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# Feminist Classrooms in Practice

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## Introduction

Feminist pedagogy is a theory about teaching that can be used in different ways on all levels of education. The foundations of feminist pedagogy are built upon the core ideas that may be traced back to the emergence of critical pedagogy, which was a product of dissatisfaction with the relationship between schools and structural and cultural inequalities. These concerns guided progressive educators, such as Paulo Freire, in the late 1960s and early 1970s to criticise traditional pedagogies because they are authoritarian, limit the learner to a passive role in the teaching and learning process, and fail to produce a type of political knowledge that results in social action (i.e. that exposes and challenges the (re)production of oppressive (raced, classed, gendered etc.) relationships), as Audrey Thompson and Andrew Gitlin explain (1995, p. 125). The purpose of critical pedagogy was thus to alter the school's role in reproducing these relations by attempting to establish a more egalitarian relationship amongst pedagogical participants and enabling those typically silenced by schooling to become active and critical subjects. The transformative power of critical pedagogy can be seen in producing such political knowledge that allows for self-reflexivity of critical subjects' own position, which is of their alienation, along with the progress toward liberation (ibid.). This critical element is also an integral part of feminist pedagogy.

The nature of the content or which topics are deemed crucial is an important aspect of feminist pedagogy, as are its goals, materials and methods used. This paper, however, focuses primarily on the teaching

and learning process itself, touching on issues regarding feminist classrooms. First, the transformative power of feminist pedagogy is discussed, as well as the concepts of empowerment, community and hierarchy. Then the focus shifts to questions surrounding feminist pedagogy in practice. Examples of feminist classrooms and practices on different educational levels are given. In the conclusion, some broader concerns regarding the vision of education, the role of the teachers, and feminist praxis underline the importance of feminist pedagogy and its inclusion in teacher training programmes.

### **What is Feminist Pedagogy?**

Feminist pedagogy is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that guides our choice of classroom practices, specifically by providing criteria to evaluate different educational strategies in terms of the desired course goals and outcomes (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 6). What are some of those evaluative criteria? One of the most important is the extent to which a community of learners is empowered to act responsibly toward the subject matter and each other, as Carolyn Shrewsbury points out. Even more crucial is the application of this knowledge and awareness to social action in everyday life (*ibid.*).

Feminist pedagogy is centred around the notion that all social relations, and thus all societal institutions and structures, are gendered. It is therefore hardly surprising that its key concerns are gender justice and imagining different ways to deal with and ultimately overcome oppressions (*ibid.*, p. 7). Teaching and learning, as envisioned by feminist pedagogy, should challenge widely and uncritically accepted knowledge on which traditional theories are based on (Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997). Feminist pedagogy calls for a change. In this sense, it is a transformative pedagogy. Its transformative component is multilayered and the drive for change constitutes different aspects of feminist pedagogy, for example:

- its vision: What is education? Even more importantly – what it could be (and is often not)? (see Shrewsbury, 1987);
- its learning: Is gaining new knowledge truly enough? Or is it just as important to shift our thinking in new directions? (see Lawrence, 2016);
- its methods: In which terms do we understand the structure of the classroom? Is there a divide between teachers and students or are they all class participants? How does the change in understanding of this relationship affect the teaching methods and practices used in the classroom?;

- its materials: What are acceptable learning materials? Is literature the only valid learning source? How can personal interpretations and experiences of social phenomena enrich teaching and learning environments? and;
- its goals: Is learning enough or is there a need to apply the acquired knowledge in day-to-day life via social action?

The transformative power of feminist pedagogy is seen in the efforts to create teaching and learning experiences that aim to overthrow the status quo, by asking alternative questions regarding human experience. Feminist pedagogy thus requires a major shift in perspective (Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997). “As feminist teachers attempt to transform educational institutions, they are restructuring their classrooms with the guidance of feminist principles,” as Linda Forrest and Freda Rosenberg note (*ibid.*, p. 183). They recognise six broad categories of feminist commitment to educational transformation in their literature review:

- integrating educational dichotomies;
- rethinking power and authority;
- creating communal classrooms;
- respecting diversity;
- integrating the knowledge of personal experience; and
- incorporating social action (*ibid.*, p. 184).

