Rethinking Classrooms & Envisioning a Future That is Female:

A Feminist Analysis of Gender Inequalities in Education and Possibilities for Progress

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 Abstract
In our current society, women are continually bombarded with inequalities, oppression, and hardships based solely on their gender. In school, girls are also afflicted with sexism which negatively affects their educational opportunities. As an intersectional feminist and teacher, I have great concerns that our current education system is reproducing gender inequality as opposed to preparing our girls for a future in which they are regarded as equal members in the workplace, in the home, and in society at large. I believe negative gender relations are affecting the educational experiences of female students, with sexist educational policies and school culture as just a few examples. Discriminatory dress codes, stereotypes, and biases impact a female student’s academic success and development of her self-esteem; through a lens of intersectionality, it is poignant that all girls experience said marginalization differently. I propose to attend to the foil of gender inequality in education by utilizing feminist pedagogy and creating feminist teachers in order to introduce topics of gender oppression to students and bring forth societal change. As instructing new ideas can be daunting for some teachers, I include ten suggestions for teachers to incorporate feminism into their daily teaching. I do not believe gender equality can be achieved without specific attention to education, and our female students deserve our urgent attention in creating safe and supportive classroom environments.

Keywords: gender inequality, sexism, feminism, intersectionality, feminist pedagogy, feminist teacher, education.

*“Feminism is sensational because it is experienced through the senses; feminism is also sensational because it causes a stir or disruption in the world” (Murphy, 2017, p. 5).*

**Introduction**

Women’s rights advocates have long utilized the slogan *the future is female* to gather collective support, champion for increased female representation, and fight for the disintegration of patriarchal systems transforming it into a feminist anthem for equality (Francis, 2002). Despite various societal and cultural advances over previous decades toward improved rights for women, collectively we are still living in a world of inequality. Patriarchy, misogyny, stereotypes, and sexism continue to plague every corner of our communities- from work, to education, and beyond. Classrooms are common places for inequalities to reproduce and flourish to the detriment of many students. As a teacher, a woman, and an intersectional feminist, I am concerned with the sexism that exists currently in schools and how gender plays a role in education.

 Deborah Britzman (1992) articulates similar educational concerns to my own when she states that her dilemma as a teacher commences “with the perils of learning, with how larger social circumstances of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of social and structural discrimination live in the contexts of school knowledge and in the social practices of students and teachers” (p. 252). My central topic begins with an emphasis on classrooms as incredibly unequal spaces for women. In this paper, I will explore how negative gender relations inform upon the experiences of female students, with a focus on educational policy such as dress codes as well as the stereotypes and biases that form school culture. I will respond with ways for female teachers to facilitate equality in their classrooms via the inclusion of Caroline Shrewsbury’s feminist pedagogy (1987) and Linda Briskin’s (1994) notion of a feminist teacher.

My research topic is explored through a lens of intersectionality. Conceived by Black feminists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and Jennifer C. Nash (2019), intersectionality addresses the interlocking and compounding forms of oppression that certain women face contributing to the varying degrees of marginalization they encounter. I believe intersectionality to be a necessary lens for feminist study and anti-sexism education because all women’s experiences cannot be dissolved into a monolithic perspective. Despite multiple waves of feminism, I find intersectionality to be the most essential because women of varying ages, sexual orientations, races, abilities, ages, and classes inside and outside of the classroom will face differing degrees of oppression that cannot be separated from their gender. Such complexities cannot be attended to with other forms of feminism. In utilizing the term feminism throughout this project, it is important to note that I always consider feminism as incorporating intersectionality in order to attend to the needs of all women in society and female students in our classrooms.

For the purposes of this paper, I would like to acknowledge my own privilege as a white woman and I do not intend to speak for or on behalf of racialized women. I would also like to emphasize that this paper heavily focuses on female feminist teachers. While male teachers certainly can be feminists and allies, this paper emphasizes the possibility of female teachers discovering the power of feminist pedagogy to uplift female students and thus the male perspective is outside of the parameters of this work.

**The Issue of Gender Inequality in School**

 Sexism in education causes numerous problems for female students. The indoctrinated beliefs of inequality that are ingrained in policies and school culture influence how female students view their own competency, intelligence, and self-worth. Research shows female students are afflicted by biases that male students do not encounter (Riegle-Crumb, 2019). Classroom materials that portray women as better suited for caregiving roles is just one example. Similarly, there still exists a stereotype of male superiority in subjects such as Mathematics and Science even though test scores dismiss such claims (Spender and Sarah, 1980). I believe teachers need to make a conscious effort to address inequality in order to assist female students to prosper.

