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## Projections of an emancipatory praxis experience through a feminist pedagogical framework

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### Abstract

Although the definitions of feminist pedagogy vary, the agreement is based on resisting hierarchy, using experience as a source of learning and transformative learning principles. The aim of this study was to analyse opinions about the experiences within a design project framework designed and structured within the framework of feminist pedagogical principles. The descriptive content analysis study is designed within the framework of the qualitative research approach. Fifty seven people participated in the course titled Gender and Education, which was conducted by the researcher at a state university in the spring semester of 2018–2019 academic year. A form with 13 open-ended questions prepared within the framework of the processes of the project was made accessible through Google Forms for the participants to fill. The written responses of the participants to the questionnaire were coded and transferred to the MAXQDA software program, and the data were analysed through descriptive content analysis.

**Keywords:** Feminist pedagogy, praxis, gender and education, descriptive content analysis.

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## 1. Introduction

Feminist pedagogy is an educational approach incorporating the feminist theory, the feminist activism and experiences of women into the educational content, the learning environment, the teacher–student relationship and the means of establishment of a connection between the classroom and the outside world. When examined historically, the feminist pedagogy—shaped based on the ideas of the philosophers preceding the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s, Dewey’s concept of progressive education and Freire’s emancipatory educational philosophy—is regarded as an important challenge to traditional approaches. The perspective of feminist pedagogies originates from the awareness-raising practices among women’s groups and experience sharing practices, implemented by the second-wave feminist movement. Developed in the 1960s, awareness raising is a tool and method of sharing information about women’s experiences and has been used as an educational tool for women in the absence of a comprehensive knowledge base on women. Feminist pedagogies have been developed to ensure that feminist theories and practices support such education within the framework of courses offered in women’s studies at universities. The goal of the radical feminists who dominated the second-wave feminist movements in the 1970s was to create a knowledge base that illuminates women’s experiences, which has resulted in the development of feminist science and especially the expansion of courses and programmes of Women’s Studies in the USA. In addition to the driving force of the women’s movement, critical pedagogies developed by Freire et al. have also made significant theoretical contributions in the development of a radical school critique by feminist pedagogies.

According to the theorists of feminism who bring crucial criticisms to the structure, functioning and cultural policy of education, gender, just like race and social class, has an irreducible effect that shapes what is happening in schools, and is also shaped by it. Feminist theories have shown that education is a medium of pressure and domination as the tools of both power and culture and can be used as a source of significant resistance and change (Tan, 2011). Feminist pedagogy is the whole of a series of epistemological assumptions, instructional strategies, content approaches, classroom applications and teacher–student relations based on the feminist theory. This theory, which guides our selection of classroom practices (Shrewsbury, 1993) related to processes of teaching and learning, is used for different purposes in various disciplines and learning environments. There are many different definitions of the feminist pedagogy, but there is an agreement on three fundamental principles: resisting hierarchy, using the experience as a source of learning and transformative/emancipatory learning.

Teaching and learning, as conceptualised in the feminist pedagogy, can be described as a defiance to traditional pedagogies that are widely accepted and as the knowledge bases that support them. The feminist pedagogy asks alternative questions about human experience and aims to transform the traditional methods and theories that direct teaching and learning when trying to create teaching and learning experiences that do not reproduce the status quo. Emphasising that schools offer opportunities liberating and empowering students, this theory aims to establish the conditions for a learning process that will prepare a framework for students to understand the plurality of the reality of life and to carry it into their daily life practices. In this sense, learning, which is a hierarchical and competition-based process in traditional pedagogies, is defined as a collaborative process that aims to take students to complex interpretations rather than final conclusions according to feminist pedagogies (Bignell, 1996; Brock-Utne, 1995). In this process, the teacher becomes a role model who shares and learns, rather than being an authority who conveys his or her superior objective knowledge. In this context, the classroom becomes a laboratory where students test their theories and interpretations in detail in their own lives, beyond just being a place where they learn something. One of the important consequences of this is the illumination of the interaction between the social and historical life and the personal life because learning that is close to the everyday lives of participants and is based on intellectual, emotional and cultural resources that they bring to their own social spaces will also ensure that they become (or it makes them) stronger (Brock-Utne, 1995).