Keeping all that in mind, one of the main goals of feminist pedagogy, characterised by engaged teaching and learning, is to create the classroom as a liberatory environment in which, as Shrewsbury (1987, p. 6) notes, “we, teacher–student and student–teacher, act as subjects, not objects”. This goes hand in hand with another tenet of feminist pedagogy: resistance to hierarchical structures. In the learning environment, the teacher and students work against the creation of a hierarchy of authority. One way to resist hierarchy is by empowering students to deliver their own content and influence the design of the class (Lawrence, 2016). The goal of such classrooms is that all members learn to respect each other’s differences by building on the participants’ experiences in a participatory, democratic process in which at least some power is shared (Shrewsbury, 1987, pp. 6–7). This environment is active, not passive, it enables students to take risks and supports values of working together as well as achieving both shared and individual goals. It promotes the application of critical thinking as a reflective process grounded in experiences, while respecting and working with others (*ibid.*, p. 7). Feminist pedagogy strives to create a community “where there is both autonomy of self and mutuality

with others that is congruent with the developmental needs of both women and men” (ibid., p. 10). In such a community, the personal can be recognised as political since it nurtures a need and sparks a desire to move learning beyond the classroom. It creates a circular motion, theory can be applied to action and experiences that are a result of social action can likewise inform theory, which may yet again lead to new action (ibid., p. 11). One of feminist pedagogy’s goals is thus to create a community that engages in feminist praxis.

Another important concept in feminist pedagogy is empowerment. Although power is a concept usually tied to critical reflections of domination in feminist theory, empowerment expresses a concept of power as a capacity and potential rather than as domination. When power is defined as a capability, the goal is to increase the power of all actors, not to limit the power of some (ibid., p. 8). In feminist pedagogy, there is a tendency to eradicate points of power and disperse the power among the classroom. Still, this does not mean that the teacher’s authority is dissolved, as Shrewsbury notes (ibid., p. 9). His or her position is more reconceptualised as a source of power by way of creative energy, not domination. As Jennifer Gore (1993, p. 79) would argue, the feminist teacher becomes more of an authority with the students than an authority over the students, that is, less didactic and more collaborative since knowledge is shared rather than imparted (Bignell, 1996, p. 316). Feminist classrooms are therefore interactive, encourage a de-centred approach to teaching and the learning process and especially focus on the critical assessment of differences (McKenna, 1996). This approach helps validate the experiences of all students, especially women, since feminist pedagogy is based on the perspective that educational environments have traditionally been sites of patriarchal power that have neglected the experiences and perspectives of women (Freeman & Jones, 1980; see also Bignell, 1996, p. 316).

### *Feminist Pedagogy and its Critiques*

One of the biggest challenges in outlining feminist pedagogy is to resist a single, dominant, institutionalised narrative, as Emilie Lawrence (2016) describes. Rather than defining feminist pedagogy as a single, fixed list of characteristics, we should allow for the possibility of different feminist pedagogies, fragmented and continually developing practices that invite teachers and students to contribute to their evolution (ibid.).

Feminist pedagogy is therefore self-reflexive and critical of its own theories. Reflexivity is in fact built into the tenets of feminist thought, meaning the critiques and questions are better understood as a means of development. Challenges to feminist pedagogy include queries about:

- resisting hierarchical relations: Is resisting hierarchy even possible in situations where one party is paid to be assessing another? How can equality be achieved in the classroom and in student–teacher relations?;
- using experiences as a learning source: Who has a voice and is able to speak out? Are all voices equally present? Which aspects of experience are hushed by the dominant voices of the classroom? How can students and teachers incorporate their private experiences into their professional relationship? and;
- transformative learning: How can ways of thinking change in an institutionalised learning environment? What are the possibilities for a change in the ways of thinking? Can this transformation be viewed in negative terms? (ibid.)

