

Path to Empowerment

A Feminist Pedagogical Approach to Critical Civic Education in Early Childhood

Rebecca Stanwick

Abstract: School is often the first institutional experience where children learn to work collaboratively across social and cultural differences. However, civic education in the early childhood classroom often focuses on preparing students for future participation in society. By not allowing young children to critically engage with the reality of the world in which they live, many educators are creating a learning environment where children are not active in their knowledge making but rather are subjects that have knowledge placed upon them. Using a feminist pedagogical approach to critical civic education, this paper explores how defying the normative white patriarchal classroom structure can create a civic consciousness that empowers young people, especially girls, to active citizenship. With an emphasis on cooperative learning, student voice, critical engagement, and democratic education a feminist approach to critical civic education creates a learning environment that promotes collaboration rather than competition while fostering an activist spirit that transforms students into change-makers.

Introduction

Swalwell and Payne (2019) suggest that it is important to teach children about the unfairness and oppressive nature of the society in which they live. That “rather than introduce students to a set of civic strategies that presume formal structures and institutions will work as promised or in ways that are just, we must acknowledge that democratic traditions and institutions are deeply oppressive in a myriad ways” (Swalwell & Payne, 2019, p. 128). A feminist approach to civic education identifies and disrupts these oppressions and injustices making them central to civic education. In centering gender in their critical approach to education, feminist educators are disrupting the hidden curriculum of gender bias that perpetuates the systemic oppression of girls and women. By providing an examination of feminist pedagogy and critical civic education, this paper will help early childhood educators understand how defying the normative white patriarchal classroom structure can create a critical civic consciousness that empowers young girls and other historically marginalized people to be active citizens and change-makers.

A Note on the Definition of Feminism

This paper subscribes to a broad definition of feminism. It understands feminism as a theoretical and political position that affirms the equality and humanity of all people. Feminism offers a theoretical and activist lens through which we can analyze the politics of knowledge that are “critical to understanding the practice and outcomes of democratic teaching, the roles of educational institutions in maintaining

social order, and the complex power and identity dynamics in any given classroom “ under patriarchy (Crabtree, Sapp, and Licona, 2009, p. 1).

What is Feminist Pedagogy?

Feminist pedagogy is a critical pedagogy and as such owes much of its philosophical and theoretical foundations to the larger umbrella of critical theory. Critical theory offers a distinct political analysis that alerts us to the ways power operates in personal, cultural, historical, social, and educational systems (Kincheloe, 2004). Feminist pedagogy, like all critical pedagogies, investigates power and through the cultivation of critical consciousness, praxis, and engagement turns students into change-makers (Villaverde, 2008). However, feminist pedagogy is not a toolbox, a collection of strategies, a list of practices, or a specific classroom arrangement. It is an overarching philosophy—a theory of teaching and learning that integrates feminist values with related theories and research.

The Feminist Classroom

Although there is not a collection of strategies or a copy/paste curriculum that defines what it is to do feminist pedagogy, there are a few key concepts that make a classroom feminist. A feminist classroom centers student voices, supports democratic and collaborative learning, seeks to transform teacher/student relationships, and centers a concern for gender injustice and social change. However, at the heart of the feminist pedagogical experience are the fundamentals of political education and direct action: becoming aware of the issues at stake, developing a perspective, problem-solving, and engaging in change thus actively participating in political society (hooks, 1984; Fisher, 2001; Tong, 2009).

Centering Student Voice

Feminist pedagogy is concerned with the validity of “experiential knowledge, or the knowledge produced through the actual lived experience of students, and privileging students’ voice over the teacher’s voice, which is no longer viewed as the ultimate authority” (Accardi, 2013, p. 37). Feminist pedagogy values student voices, and as such feminist teachers must find ways to facilitate this value. Fisher (1981) argues that “being a woman in a patriarchal society means being someone whose experiences of the world are systemically discounted as trivial or irrelevant, unless they relate to specifically feminine concerns or unless they relate to the experiences of ‘exceptional’ women” (p. 21). This is especially true within traditional curriculum structures that often emphasize and privilege the experiences of white men – both through their reliance on the “great men” curriculum and the traditional classroom structure.

