

The following is a reproduction of a "Viewpoints" article published in *Journal of Nutrition Education*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (July/August 1988), pp. 193-195.

Nutrition Education as an Instrument of Empowerment

GEORGE KENT

Department of Political Science
University of Hawai'i
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96822

Nutrition educators know that poverty is a root cause of malnutrition in the world, but somehow that knowledge rarely informs their teaching. In practice they focus on coping behavior, showing people how to adapt to their deprivation as if it were immutable.

Malnutrition is due to poverty, but even more fundamentally to powerlessness. Poverty may put the family unit at risk of malnutrition, but it does not explain the discrepancies in nutritional status within the family. Women and children are relatively powerless within the household. Small children in particular cannot fend for themselves, and are thoroughly at the mercy of others.

Some nations suffer much less malnutrition than would be expected on the basis of their average gross national products. Similarly, some resourceful individuals can manage even with little money. There are many cases in which children are found to be better nourished than would be expected on the basis of their families' income levels (see note).

Some people do badly even though they have money. The importance of powerlessness becomes evident when we look at middle- and upper-class malnutrition which, by definition, do not arise from poverty'.

Analysts of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia recognize that the problems are not only psychological but also social. Speaking of women's sometime excessive preoccupation with thinness, one doctor said that "caught between demands of those around them and their own needs, they feel powerless" (1).

Obesity illustrates the pattern. In developed countries we are all subjected to persistent pressure to eat, but some of us succumb more readily than others. According to data from the United States' National Center for Health Statistics:

- 1) Women are more likely to be obese than men, regardless of age . . . ;

- 2) Obesity is more prevalent in lower socioeconomic groups, particularly among females;
- 3) Rural populations tend to be more overweight than urban populations; and
- 4) Blacks, as a group, are more likely to be obese than whites (2).

Evidently it is the politically weaker groups that are more likely to suffer obesity.

Many of the common forms of middle-class malnutrition reflect loss of control over one's own circumstances and increasing vulnerability to pressures from outside. Thus both undernutrition and overnutrition result from powerlessness. Almost always, people who are malnourished suffer the effects of decisions made by others, others who have more power and have other priorities. Malnutrition should not be treated as if it were a problem of individuals in isolation; it is a problem of the social order (3).

If malnutrition has its roots in powerlessness, its remedies must lie in empowerment. At least one branch of nutrition education should be understood as a form of political education, one designed to empower. In my view, *to be empowered is to increase your capacity to define, analyze, and act on your own problems.*

Empowerment is not merely behavioral, in the sense that people begin to do "good" behaviors (such as breast-feeding) instead of "bad" behaviors (such as bottle feeding). It is cognitive and value laden, in that if you do something differently, you do it not because you were told to do that, but because you arrived at an analysis of the situation in which you decided for yourself that changing your behavior would be in your own best interests. The object of empowerment is not simply to convey new bits of information or to induce specific behaviors. It is to support people in making their own analyses so that they themselves can decide what is good for them.

Conventional nutrition educators advise consumers on how to make the best possible choices with respect to the available options, options described in terms of the locally available foods. In empowering nutrition education, the concern is with social and political possibilities what they are and what they could be. The education rests on a foundation of active analysis of concrete circumstances. In that analysis individuals do not accept that the range of choices whether of foods or of social conditions--is simply fixed and given. Instead they raise questions: Why are the options so narrow? How did it come to be that way? How and why did we come to be in this situation? Political analysis, in essence, means asking, Who gets what benefits, and how is that decided? The analysis then provides the basis for finding ways to expand and improve the range of possibilities. The objective is not simply improved nutrition, but empowerment.

In Yap, local merchants have promoted soft drinks rather than coconut milk because selling soft drinks was more profitable. While working as a nutritionist in Yap, Nancy Rody reversed the patterns of increasing consumption of Coca-Cola by launching a campaign based on the slogan, "Things go better with coconuts." Empowerment arose through a form of education that went beyond comparison of the nutrients in the two products and helped people to understand why Coca-Cola was promoted so vigorously and whose interests it served. Thus people gained

increasing control over their own diets, serving their individual and their community interests (4).