### **Feminist Pedagogy in Practice**

Before providing some examples of teaching and learning as conceptualised by feminist pedagogy, let us turn our attention to the content that fits into feminist pedagogy by meeting the broadest criteria of the following basic feminist principles. Teaching feminism addresses issues like: sexism, gender dynamics, power relations, structural inequalities, intersecting differences, hierarchy, patriarchy, gender-based violence, homophobia, transphobia, sex education, gender stereotypes, gender representations in media and popular culture and many more. This list is incomplete and intentionally broadly set to cover different social arenas. Just how much feminism has to give in regard to a critical reflection of society as a whole may be inferred from the extensive list of feminist interventions in a single social institution, the school. Focusing on the educative process, feminism reflects the issues of gender inequality in education such as gender stereotypes, school-related gender-based violence, the feminisation of teaching, the masculinisation of tertiary education, gender and achievement, gender and dropout, gender segregation in educational choices, gender-specific learning styles, gendered curriculum, gender-specific disciplinary practices, gender-specific pedagogical approaches and methods of teaching etc. Again, the list is not complete.

However, the purpose of feminist pedagogy is not to teach feminism by focusing solely on issues regarding gender, but to incorporate basic feminist principles and values (for example those of solidarity, empowerment, cooperation and justice) and feminist ethics, based on the importance of personal experience, context and nurturing relationships (see Kavka, 2007) in the teaching and learning process. Thus, feminist pedagogy can be used in different ways within and across many disciplines. For

example, building a community by promoting group work follows feminist principles, yet at the same time is a very universal method for gaining new knowledge. Even in science classes, feminist pedagogy can offer new ways of comprehending knowledge and different starting points for learning and teaching science. Using elements of feminist pedagogy thus benefits student–teacher relations and classroom experiences, even where issues regarding gender are not specifically addressed. Examples of such feminist classrooms and practices are given in the following chapter.

### **Feminist Classrooms**

Feminist classrooms are classrooms in which elements of feminist pedagogy exist in the teaching and learning process. This may be classrooms that teach (about) feminism<sup>1</sup> as well as classrooms where any other subject is being taught, as long as they are liberatory environments, following the basic principles already outlined. In the following sections, the importance of feminist pedagogy is highlighted for different levels of education: preschool education, primary level and secondary level.

#### *A Word on Method*

Some of the practices presented were acquired during the literature review, but the majority of feminist classroom practices discussed on the primary and secondary levels were procured during a semi-structured interview with a teacher in training. Nina<sup>2</sup> is a 26-year-old student finishing an MA in ELT (English Language Teaching), with 2 years' experience working in different educational settings teaching students who attend the third and fifth grades of primary school, as well as secondary school students. She meets with primary school children weekly in a classroom setting and teaches a few groups of students on the secondary level, but chiefly works with secondary school students individually in a classroom setting. She defines herself as both a feminist and a teacher. She is hesitant to call herself a "feminist teacher" as she believes she does not have the sufficient insight into feminist pedagogy. However, she is a feminist and her "*teaching stems from who /she is/ as a person*", meaning that it is influenced by her beliefs, values and norms. Even though her goal is not to actively create feminist classrooms, the end result is often a feminist teaching and learning situation since her methods and approach are often rooted

1 These are mostly found on the tertiary level and include Gender Studies and Women's Studies, for example. However, teaching feminism (and especially teaching about feminism) is not necessarily limited to universities, it can also be (and often is) incorporated into courses in primary and secondary schools – for instance, Sociology, History, Philosophy, Literature and Art.

2 The name is a pseudonym.

in feminist pedagogy principles. The interview was planned and conducted as a qualitative research technique, via Zoom, to explore her thoughts, perspectives and, most importantly, experiences of teaching. The interview was then transcribed and parts of it are included in the sections below. It is clearly stated which of the examples shared come from the literature and which are Nina's experiences.

