

Feminist pedagogy in Higher Education - Implications for Learning and Teaching in Early Childhood Education Teacher Training

Hannah Baynham

London Metropolitan University

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Introduction

Early Years education (0-5yrs) is a profession dominated by female practitioners. According to the Nutbrown review, 98% of early years staff are female, this is including both early years teachers as well as childminders (Nutbrown 2011). As a female led occupation, it is natural to think female empowerment and equality is strongly embedded in practice. Unfortunately, both historically and currently this is not the case (Ziv 2015). A need for early years education arose out of mothers leaving the home to join the workforce, yet feminisms have largely ignored the service and dedication early years educators provide (Goldstein 1993). Biology has clearly linked women and children, but when considering early childhood educators as partners to feminist ideals, practitioners are undervalued in both pay and status (Mohandas 2020).

This paper will argue that educators should be crusaders for feminist dialogue, not only in our work with each other but the children of the next generation. It is this link and use of critical pedagogies which enables education for social justice, and provides opportunities for more voices to participate in the system of education, whether in early years, or in HE. In this paper I hope to uncover the values of feminist pedagogies, explore ways it is used in the HE classroom and discuss how it can influence and transform early childhood teacher education in a way that will empower both future teachers and the children they work with.

Defining Feminist Pedagogy

In the same way it is challenging to find just one definition of feminism due to the variety of interpretations and focuses feminisms have to offer, it is similarly hard to find a unified definition of feminist pedagogy. It is with this in mind that I have chosen to use the plural feminist pedagogies in this paper which is in line with feminist thinking (McCusker 2017). After reading a variety of definitions, the definition put forth by Shrewsbury could be used as a framework in which to build understanding:

'Feminist pedagogy is a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies and techniques in terms of the desired course goals or outcomes' (Shrewsbury 1993 pg. 8).

Webb (2002) expands on this by describing how feminist pedagogies turn away from what is considered traditional masculine rationality which places an emphasis on efficiency and objectivity in learning, to highlight alternative feminist views and principals. Feminist pedagogies are both a strategy in learning and teaching as well as a value system, which promotes equality in not only gender, but race, class and sexuality.

Lawrence (2016 online) identifies three key common tenets in feminist pedagogies: *“Resisting Hierarchy, Using experience as resource, and Transformative Learning.”* I will use these tenets to help guide and examine the connection between feminist pedagogies and learning theories and the potential benefits to early years education programmes.

Resisting hierarchy- examining the relationship between teacher and student

Feminist pedagogies like critical pedagogy works to remove the hierarchical system of the teacher passing on knowledge to the student, and aims to create a dialogue in which learning is co-constructed:

“The teacher is no longer merely the- one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn being taught also teach” (Freire 2005 pg. 80).

Through the feminists’ lens, challenging this hierarchy goes beyond recognising the traditional teacher’s position of power, by understanding this power upholds these systems which silence and objectify women (McCusker 2017). Although coming from a tradition of critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogies go further by recognising the patriarchal gender privilege of societal structures (Shrewsbury 1997).

How do feminist pedagogies work to resist hierarchy in the classroom? The goal is to recognise that deep learning happens when learning is co-constructed. As argued in critical pedagogy, students and teachers learn together to take away the notion of knowledge as power that is transferred from teacher to student, by creating dialogic, active classrooms where all voices are heard and valued (Mei-Hui 2014, Crawford et al 2017). In many classrooms which practise feminist pedagogies the students democratically decide the curriculum, as well as the delivery (Lawrence 2016, Vivakaran et al 2017, McCusker 2017, and Mei-Hui 2014). Students and teachers become a community of learners, and are encouraged to express and use their personal experiences to construct understanding (Ziv 2015). Power is negotiated and shared within the feminist classroom but it is important to understand what is meant by power. Foucault saw power as action and not as something that can be held by some, but rather moves freely and exists in potential (Foucault in Ziv 2015). By seeing power as energy that can be transferred and shared rather than used to dominate or oppress, the feminist classroom looks to reclaim the idea of power as connection (Ziv 2015).