The problem of sexism and discrimination is certainly not isolated to educational contexts. However, I will focus on educational institutions as children spend the majority of their childhood in school preparing for life as productive citizens in society. If students can gain an awareness of societal oppressions and acquire more egalitarian perspectives while they are young, that understanding can transgress with them into adulthood and proliferate into wider society to foster change. Furthermore, I will focus on a general North American public school context as it is the most relevant to both my praxis and the majority of scholarly literature on feminist education that I have come across. Feminism can be taught to all grades and inequality can be addressed in ways as simple as instructing the harm behind occupational stereotypes.

 The scholarly literature outlining the issue of sexism in education is plentiful. Many authors write about anti-sexism from various other standpoints and paradigms, such as Judith Butler (1985) who eloquently intertwines queer theory with gender and feminist studies. Simple database searches such as “sexism in education” in journals such as Gender and Education will enumerate the cornucopia of scholarly work on the topic highlighting its importance and urgency. For example, Weiler’s (2000) work highlights sexism in schools utilizing the example of discriminatory dress code policies. Authors such as Arnot (1982), Clarricoates (1981), Grumet (1981), and Levintova and Staudinger (2018) specifically speak to the patriarchal and hegemonic classroom experiences that groom male students into leadership and dominance roles, such as female students being presented as bossy while male students are celebrated for being good leaders. According to Sadker and Sadker (1986), Wintgate (1984), LaFrance (1985), and Huntington (2006) without specific and focused attention to gender and the inequalities that are associated with gender in the classroom, our female students will continue to be subjected to injustice because sexism is not a problem that can disappear or be mended on its own. Beyond this list are many more authors and scholarly literature that tie together the thread that sexism is a growing problematic, and after too many years of injustice it must be attended to.

**Significance and Purposeful Intent**

The theoretical significance of my research paper is to bring a new facet to the issue of sexism in our classrooms. As previously stated, there is a plentitude of scholarly literature that attends to inequalities faced by women as it is not a novel issue. However, limited scholarly work exists on *specific* and *applicable* curricular-oriented ways to instruct feminism in K-12 education as most literature is abstract, theoretical, or difficult to comprehend. While theory is highly necessary, it can be arduous for teachers like myself to find suitable classroom materials on feminism without creating it independently. Perhaps the lack of tangible advice, tools, and resources contribute to why so many teachers are not utilizing feminist pedagogy. As a new teacher, I continue to look to academic authors and seek scholarly work to strengthen my knowledge on creating a classroom grounded in feminism and to fuel my goal for a more egalitarian classroom experience.

 The purpose of my paper will explore some of the complex relations that exist between gender and education. I aspire for this paper to be a comprehensible resource for teachers to think beyond the potential complexities of feminism in order to see the benefit of its use, to avoid “add and stir” feminism in which notions of equality are superficially dissolved into content, and to commit to incorporating feminism not simply into one’s singular lesson but rather into one’s pedagogy as a whole. A pedagogical change will “guide our choice of classroom practices” and inspire a new lens for teachers to re-invent past lessons, face adversities and challenges head on, debunk harmful stereotypes, and commit to assisting female students to reclaim their power and self-worth (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 8).

**My Endeavor to Equality**

As a female teacher, I have a strong personal connection to the problem of sexism in education that is currently affecting our students. I, too, spent years in the public education system, with a myriad of horrible and unfortunate memories of sexism from classmates and teachers alike. I endured years of hearing my teachers omit bullying and disrespectful behavior at the hands of my male classmates because “boys will be boys” and it was my job to be a lady and turn the other cheek. Meanwhile, I was groomed to think that I must enter into a profession that will offer flexible hours for when I must tend to my forthcoming children and husband. One can assume that my male peers were never pressured to think about how their future career will fit into being the primary caregiver for a fictitious family. Nor were they worried about being too bossy, overbearing, or rough. The injustice and inequality I faced during my most foundational and formational years left a notable scar on my perception of what one’s schooling experience ought to be like. While I did not know that I was experiencing explicit and implicit biases and sexism, I vividly recall uneasy sentiments as a young child when my vocabulary flashcard beamed “nurse” with a picture of a woman next to a male doctor. I was also completely unaware of how detrimental sexism is in school, and how harmful it is to groom decades of students into believing their self-worth, intelligence, and competency are attached to their sex.

The motivational drive behind this project is an aspiration to make a real and authentic change for girls and women in the educational institutions in which they partake in. Often times feminism can be misrepresented and misinterpreted. It can also fall privy to reductionist statements by teachers such as “all students are equal in the eyes of a teacher” without any specific re-examination of pedagogical practices or curricular content that may be (perhaps unintentionally) unjust. I hope this paper can be a means for teachers to gather a base knowledge on negative gender relations in education that they may have not previously been privy to, as well as to demonstrate possibilities to incorporate feminism not simply into one’s singular lesson but rather into one’s general practice.