Shrewsbury (1987) notes that feminist pedagogical “strategies must be developed to counteract unequal power arrangements. Such strategies recognize the potentiality for changing traditional unequal relationships [and that] empowering strategies allow students to find their own voice, to discover the power of authenticity” (p. 8-9). A feminist teacher can value female student voices by intervening when

male students dominate or interrupt. Asking male students to remain quiet or wait their turn so that female students can speak is not privileging the female voice over the male but is instead creating and safeguarding a space where all voices and experiences are given equal value.

Cooperative and Democratic

The feminist classroom is designed to be inherently democratic and cooperative. The learning community is participatory and egalitarian, and it serves as a corrective and a critique of patriarchal educational beliefs and practices (Fisher, 2001). Pushing against the patriarchal hierarchy that perpetuates and reinforces sexism, a feminist cooperative community fosters a nurturing environment where all learners, their knowledge and their experiences, are valued. Feminist teachers make use of activities that encourage all students to make their voices heard and support teamwork and collaborative problem solving.

Basic communication skills for expressing feelings, providing helpful feedback and participating in group processes and knowledge building are strategies for fostering this type of classroom environment. In the nurturing environment favored by feminist approaches to teaching and learning, learners are supported when they express uncertainty and witness models for effective communication through the teacher's example. Any activity that requires group discussion can change the energy of the classroom from a passive environment to an active one. It can be something as simple as asking student input on classroom rules, what book they want to read during circle time, or having students guide each other during a presentation or demonstration. Group activity and discussion allows individual students to form learning communities and participate in creating shared knowledge.

Teacher-Student Relationship

Feminist pedagogy seeks to transform the teacher/student relationship and disrupt tradition notions of classroom power and authority. Typically, the teacher is perceived to have the ultimate authority in the classroom while students have limited authority or none at all. Feminist teaching strategies are anti-authoritarian and student-centered. Shrewsbury (1987) notes that feminist pedagogy "includes a recognition of the power implication of traditional schooling and the limitations of traditional meanings of concepts of power that embody relations of domination" (p. 8). Feminist teaching techniques critique and challenge patriarchal power relations that traditionally govern classrooms, therefore encouraging a democratic, cooperative classroom. In such a classroom students are expected to be leaders and to make decisions as a group. The teacher shares rather than demands authority, asks more questions than they answer, and encourages students to problem solve collectively when problems arise.

Gender injustice, Sexism, and Social Change

Perhaps the most frequently cited characteristic of feminist pedagogy is a concern for gender injustice, sexism, and the oppression of women, and how this concern affects what happens in a classroom. Giroux (1989) notes that "a feminist classroom

must instruct students in a way that makes them attentive to patriarchy as an ideology that is historically and socially constructed as part of an institutional discourse and material force designed to oppress women” (p. 7). Therefore, feminism in the classroom should take as its primary subject matter issues of patriarchal oppression and sexism, and how these things construct what happens in a classroom and what material is taught.

Consciousness-raising, which has roots in the early feminist movement, is a key method of helping students learn about and become aware of a sexist and unjust society. Freedman (1990) describes consciousness-raising as the “the sharing of personal-experience with others in order to understand the larger social context for the experience and to transform one’s intellectual or political understanding” (p. 603). This emphasis on taking action is a critical component to feminist pedagogical theory because feminist pedagogy is a form of education meant to effect social change. Feminist pedagogy seeks to make visible patriarchal structures of oppression while also equipping students with the skills to challenge and transform those oppressive structures.