### *Preschool Education*

Feminist pedagogy holds the potential to greatly enrich early childhood education by providing an alternative outlook on children in the most intensive phase of their cognitive development. Feminist classrooms on the preschool level base their methods on gender-sensitive and feminist pedagogies. One of the usual starting points in such educational environments has to do with the constructions of gender. Activities include different ways of challenging children's preconceived notions of femininity and masculinity, gender stereotypes, traditional gender roles and gender relations. These may include role-play, learning about different occupations, offering a diverse range of toys and encouraging children to choose gender-atypical toys or even choosing not to give any specific cues to children so as not to risk influencing their choices or behaviour with the teacher's (often unconscious) preconceptions, instead providing the background, posing challenging questions<sup>3</sup> and ultimately letting them make their own decisions. Preschool may be critically assessed as a "system of gendering factors" (Karlson & Simonsson, 2011, p. 281) that shapes children's minds but it also has the potential to empower children by building on personal experience and offering alternative ways of teaching and learning. Kristina Andersson and Annica Gullberg (2012) describe a brilliant exploration of how two different epistemological perspectives on the same teaching and learning situation<sup>4</sup> generate different outlooks on which kind of science teaching competencies may be beneficial in preschool settings. In the first perspective, the central goal of science teaching is the development of a conceptual understanding. In this view, the purpose of science activities with younger children is to provide them with opportunities to practice a scientific way of thinking by using scientific concepts. The floating-sinking experiment was unsuccessful from this perspective of learning science. Children mostly did not acquire new concepts or misunderstood certain science concepts; the situation even enhanced a "misconception"

3 It is important that questions are posed in a way that is adjusted to children's current cognitive level, yet still challenges their line of thought.

4 In this case, it was a floating-sinking experiment in which the children throw different objects into the water and observe if they float or sink.

concerning density. Some children seemed to have acquired new concepts but in fact did not understand what they imply or how to use them correctly in scientific contexts.<sup>5</sup> The teacher, in this view, did not support the children's conceptual learning because she did not follow up on their conclusions or discuss them further or in any greater depth, she also did not introduce concepts in a scientifically correct way. One explanation may be that she did not fully understand the concept of density. Indeed, preschool teachers are required to teach science, yet often do not possess necessary knowledge, as research shows (see *ibid.*, pp. 277–278, for an extensive overview). They have insufficient subject matter knowledge, which limits them in answering children's questions about complex natural phenomena in a scientific way accessible to young children. Low levels of subject-specific knowledge also result in low self-confidence and reluctance to teach science. But Andersson and Gullberg propose that, instead of regarding teachers as the problem, it is worth ensuring that researchers e.g. "investigate what happens if the natural sciences per se and /that/ the view of the sciences are scrutinized" (*ibid.*, p. 278).<sup>6</sup> This becomes possible when using the second perspective, defined by a feminist approach, where the floating-sinking activity is investigated by focusing on whether it contributes to a feeling of participation in a scientific context for the children and, if so, what is the teacher doing to promote this inclusion. This view examines the potential held by preschool science activities in developing values and knowledge other than children's conceptual understanding. This perspective showed that the children's scientific proficiency benefited from the situation and that they had a positive experience with density, which was reinforced by the teacher. By using the experimental approach and having some freedom to experiment on their own outside of the teacher's structure, the children discovered that they possessed power over their own learning. The teacher had an important role in challenging and encouraging the children in learning science. These findings show

5 One girl used the word "experiment", but did so in a way that did not make sense.

6 The dominant view of scientific knowledge as value-neutral and context-independent is partly a consequence of the many technological and medical advances which have helped secure the natural sciences' status of authority in the twentieth century in Euro-Western societies (Keller & Longino, 1996, in Andersson & Gullberg, 2012, p. 278). This dominant view had been questioned, however, by feminist scholars like Donna Haraway (1991) and Sandra Harding (1986), who had argued that the natural sciences are culturally situated and hierarchically organised. Feminist science education researchers emphasise the importance of cultural aspects of learning. They are curious about which knowledge counts as scientific and why, while stressing the importance of active reflection and informed and engaged criticism of: the social construction of science; the impact science has on society; and of the power dimensions in the scientific community (Hildebrand, 2001, in Andersson & Gullberg, 2012, p. 278).



that when preschool teachers engage children in scientific activities, it is not just the subject matter knowledge that counts, other competencies are equally important. These other competencies include paying attention to and building on children's previous experiences; capturing unexpected things that happen on site; asking challenging questions that stimulate further inquiries and creating a "situated presence" or giving the space to the children and simply listening to their explanations (ibid.). All of these situations create teaching and learning moments in feminist classrooms.

### *Primary and Secondary Education*

Feminist classrooms are active classrooms that engage students in group work activities and empower them to take control of their knowledge by enriching classroom discussions with ideas and information from the outside world. As an English teacher, Nina stresses that language teaching and learning is a specific environment where the ultimate goal is to get the children to talk and converse with each other. The best way of encouraging students, especially teenagers from the third triad of primary school upwards, to talk is by asking them questions about themselves, focusing on their personal experiences.