Feminist pedagogy has also raised important points in relation to the curricula that constitute an important dimension of school reality and the forms of information that students are required to learn through the curricula. Shor (1980), for example, has emphasised that knowledge acquired in classrooms should provide the basis for students to understand the real conditions of their everyday lives. When considered in the context of everyday classroom practices, students' associating any type of work they carry out (reading/writing studies, reflecting opinions/comments and so forth) on a subject or text with their own experiences will diversify the results the educational process reaches and create a basis of criticism, and such association will also eliminate the hierarchy between the teacher and the learner (Perl, 1994). The main challenge to the hierarchy in question will be possible through the adoption of student experiences as one of the fundamental sources of the learning process—as emphasised by feminist educators—and thus, through the centralisation of *experience-based knowledge*, which has been devalued and marginalised by traditional pedagogies (Bignell, 1996; Weiler, 1991). For example, listening to students' stories about their own families and schools means accepting that their experiences and views are important (Herrington & Curtis, 1990). Thus, liberating classroom life is achieved, where members learn to respect each other's differences, instead of being afraid of their differences. In such a classroom, participants learn to associate their experiences with different and new testimonies, learn to think differently about their experiences, which bring with it the internalisation of participatory democratic processes (Shrewsbury, 1993).

One of the main objectives of the feminist pedagogy is the promotion of social change (Weiler, 1993). This approach provides students with a language of criticism that directs them to analyse the differences between social groups, structures inside and outside the academic environment and their roles in various forms of authority, obedience, hierarchy and exploitation. It provides students with ways to analyse practices related to sexism, racism and class exploitation that configure and direct the situations people face in everyday life (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003). Knowledge acquired in classrooms should provide the basis for students to understand the real conditions of their everyday lives (Shor, 1980).

Some of the basic educational objectives of the feminist pedagogy are to share the intellectual and spiritual development of students, to raise awareness of students about the world in which they live, to respect the voices of students and to encourage them to think critically and analyse their social position, especially in terms of racism, sexism, repression and domination (Hooks, 1994; Shrewsbury, 1993). In terms of goals and outcomes, the feminist pedagogy aims not only to improve students' conceptual learning but also to raise their awareness and promote their personal development and social responsibility (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003). It was aimed in this study to carry out a practice for the embodiment of such objectives and to analyse the views of participants—who performed this practice—on their experiences in the implementation process in an undergraduate course designed and structured within the framework of feminist pedagogical principles.

## 2. Methods

This study is a descriptive content analysis study designed within the framework of the qualitative research approach. The participants of the study were all of the students who participated in the course titled Gender and Education, which was conducted and offered as an elective course in two different sections by the researcher at a state university in the spring semester of the 2018–2019 academic year. The sample was made up of 56 people consisting of a total of 49 female and 7 male students.

Due to the fact that the traditional measurement and evaluation approaches (written examinations, and so forth) would not be suitable in the context of the goals, objectives and content of the course in question, the researcher directed the participants to a practice-based study where they would be able to reflect what they would acquire. In this context, in the first phase of the study, the participants were asked to design a material/product/object related to a social problem of their choice in the context of the learning objectives, which would be original, have aesthetic appeal, include a message,

and which they would submit by the end of the semester. In the second phase, in order to evaluate the participants' experiences throughout the design processes, a form consisting of 13 open-ended questions prepared within the framework of the final project was made accessible through Google Forms for the participants to fill at the end of the semester. The questions placed in the data collection instrument were about the participants' demographic information, the stages through which they made decisions, the processes through which they completed their projects, and their feelings and thoughts after completion of their projects. After the design process ended, all participants were asked to fill out the form in question.

The written responses of the participants to the digital questionnaire they reached through Google Forms were coded by transferring them to the MAXQDA software program developed for qualitative data analysis. Descriptive analysis, which is one of the data analysis techniques in qualitative studies, is defined as a suitable technique for research in which the conceptual structure of the research is clearly determined in advance (Yildirim & Simsek, 1999). In this study, the analysis framework was determined based on the feminist pedagogy, which was the conceptual background of the study, and the theme titles were created based on the framework of the questionnaire. Each sentence in the written texts of the participants was taken as a unit, and then read and edited according to this framework. And then, categories were created, and the important quotations that could be presented as data were selected. A descriptive evaluation was performed by taking into consideration the integrity of the narrative of the participants and the authenticity of their forms of expression.

### **3. Findings**

The findings that were obtained as a result of the analysis were addressed under the themes titled 'project development' and 'meaning of the project'.

