

# Empowering Settings in Nicaragua: Hearing Some of the Voices of Nicaraguan Youth

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**Abstract.** With high rates of poverty and a remarkably young population, Nicaragua is a nation in which the challenges of the future lie in the empowerment of its youth. The role of empowering settings in the development of individual empowerment is well-documented, yet most of this research has been conducted in Western, developed nations. A total of 29 Nicaraguan youth were interviewed to gather information about their aspirations and the settings in which they interact. Participants identified three key community settings and several resource assets and deficits which contribute to the empowerment capacity of these settings. These themes are compared to existing models of empowering settings and adolescent empowerment programs revealing some applicability of these theories.

## 1. Introduction (Describe your idea)

Empowerment is an often-used concept with many definitions. Empowered individuals are described in the literature as having increased access to resources, improved goal achievement, control over the narrative of individual and communal life, and decreased marginalization [1,2,3,4]. Empowerment outcomes can be expressed at multiple levels (i.e. psychological, organizational, and community), vary across contexts, and may mean different things to different people [3,5,6].

A number of recent studies have explored the qualities of settings that generate empowerment. Empowering settings are environments in which empowering processes take place and empowering outcomes are achieved among members of the setting [4]. Several researchers have presented characteristics of empowering settings [4,7], but most of these have been developed in a Western context. This study uses qualitative data to explore the nature of empowering settings in a different culture. Data was obtained in cooperation with Trees for Life, an international non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Wichita, KS, whose work includes helping small libraries in Nicaragua obtain books.

## 2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance (Describe how you developed your idea)

In March 2009, the student researcher traveled to rural Nicaragua. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Nicaragua in collaboration with Nicaraguan partners. Twenty-nine participants from one rural community were interviewed. The participants ranged in age from 11 to 24 with a median age of 16. Seventeen of the participants were female. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis. Table 1 displays a report of the data for each setting.

Table 1  
Themes from the Analysis

Setting	Interpersonal Resources	Material Resources	Aesthetic Resources
La Escuela	Good teachers (+) Student Involvement (+)	Computer Lab (+)	Beautiful, well-maintained building (+)
La Comunidad	Nice, happy people (+) Strong traditions (+)	New Sewer Project (+)	Dirty Streets (-) Disrepair of Tourist Attraction and Park (-)
La Biblioteca	Peer relationships (+)	Lack of Books (-) No computers (-) No activities (-)	Cracked paint (-) Holes in Ceiling (-) Broken Door (-)

Three settings were identified by the participants: La Escuela (a public high school), La Comunidad (the

town in general), and La Biblioteca (the municipal library). Participants identified several assets and liabilities present within each of these settings. These resources were coded as interpersonal, material, and aesthetic. Table 2 compares these themes to the existing models.

Based on these results, the three settings explored in this analysis emerged with varying degrees of empowerment capacity. La Escuela is an example of a highly empowering setting. Participants reported high availability of all three types of resources and few deficits. Aspirations of the participants were centered around this educational environment and success in school was seen as critical for the ultimate goal of becoming “a professional.” La Comunidad was determined to be a moderately empowering setting. Participants readily identified key assets within the community and cited relational resources and a sense of improvement. However, many deficits were mentioned by the participants and paths to adolescent involvement in bringing change to the community were unclear. Finally, La Biblioteca was seen as a minimally empowering setting. While a relational atmosphere existed, the lack of material resources (i.e. books, computers) and the depressed aesthetics of the location appeared to minimize the possible impact of the library as an empowering setting for youth. Participants clearly expressed the need for this setting to improve and connected this to their future aspirations for success.

As demonstrated in Table 2, the results fit well within Maton’s model of empowering settings [4] as the key characteristics are more actively visible in settings with increased empowerment capacity. This suggests that Maton’s model may have cross-cultural applicability. A deeper exploration of how adolescent and adult roles differ between cultures is needed, in addition to key characteristics of relational environments among non-Western societies.

### 3. Conclusions

As demonstrated, the ability of settings to generate empowerment among members can be enhanced or limited by the amount and type of resources available in each setting. Youth in Nicaragua are often exposed to settings which may be under-resourced. Using existing models, future work can focus on building the capacity of these settings to provide increased opportunity for youth to be empowered and take steps toward a better future.

Table 2  
Applying Maton’s Characteristics of Empowering Settings

Characteristics	Setting Characteristics
Group-based beliefs	La Escuela: Shared Vision, Salient Goals (“become a professional”) La Biblioteca: Little shared vision.
Relational Environment	La Escuela and La Biblioteca: Caring peer and adult relationships, sense of community
Core activities	La Escuela: Quality instruction, meaningful activities La Biblioteca: Frustrated activities due to lack of resources
Opportunity Role Structure	La Escuela: Student Involvement La Biblioteca: Opportunities unclear.

Maton (2008)

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