 I believe incorporating feminist approaches would have positive implications for both teachers and students. In utilizing a pedagogical and ontological lens of intersectional feminism, girls and women of all genders, ages, sexual orientations, abilities, and classes can become aware of the varying degrees of systemic inequality that they encounter in education. Briskin (1994) reaffirms that classrooms are common sites for women to face what she refers to as ‘contradictions’ and encourages the awareness of such contradictions. Contradictions “frame the way that women and girls relate to the learning environment, understand the curriculum and evaluate its relevance to their lives, and interact with both teachers and students” (Briskin, 1994, p. 443). One contradiction Briskin (1994) describes is the assumption of motherhood as a woman’s main occupation that is tied to her achievement (p. 444). She says that the contradiction causes women to be devalued in society, and in turn begin to ponder about their future success and longevity in education (Briskin, 1994, p. 444). As a response, teachers utilizing feminist pedagogy can combat contradictions and dismantle heteropatriarchy by encouraging female students to reclaim their leadership, power, voice, agency, as well as owning the feeling of anger at the past and present injustices (Briskin, 1994). Empowering female students in such a way would be extremely advantageous for all types of women to own their potential and assert their strength. Women have the right to an education free of oppression, suffering, bias, abuse, as well as the right to opportunity. I hope for this project to inspire teachers to attend to sexism and afford female students the education they deserve.

**An Analysis of Feminist Literature on Gender Issues in School**

Gender oppression is a widespread problem and has received much attention by researchers and scholars alike in recent decades. Since the term ‘sexism’ made its way into popular terminology in the 1970s during the human rights movements, it has been widely contested by some for its validity while extensively supported by others (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013). There are many pockets of sexism and discrimination within society, education is but one that researchers and scholars define as a man’s domain (Sandell, 1991). I turn here to the expert work of feminists in the field to assist me in exploring how gender affects the educational learning experience for female students.

 Within my qualitative analysis of scholarly research concerning gender in education, I employ a feminist theoretical perspective as the overarching orientation to which I read and analyze scholarly literature. The feminist perspective concerns itself with situations of gender oppression that women face in their school and work environments. A feminist perspective has provided direction to my research questions as I call for further attention to the sexism perpetuated in educational institutions. It has also guided me to narrow my focus on the students who are marginalized, disenfranchised, and in need of empowerment. Following a relativist paradigm, I acknowledge that there are multiple truths, multiple ways of being, and multiple ways of knowing in relation to gender and gendered experiences; some of which are appreciated and legitimized more than others.

 Furthermore, the feminist perspective I hold is conjoined with a lens of intersectionality which allows its user to address the multiple forms of oppressions existing in the classroom. Intersectionality is also a useful tool to comprehend the intricacies of identity (Weber, 2017). Students are multi-faceted individuals as there is no one singular female identity (Weiler, 1989), and the intersections of various aspects of their life play a role in the hardships they encounter both inside and outside of the classroom. Intersectionality provides a means of examining power relations by analyzing how gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ability, and class intersect to form varied experiences of inequality (Crenshaw, 1989). A diverse set of students in our classrooms today identify as female, and their experiences are diverse, complex, and unique to them. To truly understand how oppression affects a woman of color, for example, you must look at how her gender as a woman and how her race as a person of color come together and create particular struggles and experiences that a white woman would not face (Nash, 2019). There is no universal category for what it means to be a woman because universality reinforces “an exclusionary norm of privileged and elite whiteness, leaving a vast majority of working- class women and women of color unrepresented, even invisible” (Weber, 2017, p. 111). Being that I am a white, middle-class, educated woman, I have to be mindful of my positionality and my privilege so not to further marginalize groups of women and girls.

 The following two sections will illuminate two overarching examples of gender relations in the classroom that can be linked to sexism, which in turn negatively impact a female student’s educational experience. When discriminatory dress codes sexualize the female body, it reinforces to girls that they are nothing more than objects to be lusted for by men. It strips the girl of control over her own body and minimizes her importance in the classroom when her learning is not respected. Likewise, many examples of stereotypes and biases exist in the classroom and are perpetuated by both teachers and students. While all female students are oppressed within educational contexts, intersectional feminist bell hooks (2000) emphasizes that they are not all oppressed in the same manner (p. 5). White female students still hold a certain amount of privilege that their female friends of color do not, both in and out of school. Women of color are often “overlooked” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 154) and their achievements too often ignored (Brewer & Dundes, 2018, p. 50). Moving into the future of education, it is imperative that policies reflect equality and promote support for all students.