#### **3.1. Findings on the project development**

The theme 'project process' was analysed under various sub-categories consisting of the subjects on which the products/materials/objects focused, decisions on the subjects of the project, teamwork or individual work preferences, difficulties faced during the process and the points the participants enjoyed during the process.

When the messages the participants intended to convey through the products/materials/objects they designed were examined, it was possible to observe the reflections of almost any of the current social problems in the messages. A thematic classification of the products/materials/objects showed that issues such as the following came to the forefront: gender inequality, gender stereotypes/prejudices, violence against women, honour killings, patriarchal societal structure, sexism in language, discrimination against LGBTI+ people, child marriages and child abuse. The original works designed in this context included a wide range of products such as poetry/story books, pencil drawings/oil paintings, sculptures, board games for children/adults, collages, photos and rap songs.

An examination of the answers about how the participants decided on the subjects of their projects showed that the majority of the participants took action to create awareness and sensitivity, to draw attention and to create consciousness.

*P32: The process in which I have decided on the subject of my project has evolved entirely on the axis of awareness and sensitivity.*

*P1: We chose the subject of our project to raise awareness about our stereotypes.*

*P27: I wanted to unfold gender inequality, one of the biggest problems of humanity across the world, and to attract people's attention.*

When designing their projects, 76.8% of the participants preferred teamwork and 23.2% chose individual work. With regard to the causes of these preferences, the participants emphasised the

various advantages of both types of work. For example, those who preferred teamwork expressed that the process became easier in terms of time and cost through the division of labour and distribution of responsibilities. They said that the exchange of ideas was a factor in improving creativity and efficiency. And, they expressed that it was possible to work with the group by having fun. On the other hand, the participants who highlighted the advantages of individual work talked about the desire to produce a product that was their own or suitable for their personal abilities, about the desire to work freely and about the temporal/spatial problems brought by working with others.

When the participants' responses about the challenges they faced during the project process were examined, it was seen that a significant number of them experienced difficulties in the decision-making process, in finding appropriate materials and in creating the product.

*P20: We initially had difficulties in deciding on the subject. We had difficulties in finding what could be produced as a product and in revealing something different from the others' products.*

*P9: We had trouble finding fabric and adjusting it.*

*P20: When we decided on the product, we had difficulties about what materials to produce it from.*

*P32: (...) it was especially difficult to try to fulfil the harmony of lyric, music and rhythm.*

*P47: We had a real hard time because it was a handicraft. We all learned how to sew for the first time. It was very difficult for us to cut fabric and craft a baby doll for the first time.*

On the other hand, the most frequently expressed topics concerning the points they enjoyed during the project process could be summarised as completing a tangible product, labouring, producing, using creativity and finding the chance to work freely.

*P35: I think the most enjoyable moment was to watch the printing of the story that we wrote as a poster. At that moment, the fact that our efforts manifested themselves in a visible form was very exciting and made me happy.*

*P43: Making effort to think about producing a product, to produce ideas and to turn it into something tangible.*

*P34: I felt good because I could use my creativity and create a product.*

*P30: We have been able to work freely especially because the material we have created is a work based on creativity and imagination.*

### **3.2. Findings on the meaning of the project**

The theme titled the meaning of the project process was analysed in two categories consisting of the reflections of the project in student experiences and those in the context of personal/private life.

When the participants' answers to the related question were examined, the meaning of the reflections of the project in student experiences was seen to be explained as thinking outside the box, expressing oneself freely, producing a tangible product, experiencing creative thinking and internalising information.

*P10: I have always shared my ideas in my university life by writing reports or taking exams. Now I've found a way to deliver my thoughts by using something visual.*

*P12: My life as a student has been in a classic style, where information is explained and whether I've learned it is measured by an exam. But this study has given me the opportunity to express in my own way what I have learned.*

*P15: It has been different from the usual academic studies as I have made an effort to carry out a study that I would totally enjoy and where I would be able to use my creativity.*

*P33: It has been different from exams and other assignments. This was the first time I have come across such an assessment. It has made me feel good to have done something different. I wish I found this kind of assessment in my other courses.*

*P30: (...) the completion of an assignment in which I could freely express myself has taught me to push the boundaries of my imagination, and to investigate and learn a lot about women while doing this assignment.*

*P31: I would say that it offered me a space in my life as a student, where I would be able to work freely, without being supervised, restricted or governed by an authority.*