Teaching using feminist pedagogies requires humility and awareness. It is a reflective process which encourages the teacher to consider their own position and the potential learning they also wish to engage in (Ziv 2015). In the feminist classroom the teacher is responsible for challenging hierarchy and potential gender inequality issues within the learning environment. Teachers work to moderate and facilitate learning rather than the traditional way of ‘banking’ knowledge (Freire 2005).

Challenging a hierarchy which has been well established and practised in education not only in HE, but throughout a student's lifelong journey of learning cannot happen without critical analysis. Students often find feminist pedagogies challenging. Students who have not experienced having ownership and sharing power in the classroom struggle with this initially (McCusker 2017). Change can sometimes be met with resistance, but when it comes to resisting hierarchy in feminist pedagogies continuous reflection, critique and evaluation is needed to ensure power is used as energy rather than domination.

Learning involves listening - Using experience as a resource

Feminist pedagogies acknowledge experiences as a resource. In feminist pedagogies challenging hierarchy recognises individual experiences and the voices of both teachers and students (Ziv 2015). Feminist pedagogies acknowledge that in traditional systems it is mostly the instructors or the authoritative figure's voice that is heard, and students are deprived of a critical and fundamental way of knowing (Webb et al 2002). The feminist classroom does not rely strictly on the academic 'voice' or resources but rather hopes to include participants' own experiences as 'learning materials' (Lawrence 2016). In recognising that not all voices are heard in academia, feminist pedagogies place value in listening and learning from experiences and providing a safe space in which to do so (Lawrence 2016, Schacht 2000, Aneja 2017, Webb et al 2002). When considering and valuing diverse experiences as learning tools, there is a possibility for creating a rich environment in which the participants can experience transformative learning. In order to ensure that experiences are shared and learned from it is important to create trust and an environment that feels safe, in which one can be open and express ideas (Powel et al 2009).

Feminist pedagogies encourage active participation in learning. Students are motivated to see themselves as developers of knowledge, not just passive consumers (Vivakaran et al 2017). The idea of 'voice' as a unique expression of either an individual or group is an important concept for students to understand (Ziv 2015). Students often do not realise how they have been silenced in previous education or society and coming to terms with this can often be an uncomfortable struggle. Students in feminist classrooms are encouraged to use tools of reflection such as journals, blogs and online learning spaces to explore and express ideas and allow for personal connection to theory (Aneja 2017, Vivakaran et al 2017). The importance of language is key in student learning as it plays a significant role in the construction of meaning (Ziv 2015). In my research for this paper the idea of feminism being a 'bad word' and one that could scare off students in participating or engaging was a common theme, illustrating the power of language and its social constructs. (Ziv 2015, Schacht 2000, Mac Naughton 1996, Laliberte et al 2017, hooks 1994, Burke et al 2013, McCusker 2017, LaMantia 2016). To me this shows the power language can have on students in their learning and the challenges that exist to overcome preconceptions and value systems. Learning from experiences that are unfamiliar or challenging to beliefs can be an uncomfortable process for students as they recognise their privilege or oppression (Ford 2012).

Transformative Learning - Education as transformation

The purpose of education in feminist pedagogies is more than just to learn skills or acquire knowledge, the aim is to challenge and shift thinking into new directions (Lawrence 2016). Feminist pedagogies like critical pedagogies recognise that existing systems oppress and silence voices, and therefore need to be challenged and transformed.

Education can be empowering, especially when education works to break down hierarchy and allows for voices to be heard. In order to be empowered, or work towards the empowerment of others one first needs to recognise and understand privilege (Ford 2012). Teaching and learning within feminist pedagogies should not only work to expose oppression, but also to highlight the courage it takes to stand against it, and the potential challenges in doing so. In this way agency is not the product at the end of the experience but the struggle itself (Lissovoy 2010). Feminist pedagogies embody the idea of social change and potential in humanity and encourages students to contribute and act towards a more equitable society (Webb et al 2002). Teachers also need to grow and feel empowered by the process of learning and teaching. Empowerment is not possible unless teachers are also willing to be vulnerable and to take risks while encouraging their students to do so (hooks 1994). This creates opportunity for deep learning, and is where the potential of transformation becomes possible.