Each topic we cover, you have to ask for their opinions, what they have done in their lives that makes them think so. Focus on their lived experiences and not on the articles that are presented in textbooks.

One of Nina's goals is to promote civil discourse, creating situations in which the children work as a unit. Her classrooms are always open to group discussions, which she believes are one of the best teaching and learning situations for helping to improve students' critical thinking, a skill that is important in educational settings as well as in other areas of life. She discovered that essay writing is easier for the students when the topic they have to write about has previously been covered in a way that includes their own experiences. Drawing from experience therefore benefits students as it holds the potential to enrich the learning material, process and outcomes, but it is also a positive teaching practice that can enhance the work of teachers. Nina talks about her personal experience and how it has shaped her teaching.

*When students take tests, they sometimes come up with answers that you did not expect, but that grammatically work. I like to bring attention to those and go 'this is what I had in mind, a student /.../ wrote down this, which works perfectly here. Why does it work? What made them think of that?' /.../ This is /.../ because of my personal experience, when I didn't know how to spell baggage in high school, so I*

*wrote down carry-on and my professor refused to give me a point because it was not a word we had covered in class.*

The beginning of every lesson with her secondary school students is reserved for something Nina calls “life update”. This is an activity that works well with small groups in which students are given a chance to tell everyone what they did over the week.<sup>7</sup> This opens up a discussion in which all students participate, mostly by asking questions. This activity helps on three levels:

- It builds a better classroom climate. This is especially true if the children had a test before. “Life update” helps break the tension and enables the students to relax or, as Nina explains, “to be humans before they have to be students again”. It also helps because it allows the students and teacher to come to know each other better. It gives some cues about the personal lives of the students that might have an impact on their current mental state. These cues are important to the teacher so that he/she knows how to structure the class (for example, the teacher may behave differently if they know that a student’s family member has just died).
- It helps with student–student relations: they get to know each other better by asking simple questions about the everyday life of their peers and are hence more open to participating in other classroom discussions, even those that cover more serious or controversial topics on a deeper level.
- It helps with student–teacher relations: students believe that the teacher is genuinely interested in their experience which in turn makes them likelier to share.

Nina in this context says that the students: “*stop seeing me as an authority and start seeing me as a peer*”. We would argue though, in line with Shrewsbury (1987), that this activity does not undermine the teacher’s authority, but moves the conception of power as domination to power as a creative energy. It is therefore an empowering activity that “provides a

7 While “life update” has some upsides, which will be discussed, one possible concern entails different levels of student willingness to participate in such an activity. Not all students automatically want to share their everyday lives with others. Nina explains that, as an English teacher, she likes to use it nonetheless since the main goal of this activity is to develop speaking and listening skills. *“I accept answers such as ‘Yesterday I took a long nap’ or ‘Nothing special, really’. I don’t force students to participate if they don’t want to, but I encourage them and invite them to.”* Respecting the students’ choice to share or not to share something is an important part of feminist pedagogy as it builds better student–teacher relations based on trust and mutual respect. Not forcing to share also helps create an environment where students feel safe and are in turn perhaps more likely to speak up in the future.

model of interrelationships that can be incorporated into a developing vision of a world in which hierarchical oppressive relationships are exchanged for autonomy within a community that celebrates difference” (ibid., p. 9). Empowering students by resisting hierarchical in-class relations and building a community is something that can be seen in another practice Nina says she employs, that has to do with making and correcting the mistakes. She often makes grammatical mistakes while teaching students in fifth grade and those attending secondary school. These mistakes are generally intentional and used as potential moments where power relations in the classroom could be shifted. At the start of each school year, she tells the students to let her (and everyone else in the class) know that she has made a mistake if they notice one – which they do, once they become a little more familiar and comfortable in class. This is a great example of utilising the notion of power as a capability as it creates a dialectical relationship between the teacher and students. Or, in Nina’s words:

*Because if I’m the one correcting their mistakes, I also want them to feel in charge of their knowledge when they spot the mistakes I make, right? .../ We’re all here to learn.*