*P36: So far, all my project assignments have had didactic information, which made the process of the work boring. However, this work has been more fun than an assignment, and its patterns have been based on the eternity of creativity. I have actually weighed here what I would be able to do if no boundaries are drawn.*

*P24: I haven't done an assignment like this for a long time, where we have had to think a lot and be creative. So, it has been quite a different experience for me in this respect.*

*P13: The accumulation and detailed presentation of the truth that has been taught to us in the 4 years of our lives as students have been important for us to internalise our understanding of gender equality.*

*P12: For the first time I have processed the raw information taught to me in the school.*

The participants' assessments of their lives as students are meaningful in terms of the traditional pedagogical insights, which Freire (2018) criticised as the term 'banking model of education', and in terms of the basic objectives of feminist pedagogies. According to Freire (2018), the teacher–student relationship is mainly narrative. This relationship consists of a subject (the teacher) who tells something and objects (the students) who listen patiently to what is being told. The narrative drives students to mechanically memorise what is being told. It converts them into 'bins', 'containers' that must be filled by the teacher. On the contrary, education should be liberating and empowering; it is a process of dialogue in which the teacher and the learners undertake together the act of knowing and investigate the problems in the world together. Students' critical understanding of society and self-awareness of their capacities to transform society (consciousness) and their conscious actions, or their simultaneous conduct of thinking and action (praxis), form the foundation of the liberating education in Freire's approach. In this regard, the positive emotions experienced by the participants in the process of the project settle in a meaningful framework.

Whether there was any projection of the project that extended to the personal/private lives of the participants was also quite an important issue in terms of the theoretical background of this study, which was the feminist pedagogy. In this context, when the responses of the participants were examined, the reflections of the Gender and Education course in general and the reflections of the project that was carried out within the scope of the course in particular in personal lives can be summarised under the following categories: gaining and raising awareness/sensitivity, liberation, empowerment, and gravitation towards questioning, thinking and action.

*P11: In fact, with the help of this course and assignment, my awareness of my own stereotypes has been raised, and I have reflected that in my homework.*

*P12: What is more, a lot of things in my head became smooth and clear. My sensitivity and awareness of gender has been raised.*

*P5: When I was painting, I asked my friends and some relatives about what this picture was all about. From what I understand from their statements, (...) I think that I have at least created awareness, a question mark in their heads, which has been important to me.*

*P26: To begin with, as a woman, I have got rid of my social stereotypes, and I have been liberated.*

P7: *My work has given me strength.*

P8: *It has helped me better understand the concept of liberty.*

P33: *I have become aware of the situations in which I have been restricted. We don't realise certain things because we internalise them beginning with childhood. I have also realised my areas of freedom.*

P14: (...) *it has had a serious impact on turning the idea into action.*

P25: *I can much more clearly see the gender patters in my family, friends and other social circles, and I am aware of the responsibilities that fall on me as an educated person. I am trying to implement and share what I have learned in my immediate environment (my brothers and sisters, my friends and my beloved).*

Research shows that gender education leads participants to have a more flexible gender role and empowers their sense of control over their own lives and self-esteem (Haris, Melas & Rodacker, 1999). Moreover, it has been reported that those who take such courses gain consciousness/awareness, self-esteem/self-confidence, and motivation for social activism against sexism and other social inequalities, and they develop more egalitarian attitudes towards women and other oppressed groups (Stake, 2006; Stake & Hoffmann, 2001). It was understood in this study, as well, that the participants developed sensitivity and awareness, their self-confidence increased and they gained motivation for social activism.

#### 4. Conclusion

It was understood that the undergraduate course, structured within the framework of feminist pedagogical principles, achieved the specified objectives, that the participants had different learning experiences, and that these experiences were projected in their personal lives as well. In terms of goals and outcomes, the feminist pedagogy aims not only to improve the conceptual learning or knowledge of learners but also to raise their awareness and sensitivity, to improve their consciousness and to promote their social responsibility and activism within the framework of an ideal democratic society. Feminist pedagogy also requires the transformation of the academy and points out that we can create this transformation with the steps that each of us will take in our classrooms—even if they are small (Shrewsbury, 1993). In this context, it will be a meaningful effort to think more about ways and methods of bringing a liberating and empowering pedagogy to classrooms and creating practices that encourage reflexivity in learners—that is, allocating a space for praxis.

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