integrate  
social  
justice  
concepts  
  
into what  
and how  
they teach

March  
2012

The term "Empowerment" first appeared in the 17th century as a legal term meaning "to invest with authority, authorize," and standard definitions today still connote a "giving" of power to others. However, the word has also become part of our popular lexicon in the context of disenfranchised people/groups gaining, through their own efforts, the power to improve their lives, their communities, and society.

This distinction in the use of *empowerment* is quite relevant to Concern America's experience in and approach towards our community development projects in Latin America and Africa: when impoverished communities are able to analyze their situation, develop plans of action, and learn the skills necessary to put their solutions into place, they shift from being "subjects" to "agents" of history. They have become empowered, not by receiving power from others, but by gaining power through their collective actions.

Anne Hope, a community development worker in Uganda in the second half of the 20th century, tells a story of her own transformation in how she worked with impoverished communities, learning to trust in their abilities to empower themselves to change their futures.

*"A village had numerous problems in both the health field (all types of worms, malaria, no clinic) and a very poor school from which the teachers were nearly always absent. In a village meeting the people insisted that their top priority was to make a football field. I was appalled but the community development worker very wisely encouraged the group to go ahead. They made their football field, started playing football, organized a team, played matches against other villages. The football field was a turning point in the life of the village. They had gained self-confidence, a structure for communicating with one another, and a sense that they were capable of changing things. Later they tackled many other, "more important" projects. But were they really more important? Was not their own intuition that they needed something that would build their own sense of themselves as a community, and their confidence that they could achieve their own goals, far more important than my outsider priority that they needed a clinic?"*

The role of people like Anne Hope, and Concern America's field personnel, is not so dissimilar than that of successful teachers in this country who create a classroom environment in which they accompany their students in a process of learning and awakening. This edition of *With Eyes to See* explores the empowerment of students with activities that position them as active agents in their learning, not passive subjects to whom knowledge is given.

CONCERN AMERICA

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6-12

**"Football Fields" in the Classroom**

**Exercise 1:** One result of the people-centered approach described by Anne Hope on page 1 is that communities will have a better chance of improving their lives if they define what needs to be done. However, too often "experts" (community development workers, college educated individuals, etc.) act on behalf of others, making decisions as if they know best what a struggling community wants or needs.

This exercise, called the "Priorities of Mathari Valley People," was designed to help show how the priorities set by professional workers and newcomers to a community are not always those that the community members would choose. The Mathari Valley is a slum of Nairobi, Kenya, without running water, sanitation, schools, etc. A very desperate place. The following is a copy of the survey of the residents of Mathari Valley, used to determine the top problems as identified by the people themselves.

Give the following list to the students (without the numbers in parentheses) and ask them to rank in order of what they think the people in the Valley answered as their first, second, third priorities, etc., placing a number 1 by the one they think the people ranked first, a number 2 by the one they think the people ranked second, etc. up to 10. Then, have the students discuss their answers in small groups, culminating with a classroom discussion. Next, show the actual answers of the people (in parentheses), and talk about the similarities and differences between everyone's results and what this might mean if the students were to go work in Kenya to help this community.

- |                     |                                    |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| ___ Land (5)        | ___ Money to expand business (6)   |
| ___ Clean water (7) | ___ Educational facilities (10)    |
| ___ Shelter (2)     | ___ Food (10)                      |
| ___ Clothing (4)    | ___ Better standard of housing (9) |
| ___ School Fees (3) | ___ Sanitation (8)                 |

What does this exercise have to do with schools? If one were to replace "community development worker" with "teacher," and "people/community" with "students/classroom," is Anne Hope's point still valid? Use these questions as a follow-up discussion about the empowerment of students in schools.

**Exercise 2:** Building upon the above survey, this exercise asks the students to explore what they want of their school and, hopefully, empowering them to think critically about how they might be agents of change at school.

Begin with the question: What functions do schools serve in our society? Discuss the purpose of schools with the students, and together come up with a mission statement for schools. With this mission in hand, have students form groups of 3-4 and design their ideal school. While there are many directions this activity could take, possible design components can include architecture and location of the school building; class size and make up; who are the teachers; administrative structure; participation of students in the daily operations of the school; parental/community involvement; grades and assessments (for students, teachers, administration, and parents/community); subject areas; and much more.

To culminate the exercise, have the students prepare pamphlets explaining their school, and then each group can present its concepts to the class. If the activity goes well, have the students take their ideas to the administration and/or school board!

"I'm not afraid of storms for I'm learning how to sail my ship."

-Louisa May Alcott

"We need to find the courage to say 'NO' to the things and people that are not serving us if we want to rediscover ourselves and live our lives with authenticity."

-Dr. Barbara DeAngelis

## Student Survey, Teacher and Student Responses

K-5

What do teachers think are the aspects of the classrooms/school that are most important to their students? What aspects would the students themselves say are most important? Are these lists the same? If not, how would these differences alter how teachers set up their classrooms and/or the school-wide environment?