Transformation in education can be a goal but cannot be forced or guaranteed. A critique of transformative education is that social change cannot happen on an individual level, but rather requires a societal change (MacNaughton 1996). Those who practise feminist pedagogies also cannot work in isolation and need to work with other progressive pedagogies, such as transformative pedagogies, and decolonising pedagogies and share the responsibility of promoting larger change within education (MacNaughton 1996). It is also important to note that not all change serves all interests, and being committed to equality often means putting the interest of groups that are marginalised, oppressed, or silenced first (MacNaughton 1996).

Implications for Early Years Teacher training

Early years teachers have long been considered 'carers, aunties or mothers' to children which continues to perpetuate stereotypes that influence societies views of teaching being considered a feminine occupation (Ziv 2105). This nurturing nature however when explored within compassionate pedagogy presents an image of a teacher who is both aware and conscious of social justice, but also flexible and dialogical (Taggart 2016). This compassionate role model shows children it is ok to be vulnerable and open while at the same time a powerful contributor to society (Taggart 2016).

When resisting hierarchy within early childhood education it is important to consider the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 2015). Such articles as; "*Article 2-non-discrimination, Article 3-best interest of the child, Article 12- respect for the views of the child, Article 13- freedom of expression, and Article 28- right to education*" are important pillars of understanding the role of the Early Years educator in advocating and listening to the child (UNICEF 2015 online). Empowering teachers in their learning to in turn empower children is fundamental to the transformation of education.

Using experience as a resource could also be to great advantage as every potential teacher has their own unique experience of childhood and education which has shaped the person they have become. In my teaching environment I often draw from students' expertise or interests, allowing for opportunities to discuss and share. For example, a parent may have valuable insight, and should be encouraged to voice their experience. I see my role as facilitating conversation, asking questions and having students share personal experiences as a rich resource in which knowledge is explored. By fostering an environment of respect and trust I in turn hope this will be replicated in the children's classrooms.

Conclusion

In my examination of these three tenets in feminist pedagogies, '*Resisting Hierarchy, Using experience as resource, and Transformative Learning*' (Lawrence 2016 online), I have considered how and why these three pillars should be incorporated in Early Years Education teacher training. Change in education needs to start where learning begins. The use of critical pedagogies such as feminist pedagogies in early years teacher training environments will not only support critical thinking, but provide a platform for social change. I believe this is key in our work with children as education is a powerful tool to fight injustice and to promote tolerance, inclusion and understanding. By allowing teachers in training to become active participants in learning and reflective practitioners we are empowering, respecting and encouraging transformative learning:

"To educate as the practise of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students" (hooks 1994 pg. 13).

Early years educators not only play a part in developing the foundation for learning in young children but also plant the seeds for future generations to come. Incorporating feminist pedagogies would encourage a shift away from a patriarchal system of power to a more holistic approach to learning and teaching and move towards education which changes social institutions, rather than upholds them.

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Biographical note

Hannah Baynham is a Montessori teacher educator who is passionate about issues of social justice, sustainability and the spiritual preparation involved in learning and teaching. Having worked in schools around the world, she has a unique view of the importance of fostering inclusive early years, and HE environments. She is the co-founder of Collaborative Montessori, a Montessori consultancy group, and was the Early Years Educator course leader, lecturer and group tutor at Montessori Centre International. She has just completed her MATHE at LMU, with her dissertation focusing on how Montessori values can be applied in working with adult learners in teacher education programmes. Hannah is inspired by the transformative nature of Montessori education which she sees as a gift to children everywhere.

Hannahjoy@collaborative-montessori.com