**Educational Policy- Controlling the Female Body Through Dress Codes**

 Limiting the autonomy, actions, and choices of individuals has been a mechanism to control the oppressed for centuries. Women have been subjected to male domination for thousands of years, and their persecution has ensured the maintenance of female gender roles as wife and mother perpetuating the belief that women are not worth achieving more. Historically and contemporarily, girls’ education has been of low priority for communities following patriarchal cultural values. However, even the girls fortunate enough to attend formal education face their fair share of obstacles. McLeod (2019) defines sexism as “The process through which females and males not only progressively learn that different things are required and expected of them because of their sex, but learn these things in an unexamined way” (p. 37). Educational reform towards more equitable treatment for girls has existed since the 1970s, but dress codes continue to be a point of contention for teachers, administration, parents, and students (Pavlakis & Roegman, 2018).

**“**Globe and Mail” reporter Caroline Alphonso produced a gendered newspaper article titled “Ontario high-school incident highlights dress code tensions in the age of #MeToo” in which she brings to light an example of an issue plaguing Canadian schools and beyond. Dress code policies have existed in schools (as well as in the workplace, the home, etc.) for decades, and are less about setting standards and more about governing what a woman can wear on her own body. On October 22, 2018 the male principal and female vice principal of St. Theresa’s Catholic High School in Ontario conducted a random dress code check and “walked into a Grade 12 classroom and asked the girls to stand up to check their skirt lengths as the boys watched” (Alphonso, 2018). The male principal attempted to justify his actions to the female students by stating “You’re putting every male in this building in an awkward situation" and “Legs are pretty” (Alphonso, 2018). Unsurprisingly, the female students of St. Theresa’s were incredibly uncomfortable. Although the principal apologized, the school did not defend the young women and described the situation only as “difficult” (Alphonso, 2018).

It is clear that dress code policies in this scenario and others promote the hypersexualization of girls and women. The policies condition women to be ashamed of their bodies, and unnecessarily sexualize parts of the body such as shoulders and knees. These sexist notions are perpetuated in society, and can be clearly seen through catcalling as just one of many examples. Dress codes, in turn, create a student-to-student relation in which boys are taught to look at women (and any amount of skin showing) as sexual objects. Alphonso (2018) digresses to speak of other dress code policies in Ontario where female students were prohibited from showing their shoulders at all times, while male students were able to attend gym class without a shirt. In no way is it ethical for dress code policies to pertain only to women. Should policies be enacted to set a baseline standard of appropriateness, all uniforms and all dress codes should contain regulations that equally apply to all students regardless of gender identity, race, or class in order to combat discriminatory messages of objectification.

Dress code policies further marginalize girls of colour as they limit cultural practices, such as hair braids or hair scarves, in order to promote a Eurocentric belief of superiority. Dress code policies “other” racial minorities in what Simon de Beauvoir called alterity (Thompson, 1995). Racialized female students are presented as abnormal, defined by reference to white students in what is considered normal (Thompson, 1995). Dress code policies also place limitations on cultural expressions and traditions, and attempt to stifle diverse identity formation. The policies transfer into pedagogy, and how we understand gender, race, and class relations. When we practice inequality and ‘othering’, students will internalize and reproduce such behavior. While it has been written that protests on gender-specific and class-specific dress codes dates back to the 1960s (Lovell, 2019, p. 77), it is clear that much progress is still needed.

The overt sexism behind dress codes teaches us a lot about our perception of the value of women, as well as about the state of education. Policies on dress codes speak to a hidden, heteropatriarchal belief that women of all races and classes, their bodies, and their knowledge are open to the management and control of a higher (male) authoritative being. Just as Marxists and critical theorists look at the social structure of society “to explain the ways in which schools contributed to the unequal allocation of individuals in society” (Weiler, 2000, p. 15) so, too, do feminists. It is clear that schools, which function to replicate societal values, reproduce gender oppression through its higher value and appreciation for men’s education (Weiler, 2000, p. 16). “School practices were underpinned by an official state ideology that deliberately restricted women's options, circumscribing their futures to unpaid domestic labor and low ­paying jobs” (Weiler, 2000, p. 16). The educational policies and practices instruct that it is unacceptable to distract male students, as explicitly stated in the newspaper artifact. Concurrently, it is perfectly permissible to disrupt female students from their learning and cause lost class time by forcing them to assess their clothing or return home to change their outfits (Pavlakis, & Roegman, 2018). Essentially, valuing a man’s learning while “silencing the voices and ignoring the concerns of women” (Martin, 2002, p. 5). It places the onus on the woman to overt male attention, even when she is not asking for it, to avoid inconveniencing them. When she fails to do so, the blame is thrusted upon her as seen in the article.
**School Culture- Stereotypes & Biases in the Classroom**