It is important to go beyond technical nutrition and narrow biomedical analyses to include consideration of political, social, and economic factors which affect nutrition. This sort of expansion of the coverage of nutrition education has been advocated many times (5-10).

Not only the content but also the method of teaching should be different if nutrition education is to be empowering. The teacher should be a facilitator, creating opportunities for discussion and posing questions which help people to figure out their own problems. Good facilitators would not lecture, pressing their own political analyses as *the* correct one, but instead would try to get people to develop their own understandings of their situation, in their own terms. With good facilitators, much more learning than teaching would take place in the room.

Empowering nutrition education encompasses political, social, and economic factors which affect nutrition; it encourages local people to participate in the interpretation and analysis of their own situations. Local people need to reflect together on issues such as their malnutrition. In that dialogue process they can learn from each other, and indeed they can produce knowledge that none of them had previously as individuals. They will come to new understandings not only about what they do but also about what government officials or plantation owners or village chiefs do to cause or to prevent malnutrition. They will get a clearer understanding about how and why they relate to one another in the ways that they do. And as a result of that process they can come to clearer answers about what should be done in their specific circumstances.

Paulo Freire is widely recognized as the leading modern proponent of empowering education (11). He sees the similarities between conventional schooling and conventional nutrition education. In her foreword to a recent book by Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, Ann Berthoff makes the following observation:

Freire rejects the banking concept of education (the teacher makes deposits, which accumulate interest and value). Nutrition is another metaphor: "Eat this. It's good for you!" Freire cites Sartre's sardonic salutation, "O! philosophie alimentaire!" (12).

Nutritional literacy means more than knowing technical aspects of nutrition. Just as Freire says that literacy means reading *not* only the word but also, the world, so the teaching of nutrition should include examination of the world which generates nutrition problems.

Therese Drummond has described how the methods of Paulo Freire can be applied in nutrition education. She recognized that "*poor* health and poor nutrition of most of the world's population is caused more by a lack of access to the resources of land, credit, income, legal services, sanitation, etc. than by a lack of knowledge," and said

I believe that in the ideal situation nutrition education should be a part of a global effort for liberation from hunger, disease, and inhuman conditions; a joint effort of people and

technical staff for achieving first and foremost a *humanizing* situation where dependence is destroyed. This implies conditions in which people are acting as subject and not passively receiving information or being acted upon as objects. It is more than just "participation" of the people because it involves a whole basic philosophy and motivation on the side of both teacher-students and student-teachers. Nutrition education then is part of "conscientization" and the awakening of critical awareness among people who have many deprivations, including food and nutrient deprivations (13).

The possibilities are illustrated by Alexandra Praun's work in Central America. Facilitators or *promotores* were trained to work with local groups, leading discussions on questions such as

- 1) The nutrition situation in our locality.
- 2) Why do children die?
- 3) Why don't we have enough food?
- 4) Foods in the community.
- 5) Local food preparation.
- 6) Local food taboos and traditions.
- 7) The agricultural services in the region.
- 8) The health services in the region.
- 9) Food aid programs.
- 10) Communal/home gardens.
- 11) Chicken, rabbit, and pig farms (14).

The theme "nutrition situation in our locality," for example, was developed through a set of questions concerning local food prices, food availability, local production, family diet, common child sicknesses, budget used for food and so on. Of course the appropriate questions would be different in different circumstances. They would not be addressed mechanically, as in some sort of examination, but would be used to stimulate an open-ended joint analysis of the local food situation.

In another case, in the Dominican Republic a women's nutrition training course was established.

Some 62 women started attending the course--structured along Paulo Freire's lines--which examined nutrition not only in technical terms but also in the social, political, and economic context of the women's lives. . . . They studied the nutritional situation of their own region, and of the entire country. They also made surveys in their own neighbourhoods to assess the nutritional problems of their families, friends, and neighbours, and to work out ways of dealing with them (15).