When students make mistakes, she tries not to correct them too often or aggressively. If somebody persistently makes the same mistake, she uses it as a teaching moment for the entire class to work on and to correct collectively. Another way she resists the hierarchical structure of the teacher–student relationship is by rarely providing the solution to problems: “*I don’t want them to see me as a source of knowledge /.../, but a facilitator*”. She has noticed that it is easier for students to internalise the rules and they also self-correct more efficiently provided that she only manages the discussion instead of leading it. When children have questions, she does not answer them immediately, instead pausing and letting them come to their own conclusions. She encourages peer-to-peer teaching and helps them if they struggle. She believes that the key to building a better classroom climate is to apologise to the students if the situation calls for it. These are all in-class micro practices found in feminist classrooms that work together to deconstruct hierarchical relations.

Feminist classrooms make a point to notice the specific contexts of the teaching and learning process, but also more generally to try to contextualise different concepts and phenomena in specific social, cultural, political and economic spheres. Nina explains how, especially with her secondary school students, she sometimes brings up her genuine mistakes that she did not notice at the time, in the following lesson. They then discuss the reasons for those mistakes:

We also talk about why we make those mistakes, so what is the specific cultural environment in Slovenia that results in us making such mistakes. I like to classify the mistakes we make in two groups: this is something that native speakers do as well, and this happens because of transfer, because of the specifics of our language.

Nina's teaching is also shaped by the structure of the classrooms. The basic principles of feminist pedagogy are present in all her classrooms, but the teaching methods are adjusted to the specific group of students. She mostly focuses on the students' age when she talks about different teaching and learning situations. Discovering mistakes and advanced discussions are mostly reserved for older students because cognitively and language-wise they are capable of participating in such activities. That does not mean that classrooms with younger students are not active classrooms nurturing social agency. Nina describes a project with students from the third grade, where they dedicated a week to talking about empathy. Her goal was to try out some activities that English teachers do not usually participate in, centred around the notion of empathy and promoting a better classroom climate. She picked a children's book on the said topic and decided to use a method of language teaching with non-verbal activities since children so young are still not able to have a discussion about read material.

*I set up a story time nook and had them sit on the pillows, be very relaxed, have this good classroom atmosphere and I read them a book that was difficult for them language-wise /.../ but the content was based around the concept of empathy and was more relatable, as it followed a simple structure, familiar to children. We also stopped and talked about it in between pages. /.../ After the story was over, they started drawing /.../ they had complete freedom, they just had to include something from the book or something that reminded them of the book. I expected them to start talking and they did, they started talking about a different language they can use when talking about somebody and when talking to them /.../ and why it is nice to use some words and not nice to use others /.../. They got into disagreements about whether specific words are nice or not and held a conversation on a deep level, cognitively pretty advanced for third-graders. They started talking about why it is important to be nice. The whole concept of empathy really came out during that lesson.*

This activity also helped with managing the behavioural problems of some students in the class, especially three boys, who are very rowdy and disruptive.

*Their behaviour during that lesson was completely different from how they usually behave. I think it is because of the classroom climate, the other students really egged*

*them on. /.../ When the classmates started borrowing rulers or pencils and sharing with each other, the three boys started offering their stuff as well, which is something they had never done before. /.../*

Another positive outcome of the empathy lesson and one important in the context of feminist pedagogy involves the use of non-verbal activities, which is a good way of teaching and learning concepts, as Nina explains.

*Children lack the vocabulary to really get into the concept of empathy, but they can talk about how it is important to be nice to people, to understand where they come from. They don't have the words, but they have lived experience. Sometimes, it is beneficial to ignore the words and let them express their lived experiences as they want to – could be through drawing, dancing, other language ... You need to rely and lean on the lived experience of the children.*

This ties into what feminist pedagogy can contribute to the teaching and learning process in the same way as was discussed in the case of the floating-sinking experiment of Swedish preschool children. Classrooms should be more than just places where conceptual understanding is being developed, focusing instead on a range of different competencies and building new knowledge from them. This is what Nina discovered when evaluating the lesson on empathy.