Stereotypes and biases are also issues girls face in our educational settings today. The theory of gender socialization occurs when girls and boys are conditioned to absorb contrasting expectations, behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and actions that connect back to social norms and stereotypical perceptions of gender (Riegle-Crumb, 2019). The gender norms depict what girls and boys ought to be like and act like, and such expectations linger with a child until adulthood. Riegle-Crumb (2019) says “Gender stereotypes play a prominent role in this theory, as boys are expected to be assertive, aggressive, independent, and strong, and girls are expected to be more docile, submissive, and social” (p. 43). Gender stereotypes negatively impact a girl’s educational experience. For example, girls show statistically lower rates of being disruptive or outspoken in classroom (Riegle-Crumb, 2019). It can be attributed to the stereotype that girls ought to be quiet, meek, and follow rules without encouragement for free speech. According to the works of Stitzel (1979) girls can often feel pressured to keep silent, even in witnessing an erroneous action or verbal remark, for fear of being perceived as oversensitive or overbearing by male students and teachers. The presumption that female students are overly emotional is often juxtaposed with the belief that boys exude rationality. The emotional versus rational dichotomy further propagates the idea that girls must enter into the Humanities where they can express their inner passions through the written word and visual art, while boys are able to utilize their analytical abilities in the fields of Mathematics and Science (Riegle-Crumb, 2019; Martin, 2002).

 What may linger as the gravest example of gender inequality in school culture is the differing treatment that girls and boys receive in the classroom at the hands of their instructors and peers. Unconscious biases held by teachers translate into sexist actions towards female students that ultimately harm their self-worth and competency. Education often hides behind a veil claiming universality, when in reality it does not teach to every child but rather reinforces the superiority of men whose stories are heard in all subjects from English to Science to Art (Weiler, 1989). The past and present state of education has created a hierarchy where “all people are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151) thus producing unequitable learning opportunities. Both Martin (2002) and Riegle-Crumb (2019) confirm that female students are often less likely to be recognized and praised for their hard work in classes such as STEM. Likewise, Riegle-Crumb (2019) and Mahoney (1983) support the claim that male students take up a larger classroom presence than female students in that teachers offer more attention to boys and call on them more often to answer questions and participate. Furthermore, teachers unknowingly hold higher expectations for female students’ behavior returning back to the social norm that women should be obedient (Riegle-Crumb, 2019). Alternatively, they view female students with lower expectations and competencies in subjects such as Mathematics, projecting an expectation of low test scores (Riegle-Crumb & Humphries, 2012). Teachers discriminatorily instructing students in gendered manners whether it be consciously or unconsciously reinforces harmful societal oppression and social construction of gender that then is reproduced, reappropriated, and ingrained in the minds of our students. Both male and female students absorb the gender divide in examples such as: “male students are less likely to include female students in study groups and discussions and more likely to disparage their contributions” (Riegle-Crumb, 2019, p. 48). Unfortunately, such exclusion continues beyond school and into areas like the workplace.

Stereotypical and biased interactions at the hands of teachers perpetuate the institutional sexism that transcends society and flourishes in the classroom. It prevents girls from fully developing “their cognitive and emotional abilities” and capabilities (Fennema, 1973, p. 147). Schools and teachers represent social order and societal values, and thus reinforce the functions of our capitalistic society in order for current systemic functions of heteropatriarchy to continue to thrive (Lee, Marks, & Byrd, 1994; Nelsen, 1981). The hidden curriculum- the lessons not explicitly taught to students but undoubtedly learned- conditions male students that female students are less intelligent and skilled, and causes an internalization of inferiority in female students.

Through an intersectional lens, it is important to note that the superior view of male students in Science and Mathematics classes is often directed towards white, male students. The perception of innate intelligence and rationality aligns with Eurocentric ideologies also perpetuated in schools, and teachers subconsciously view white males as examples of success, skill, and intellect. White male students are also perceived to have higher overall class performance and more diverse abilities when compared to male students of other ethnicities as well as female students (Spender and Sarah, 1980). Riegle-Crumb & Humphries (2012) “note that racial/ ethnic minority students as well as female students are likely to encounter negative status expectations in math classrooms as stereotypes of men's superior math skills do not in general refer to all males, but rather to the presumed advantage inherent to white males in particular” (p. 291). Analyzing stereotypes and biases of student competency and achievement via intersectionality can illuminate societal racism as well as sexism that continue to reproduce. The stories of Black women are seldom studied in curriculum despite holding a completely unique female perspective, leaving an impression that Black women are not considered valuable (Omolade, 1987). Society continues to privilege and uphold white males despite the laborious work of feminists and anti-racist activists throughout the years. In order to alter perceptions of ability and disability in education, seemingly, there needs to be explicit attention to intersections of race and gender (Gillborn, 2015; Gonzales, 1980).