Issues in Non-Critical and Non-Feminist Civic Education

According to Parker (2003), school is often the first institutional experience that brings children from the home and family into society-at-large where people must learn to work collaboratively across all differences. Schools, therefore, are the ideal space for civic engagement and democratic education. However, the emphasis on civics in Early Childhood Education (ECE) has primarily been through a preparatory lens and thus views children as humans who, through education, will become “real” citizens one day (Swalwell & Payne, 2019). This form of preparatory civic education continues a long tradition of seeing young children as egocentric and not capable of acting for the good of the community (Levsitz, 2013; Phillips, 2011). This illiberal view of the capabilities of young children often coincides with civic education content standards that are limited to themes of nationalistic patriotism, compliance with rules and laws, and the recognition of great historical figures (i.e. white men with the “exceptional” women or person of color added when necessary). For example, Ohio Social Studies Standards for Kindergarten focus on knowing how to say the Pledge of Allegiance and understanding rules and authority figures, while 1st and 2nd grade standards expand on rules and laws as governing good and bad behavior within in communities and groups, and recognition of political/historical figures (Ohio Department of Education, 2018, p.11-17).

This approach to civic education “narrows the civic possibilities that schools offer to children and positions them as the recipients of knowledge rather than as creators” of knowledge (Swalwell & Payne, 2019, p.127). This type of education famously described by Freire (1970/2018) as the “banking” model of education views knowledge as “a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 72). Teachers in this model are the dominate source of knowledge in the classroom and the experiences and histories of the children are of no consequence. Neither are the issues of gender, race or other identity markers that function as part of the discourse of schooling thus perpetuating traditional oppressive educational structures (Brady, 1995).

The lack of critical examination in the banking model results in pedagogy being frozen in forms that deny the “historically and socially constructed nature of all knowledge, discourse and practice” (Brady, 1995, p. 11). Therefore, instead of expanding on notions of democracy, ethics, and social justice, banking education reflects the logic of capitalism and the marketplace; creating students who are meant to conform, to follow authority, and acquiesce to being dominated by systems of oppression. Children in this pedagogical model are not supported in becoming active citizens who engage in active decision making about issues that are of consequence to themselves and broader society (Levsitk, 2013).

Feminist Pedagogy and Critical Civic Education

Teachers informed by a feminist pedagogy reject the banking model view of teaching and learning in favor of a more complex and social process of knowledge-making through interaction, collaboration, and negotiation (Barkley et al., 2014). They strive to join students in becoming members within, not above or outside of, a knowledge community. bell hooks (1994) notes that a classroom should be “a place where difference could be acknowledged, where we could finally understand, accept, and affirm that our ways of knowing are forged in history and relations of power (p. 30). Traditional civic education in the ECE classroom, as discussed above, does not leave room for an investigation of systemic power. In fact, by way of replicating power as masculine in its investigation of history/historical figures and authority, and its reliance on a non-democratic authoritative classroom structure, traditional civic education reinforces an oppressive white male patriarchy.

A way to push back against this type of civic education is by moving traditional civic education into the realm of critical civic education through the lens of feminist pedagogy. According to Wheeler-Bell (2014), critical civic education creates children who are “knowledgeable about current injustices” and are capable of participating in social transformation (p. 464). Critical civic education hinges on the ability to turn children from empty receptacles (as the banking model believes them to be) into active citizens capable of recognizing systems of oppression and complex social thinking. Active citizenship refers to the values, norms, and skills related to being a good citizen, and are negotiated among children themselves. This process requires that children participate through active engagement in critical reflection and also social action to reduce oppression and inequality which reflects a focus on democratic values of participation (Sigauke, 2011).