Similar to the "Priorities of the Mathari Valley People" survey on page 2, create a list of items that, in your experience, are the top ten aspects of school that are most important to your students (and, before giving the list to the students, rank them in the order you think they would rank them). The list might include things like healthy food, reading time, recess, center activities, math, reading buddies, etc. Present the list to the students and ask them to rank them in order of importance (for younger grades it would be necessary to administer the survey orally, maybe in small groups). Have the students share their responses in small groups, and then hold a general discussion of the results with the entire class.

After tallying the student results, share with the class both the student and the teacher results side-by-side. Ask questions like: "Are there any surprises?" "Why are our answers different/the same?" "What can we learn from this?" On one level, this will help teachers better understand their students; on another level, this will hopefully encourage the students to think critically about how their school day/activities are organized and that by constructively voicing their opinions they can potentially help improve how they experience school.

"Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending."  
-Maria Robinson

"You cannot control what happens to you, but you can control your attitude toward what happens to you, and in that, you will be mastering change rather than allowing it to master you."  
-Sri Ram

## Active Agents of Change in their Community

6-12

We all live in communities that have both positive and negative aspects. A first step in addressing the negatives in any situation is to identify the problems. Simultaneously, it is important for us to identify the positives in our communities so that we are able to draw on these strengths when we work for change. Try the following two exercises that place the students as the agents for change in their communities:

**Documenting the Good and Bad:** For a homework assignment, have the students make a list of the things they like and dislike in their neighborhoods. Using video cameras, still cameras, or drawings/descriptions, in teams, the students will then document examples in the community to accompany their lists. The students will create a short piece, with narration, to present their views of their community. The final results can be used to encourage class action projects, or to present to school boards, parents, and community councils. (adapted from Gregory Michie's *Holler if You Hear Me: the Education of a Teacher and His Students*)

**Community Mapping:** What services, open spaces, entertainment, etc. exist in your community? While we often focus on the negatives of our communities, there can be many resources that go unnoticed. Have the students make a resource map of the community around the school (if a neighborhood school), or in their neighborhoods (if they come from various communities). Using the internet, talking to neighbors, and hitting the pavement, students will catalogue the parks, community organizations, public services, and other resources in their area. The maps can be distributed to the rest of the school and sent home to parents/care givers.

# IDEAS and WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

"Within each of us is a hidden store of energy. Energy we can release to compete in the marathon of life. Within each of us is a hidden store of courage, courage to give us the strength to face any challenge. Within each of us is a hidden store of determination.

Determination to keep us in the race when all seems lost."  
-Roger Dawson

## RESOURCES

• The "football field" story on page 1, including the "Priorities of the Mathari Valley People" activity on page 2, both come from the four-book series by Anne Hope, Sally Timmel, and Chris Hodzi (illustrator), entitled *Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers*. Though written from and for the context of community development workers in impoverished countries, the themes and activities are quite relevant for teachers in this country. Some used copies are available online, or can be borrowed from Concern America.

• *"Few people I know have seen as much change in the American South, or helped to bring it about, as Myles Horton. He's been beaten up, locked up, put upon and railed against by racists, toughs, demagogues and governors. But for more than fifty years now, he has gone on with his special kind of teaching--helping people to discover within themselves the courage and ability to confront reality and change it."* Thus begins Bill Moyer's preface to Myles Horton's autobiography *The Long Haul*. The book chronicles Mr. Horton's own educational transformation and his creation of the Highlander Folk School, a training center in Tennessee that was a major influence on the Civil Rights Movement and attendees like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and more.

## CONCERN AMERICA

is an international development and refugee aid organization that sends doctors, nurses, engineers, educators, and nutritionists as volunteers to train and empower the materially poor in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia, Mozambique, and West Africa.

In support of these projects, Concern America offers educational services in California which include:

- \* Walk Out of Poverty
- \* Infusion Methodology Workshops for teachers
- \* "Training for Transformation" Workshops for adults
- \* School and parish consulting for the implementation of the Bishops' Pastoral: "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions" (June, 1998)
- \* Lending library for resources of peace and social justice

Feel free to contact the Education Coordinator at Concern America for more information on any of these projects.

## Join Us for Concern America's 30<sup>th</sup> Walk-a-thon (a Concern America 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary event) on March 31, 2012

For three decades Concern America has held walks to raise awareness and funding to support our sisters and brothers living in material poverty around the world. The increasingly successful Walk Out of Poverty (now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year) in southern California will take place this year on March 31, 2012. Join more than 500 walkers to help make this year the best Walk ever. And if you don't live in southern California, we invite you to do your own parallel walk to make the impact of the Walk even greater!



Call Concern America to get information, Walk packets, flyers, and/or to schedule an engaging Walk presentation for your group.

"It's a long walk out of poverty; it's further without you!"