**Why Are We *Still* Talking About Feminism?**

 The 1990s was a significant decade for the popularization of female liberation. With an explosion of all-girl bands like the Spice Girls and Bikini Hill (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013), the notion of gender politics was brought into the lives of listeners all around the world. The bands sang lyrics of girl power and rebellion making the movement towards women’s freedom feel even more palpable and close to home (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013). Collectives of girls and women began feeling empowered to stand up against male control and sought new ways to dress and act that opposed patriarchal and stereotypical examples of femininity. However, the widespread promotion of feminism in recent decades has led to a false presumption that societal equality has been achieved and that women now no longer face hardships such as pay inequality.

 During the female liberation movement, girl power was a concept that emerged as a youth movement to stress the vigor and authority of women and girls. It constructed an archetype that white, middle class girls represented individualism and responsibility (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013). It was an attempt to convince girls that they could obtain whatever they desired and achieve anything they wished for (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013). Proliferating beyond young girls, girl power also reached boys and men creating a perception that women achieved liberation and sexism was an extinct concept (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013). Extending into contemporary times, if the dominant narrative continues to present all girls as high-achieving and independent without any struggles in sight, then the following assumption may be that there are no pending issues around sex and gender that girls ought to be concerned about (Pomerantz, Raby, & Harris, 2017). Being that girls and women are on average achieving higher test scores than boys and are making enormous strides in the workplace (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013), the narrative that inequality is extinct goes unquestioned and regarded as factual- thus becoming neutral knowledge. The continued challenges women and girls face are unnoticed and impending hardships are no longer legitimized. The perception held by some is that today’s women no longer face any injustices because they are afforded the opportunities to choose what they want to study, where they want to work, what they want to wear, and so on. If women are succeeding, why would we still require feminism?

 I must underscore that the notion of achieved equality believe by certain members of society is detrimental to women and girls as it is indeed a myth. While women’s rights have ameliorated and women are thriving in all fields, societal equality has not been achieved and feminism remains contemporarily relevant as studies continue to show that girls face repeated sexism and oppression (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013; McLeod, 2019). In addition to the gendered policies, stereotypes, and biases experienced in schools, girls still face staggering amounts of gender-based bullying, high rates of sexual assaults, catcalling, domestic violence, as well as ingrained perceptions of female inferiority in comparison to men (Secret Teacher, 2019). Based on a study performed in the United Kingdom on teenage students, “nearly a third (31%) of boys believe female politicians are not as good as male politicians” (Secret Teacher, 2019). Ingrained systemic inequality is abounding, and limits the opportunities, choices, and successes of women in ways that may not be visible or obvious. Feminism is still relevant and much needed in order to illuminate sexism. Without applying an intersectional lens, an accurate picture of reality is not present because not all women are given opportunities or possess the ability to make decisions for themselves (Spanier, 1982). Sexism ought to be constructed as a collective societal issue in which all individuals are implicated, and some girls are impacted more heavily than others. When sexism is presented as a problem of the past, it becomes an individualized issue weighing on the shoulders of girls who feel that they are facing injustices alone and must discover a solution independently (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013). It also negates the efforts of intersectional feminists and women of colour who are continually fighting for Black women to be seen as fully human members of society (Nash, 2019).

Feminism can feel like a loaded term and, at times, even a bad word. It has assumed negative connotations by individuals who are not privy to the systemic oppression women of all classes and races continue to face. The adverse feeling towards the term can cause teachers to shy away from bringing ideas of feminism into the classroom and discussing the concepts with their students for a variety of reasons. Perhaps teachers feel the pressure to remain neutral because they think they should not disclose their own thoughts or opinions, and must not entertain controversial issues so not to sway student opinion or be accused of indoctrination. The vulnerability of making one’s personal ideologies visible and apparent to students may cause teachers to hesitate over backlash from angry parents. Likewise, a teacher’s administration team may want to appease parents and thus prefer their staff not discuss contentious topics. Whatever the concern, apprehension, or reservation might be over exploring feminism, sexism still harbors in classrooms and schools. Women have been fighting for equal opportunities in education for over 100 years and it is time for their pleas to be heard (Weiler, 1994).