Active citizenship is fundamental to critical civic education because it insists children must “understand the current and undesirable world they . . . inhabit. While also having the skills and dispositions to consciously produce the desired society” (Wheeler-Bell, 2014, p. 469). Active citizenship is also incredibly important to feminist pedagogy and is characterized by the feminist concept of direct action. Direct action is the challenging of the oppressive status quo in an effort to make a more equal society through feminist activism. In terms of feminist critical civic education in ECE, that more equal society comes in the form of cooperative democratic learning in which students deliberate to collectively decide how to allocate classroom resources in ways that promote equality and human prosperity. It also allows for the decentering of the white male point of view which allows for girls to succeed and

affirms them as worthy contributors to the classroom community (DiGiovanni & Liston, 2005).

Conclusion

On the very first day of a child's academic journey, the hidden curriculum of gender bias starts to negatively affect girls. However, there is hope. This hope comes in the form of feminist pedagogy that promotes a critical civic engagement and encourages students to work together in cooperative instead of competitive ways. It is my hope that this article has not only provided educators with the tools to begin exploring feminist pedagogy and critical civic education in their classrooms, but to look deeper at how they can use feminist pedagogical principles to center student voices, support democratic and collaborative learning, to transform the teacher/student relationships, and to center a concern for gender injustice and social change. The techniques used in feminist pedagogy can and do enhance the education of not just girls. Historically marginalized communities and communities silenced by oppressive patriarchal structures can benefit from the liberatory principles of feminist pedagogy. Using feminist pedagogy as a lens through which to examine the benefits of critical civic engagement provides clarity to critique the status quo of oppressive inequalities, thus empowering all students to achieve their potential and ultimately transform society into a more equal place for all.

References

- Accardi, M. T. (2013). *Feminist pedagogy for library instruction*. Library Juice Press.
- Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., & Cross, K.P. (2005). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. Jossey-Bass.
- Brady, J. (1995). *Schooling young children: A feminist pedagogy for liberatory learning*. State University of New York.
- Crabtree, R. D., Sapp, D.A., & Licona, A.C. (Eds.). (2009). *Feminist pedagogy: Looking back to move forward*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- DiGiovanni, L. W. & Liston, D. D. (2005). Feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom: An agenda for practice. *Feminist Teacher*, 15(2), 123-131.
- Fisher, B. M. (2001). *No angel in the classroom: Teaching through feminist discourse*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Bloomsbury Academic. (Original work published 1970).
- Freedman, E. B. (1990). Small group pedagogy: Consciousness raising in conservative times. *NWSA Journal*, 2(4), 603.
- Giroux, J. B. (1989). Feminist theory as pedagogical practice. *Contemporary Education*, 61(1), 6-10.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004). *Critical pedagogy: A primer*. Peter Lang.
- Levitz, L. (2013). Learning to work it out: Social education for young students. In D.R. Reutzler (Ed.), *Handbook of research-based practices in early education* (395-412). Guilford Press.
- Ohio Department of Education (2018). *Ohio's learning standards: Social studies*. <https://education.ohio.gov>.
- Parker, W. (2003). *Teaching democracy: Unity and diversity in public life*. Teachers College Press.
- Phillips, L. (2011). Possibilities and quandaries for young children's active citizenship. *Early Education & Development*, 22(5), 778-794.

- Sigauke, A.T. (2011). Teachers' view on citizenship education Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Citizenship, Teaching, and Learning*, 6(3), 269-285.
- Shrewsbury, C. (1987). What is feminist pedagogy? *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 15(3/4), 6-14.
- Swalwell, K, & Payne, K.A. (2019). Critical civic education for young children. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 21(2). 127-132.
- Tong, R. (2009). *Feminist thought: A more comprehensive introduction*. Westview Press.
- Wheeler-Bell, Q. (2014). Educating the spirit of activism: A 'critical' civic education. *Education Policy*, 28(3), 463-486.
- Villaverde, L. E. (2008) *Feminist theories and education*. Peter Lang.



About the Author

Rebecca Stanwick is currently a public librarian at a large urban public library. She received her bachelor's and master's in English Literature from the University of Toledo and her master's in library science from Indiana University- Bloomington. She is currently a doctoral student in Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education- History of Education at the University of Toledo.