*If we look from a language-learning perspective, it was the worst lesson I have ever had. /.../ But if we look at it from another point of view, the kind of climate it created /.../ and the following lessons ... The three boys who hate English and are usually not engaged or disrupt the others – they were calm, they were great, they were relaxed. Their interest in English increased. /.../ The effect it had on their continued success as a group and as individuals made that lesson one of the best we had.*

Travis Bristol (2015, p. 62) describes the case of disengaged and underachieving boys and their grade-8 teacher. He uses the term “gender-relevant pedagogy”, but essentially depicts a situation that may be seen as an example of feminist pedagogy in practice. The boys were uninterested in the content the teacher was attempting to deliver and were talking incessantly about video games. Bristol suggested that she could try to re-engage them through their interest in video games. Instead of prohibiting the boys from talking about their interest from outside the classroom, he suggested including the complexity of video games in the content. This method worked and underscores the point that feminist pedagogy practices (i.e. building on personal experiences and interests) can help when students are not engaged or struggling academically. Nina says that in her

experience the best way of connecting to the personal interests of children is to let them take on the teaching role.

*If I want to engage a student who only cares about football, I would not bring in an article about football. But I would ask him questions about football, make him be the teacher, make him tell me things.*

As we can see, the active engagement of students is an important element of feminist classrooms. Once the students are engaged, it is up to the teacher in which direction to go. Nina talks about the importance of group discussions in shifting the thinking in new directions. New ways of thinking can also have a significant role in the context of social agency.

*I think that learning doesn't finish in the classroom, you have to take ... both ... the actions you learn in the classroom out there and you have to bring the outside into the classroom. It goes both ways.*

Moving learning beyond the classroom creates a praxis, defined by the circular motion of mutually informing theory and action that Shrewsbury (1987) mentions in the context of creating a learning and teaching community, where the personal can be recognised as political.

## **Conclusion**

If equity and equality are among the main goals of educational environments, then gender is a topic that must be addressed, constantly and in different ways. Feminist pedagogy offers a good starting point for such discussions as it facilitates the use of positive practices that create active, open and communal feminist classrooms which integrate educational dichotomies, rethink concepts of power and authority, respect diversity, build on personal experience, and demand social action.

Pedagogy must be understood as potentially reproducing power relations, as David Lusted points out, noting the contradictions in its content, which call for change, and its form, which reproduce the existing relations. To connect the learning with actual change in consciousness, namely – to transform theory into practice – requires a constellation of open-ended and specific pedagogies sensitive to context and difference, addressed to the complexity of experience constituting any student's or group's "gendered, raced, classed, aged and discrete biographical social and historical identity" (Lusted, 1986, p. 10). From the teachers' perspective, this means that their role in feminist classrooms is to help students find the language for the different experiences they bring in with them, to understand the wider social, cultural and political context of their

individual positions and to facilitate social action. All of this is contingent on a broader understanding of what education is and should be. For Nina:

*.../ education is not something that happens in the classroom – in the classroom you sort of things that you learn elsewhere and that you bring in with you from the outside. The role of the teacher is to guide the students through this process, help them in becoming self-sufficient and capable of using the knowledge for what they need, critically assess which sources to trust, expand their ways of thinking about the world... Make them into well-rounded people and not just providing knowledge.*

Teachers have the means to create a platform for the students from which they can grow as individuals and as a community, providing a framework in which to organise, understand and contextualise personal experiences. This is why introducing feminist pedagogy into teacher training programmes is especially important. Of course, we should not minimise the effect of the many restrictions, regulations and curriculum constraints, which often leave teachers unable to freely choose what and even how to teach. But empowering future generations of teachers with knowledge about the positive effects of liberatory pedagogies means they will be more likely to expand their teaching methods and actively include at least some feminist pedagogy elements in their teaching. Still, it is not just about informing them with materials on this content or theoretically introducing the topic, it is also about practice. This means taking it one step further and actually consciously using feminist pedagogy in the same teaching process that teachers-to-be participate in. As Lyn Robertson (1994) notes, preparing teachers who have learned to use feminist pedagogies is one way of breaking the cycle of male-dominated, hierarchical pedagogies, especially given that teachers tend to teach as they themselves were taught (Arends in Robertson, 1994, p. 11). It is not fruitful or even sensible to draw conclusions based on one example only, but if Nina's directions are any indication of the general state of the current teaching practices, then feminist classrooms are not too far from reality for the future generations.

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