**Defining Feminist Pedagogy and The Feminist Teacher**

 I turn here to the incorporation of a new pedagogy, a new way of seeing education, and a new way of instructing children in our schools that will assist in addressing the problem of gender inequities in the classroom and overall education at large. Feminist theory is one of the many discourses that emerged out of the 1950s movement away from traditional understandings of curricula (Shrewsbury, 1987). Feminist pedagogy is described as a “teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies” (Shrewsbury, 1987, p.6). Shrewsbury (1987) describes it as a vision for what education can and should look like, but unfortunately is not because of systemic inequalities. It is a means for students and teachers to “work to achieve mutual goals both as a collective and as individuals. Feminist pedagogy gives emphasis to empowering students’ voices, collaboration, community building and validating knowledge based on experience” through its specific emphasis on gender relations (McCusker, 2017, p. 445). It is a reflective process actively engaged with classroom materials to illuminate the struggles of sexism and racism (Shrewsbury, 1987, p.6). Multi-faceted in its educational approach, feminist pedagogy can assist students to reframe their ideas of education and educators, and broaden their awareness of equality and collectivity. Feminist pedagogy can also be a direct and pertinent means for teachers to expand their instruction and advance in their tenacity for societal change (Shrewsbury, 1987).

 Linda Briskin (1994) builds upon Shrewsbury’s (1987) work and eloquently describes what it means to incorporate feminist pedagogy to become a feminist teacher*.* She explains various contradictions women face in the educational setting, and three strategies to create educational reform. As well, she states that teachers must “unravel the contradictions women experience as learners, as teachers, as feminists, as change-makers” to properly establish feminist pedagogy (Briskin, 1994 p. 443). Briskin’s (1994) contradictions include “contradictions women bring to the classroom” (p. 443), “contradictions women experience as educators” (p. 448), and “contradictions experienced by activists” (p. 459). Because classrooms are extremely gendered spaces, Briskin (1994) describes three strategies that emerge out of said contradictions to become a feminist teacher: teacher leadership, anti-sexism, and reclaiming feminism in the classroom. Due to the scope of this paper, I will not be exploring the contradictions in this section but rather provide focus on Briskin’s strategies for the practical improvement of classroom experiences.

 Both Shrewsbury (1987) and Briskin (1994) believe in the power of leadership, and Briskin’s (1994) first strategy for implementing feminist pedagogy in order to become a feminist teacher is teaching leadership. Leadership is a guidance quality that exudes control, direction, and command- it is also a quality most often attributed to males. It is “the embodiment of our ability and our willingness to act on our beliefs” (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 11). The bias that only males create strong leaders often begins in classrooms. Boys are praised for regulating and taking charge of an activity, while girls are reminded not to be controlling. Briskin (1994) states that leadership is a form of empowerment, and feminist pedagogy seeks to empower all people without limiting the power of any group. She goes on to state that teachers ought to explicitly teach leadership and about the culture of power in the classroom, especially to students who do not benefit from heteropatriachal privilege. Teachers must bring light to the agency students have outside the walls of the schools, and encourage them to use it in an effort to advocate for change.

 The second strategy concerns itself with anti-sexism. Briskin (1994) encourages anti-sexist education in order to make gender “an official rather than unofficial factor” (p. 454). It also illuminates an intersectional quality in that it makes visible other unequal power relations such as race, class, and sexual orientation (Briskin, 1994). The key aspect of anti-sexism education lies in that it relocates the issue of sexism from one of morality to one of political practice (Briskin, 1994). As opposed to be concerned with who is and is not sexist, anti-sexism calls for putting energy and focus into how to change the current political and social makeup of society to dismantle gender oppression while highlighting the woman’s experience- both of oppression and of strength (Fisher, 1981). Discussing with students the barriers, obstacles, and challenges women face in various aspects of society (eg. the workplace, sports, child-reading, etc.) is far more productive to bring awareness to gender inequality than simply encouraging girls to pursue whatever they set their mind to- a strategy Briskin (1994) calls non-sexist education.

 The third strategy is reclaiming feminism in the classroom. This strategy is noteworthy in its essence as teachers must discover determination to channel their authority and influence. Briskin (1994) too agrees that it is “critical” to the process of social change (p. 458). Reclaiming feminism involves bringing a wide array of literature into the class, and having students analyze and reflect upon the diversity of women’s experiences to develop a better understanding of feminism’s pluralistic nature and the strength of women (Briskin, 1994, p. 459). It also includes the importance for individuals to title themselves as feminists in order to build relationships, create connections, and foster community (Shrewsbury, 1987). While I personally have encountered many people who refuse or denounce the label of naming oneself a feminist, Briskin (1994) underscores its necessity as we are collectively working together and are part of a movement (p. 559). Much like how those who do not eat animal products consider themselves vegan, or those that concern themselves with environmental affairs are environmentalists, we must also place a term for passionate followers to connect to and align with. The value of feminist pedagogy is accentuated by the fact that it empowers educators to identify as feminist teachers. By a teacher specifically identifying as an empowered feminist, it exemplifies to female students that their identity formation as equal and worthy individuals is a priority in the classroom. It also represents a commitment to combat gender oppression, unambiguously communicating to girls that they have a champion and support system so that they do not feel as though they are facing adversities in isolation.