As a result, the women, calling themselves Women of the South, developed detailed critiques of the export orientation of the country's agriculture and of their own excessive dependence on food aid; they launched a number of projects for food production and distribution; and they undertook a systematic program of self-evaluation of their efforts.

Their realization of the limits of [conventional] nutritional education had led them to analyse the socioeconomic and political structure of their own society and their own role within it. They have become truly *conciente*, aware of themselves and their role, and their first question when faced with any problem is: "What can we, as women of the South, do?" They believe in their own power to instigate a social change, and to work with other organizations to create conditions in which children will be well fed, clothed, housed, and educated (15).

Most nutrition programs are intervention programs, meaning outsiders coming in to help. Why can't people help themselves? Who, when not deprived of the means, would not feed themselves? Why assume that food and nutrition programs necessarily originate in the central government and filter down from there? Why design programs directed at "target" groups based on the assumption that they have needs but do not have any resources, competence, or views? Why assume that the solutions must be worked out for these people, and that they cannot figure things out for themselves? No wonder many conventional nutrition programs have little impact after the agents and the subsidies are gone. People don't like to implement ideas formulated by others. Plans become the people's own---owned by them--only when they work out the plans themselves. When plans are generated by the people who are to act them out, so that the goals and the motivations are wholly internalized, implementation becomes much less problematic.

People who are malnourished lack the power to manage their life situations adequately. Thus at least some aspects of nutrition education should help people to understand why they do not eat well, and support them in making their own analyses about what to do about it.

NOTE

Zeitlin, M., and M. Mansour *Positive deviance in child nutrition: With emphasis on psychosocial and behavioral aspects and implications for development*. Tufts University School of Nutrition, 1986, 176 pp,

LITERATURE CITED

- 1 Disorders in eating start at an early age. *Sunday Star-Bulletin and Advertiser* (Honolulu), May 3, 1987, p. J-7.
- 2 Weiss, S.R. Obesity: Pathogenesis, consequences, and approaches to treatment. In *The psychiatric clinics of North America*. F.E.F. Larocca, ed, vol. 7, 1984, pp. 307-19.
- 3 Kent, C. *The political economy of hunger: The silent holocaust*. New York: Praeger, 1984, 176 pp.

- 4 Rody, N. Things go better with coconuts: Program strategies in Micronesia. *Journal of Nutrition Education* 10:19-22, 1978.
- 5 Berg, A. Fear of trying. *Journal of The American Dietetic Association* 68:311-15, 1976.
- 6 IUNS workshop. Who is ignorant? Re-thinking food and nutrition education under changing socio-economic conditions. *IFDA Dossier* 25:31-40, 1981.
- 7 Eide, W.B. The nutrition educator's role in access to food--From individual orientation to social orientation. *Journal of Nutrition Education* 14:14-17, 1982.
- 8 Schuftan, C. Ethics, ideology, and nutrition, *Food Policy* 7:159-64, 1982.
- 9 Mosio, M., and W.B. Eide. Towards another nutrition education *IFDA Dossier* 40:63-69, 1984.
- 10 Gussow, J.D., and I. Contento. Nutrition education in a changing world: A conceptualization and selective review. *World Review of Nutrition and Dietetics* 44:1-56, 1984.
- 11 Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press, 1970, 186 pp.
- 12 Freire, P., and D. Macedo. *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1987, 184 pp.
- 13 Drummond, T. Rethinking nutrition education. In *Teaching nutrition education in developing countries or the joys of eating dark green leaves*. K.W. Shack, ed. Santa Barbara, CA: Meals for Millions Foundation, 1977, pp. 2-11.
- 14 Praun, A. Nutrition education: Development or alienation? *Human Nutrition: Applied Nutrition* 36A:28-34, 1982.
- 15 Hilsum, L. Nutrition education and social change: A women's movement in the Dominican Republic. In *Practicing health for all*. D. Morley, J.E. Rohde, and C. Williams, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 114--32.