Lastly, as part of Briskin’s (1994) third strategy, feminist teachers become champions for equality. In naming oneself as a feminist, the teacher becomes a role model and leader for their female students (Shrewsbury, 1987; Ropers-Huilman, 1997). A feminist teacher employs a lens of feminist pedagogy in all that they do in order to foster “community, a sense of shared purpose, a set of skills for accomplishing that purpose, and the leadership skills” while breaking down patriarchal oppression and embodying equality (Shrewsbury, 1987, p.14). A large component for female feminist teachers is framing one’s identity as powerful, autonomous, competent, and capable of uplifting the community around her while fighting for a shared vision of a better future for girls (McCusker, 2017; Howe, 1983). While classroom teaching was historically allocated to women due to its low salary and belief that school was an extension of the home requiring a maternal figure (Weiler, 1989), women have reappropriated their classroom to be points of change as opposed to points of cultural reproduction. If the goal is for female students to realize their potential, then they must see it exemplified first.

Applying feminist pedagogy through a lens of intersectionality is a teacher’s way to attend to issues of sexism perpetually occurring in education exacerbating its relevancy today in our schools. Celebrating classroom diversity of gender and race is of the utmost importance for feminist teachers in order to resist dissolving students’ unique life experiences and aspects of identity into the dominant narrative (Shapiro, 1991). An implication for the pedagogical application is the classroom focus shifts from biased curricular content to an effortful rejection of the dominant cannon to underscore the individual; in doing so, the teacher’s relationship “to the work is secondary to her relationship with the student” (Shapiro, 1991, p. 75). An additional implication would be that, through feminist pedagogy, teachers become equipped to “help their students grow as people with race, gender, class and cultural identities that position them unequally within and beyond their classrooms and schools, and equip them with the language and histories of struggle and possibility” to be cognizant of intersecting forms of oppression and strive for change (Maher & Weiler, 2002 p. 3). Pedagogical approaches that do not attend to gender and race will negatively affect many students in that they will be inadequately prepared to resolve the struggles concerning gender inequalities and the perpetuation of male interests. In addressing education and its direct links to power (Fisher, 1981) feminist pedagogy teaches female students how to question, process, and contend with the marginalization they face as opposed to pretending it does not exist. Students in classrooms that utilize feminist pedagogy are active, take risks, and model positive behavior (Shrewsbury, 1987). Classroom teaching is not only about instructing mandatory curricular outcomes and proving learning via an assessment, it is about teaching to the whole child and providing the best opportunities for a bright and equitable future. Ignoring a detrimental problem like sexism is to ignore a barrier that maliciously damages our female students.

**Tips for Teachers**

 Throughout this paper, I have outlined issues of gender inequality in education. By articulating the systemic sexism behind dress codes, stereotypes, and biases, the harmful effects on the educational experiences of female students can be illuminated. While some individuals may believe that gender inequality is no longer an issue, the continued mistreatment of girls in school at the hands of their teachers and peers prompts the need for educational reform. Teachers, such as myself, wish the best for their students and must implement new ideologies in order to make this aspiration a reality. Through transforming into a feminist teacher and applying a feminist pedagogy, both female teachers and female students can reclaim their self-confidence, achieve academic success, and strive to push societal boundaries.

 I conclude this feminist endeavor with a list of tangible ways for teachers to incorporate feminist ideas into their own practice as well as implications for doing so. Feminism can be a means to help female students find their voice while questioning the privilege and sexism that is so pervasive in the classroom and beyond (Shapiro, 1991). I see feminism as the tool to actualize the vision of what education ought to be like and what our girls require to develop into their best selves (Sandell, 1991).

1. Begin by fostering a classroom atmosphere of respect.

Discussing complex topics can leave students with mixed emotions of anger, sadness, or even confusion. It can be dangerous for students to harbour such emotions without the awareness that they can openly discuss what they feel. Teachers ought to explain to students that a variety of sentiments may arise during difficult conversations around sexism and feminism, and they are free to discuss their emotions with the class without the fear of judgement. It is helpful to remind students to channel such emotions towards an aspiration for social change, as opposed to feelings of guilt. An implication of utilizing this strategy would be creating a positive and supportive ambiance in the classroom. As well, it would also teach students about fairness, equity, and compassion when everyone must be respected (Shrewsbury, 1987). One strategy to creating an atmosphere of respect would be for the teacher and students to collectively create a class creed that promotes support for all students. A second strategy would be to conduct an anonymous class survey asking students what they expect of their teachers, classmates, and themselves during conversations and activities teaching feminism and sexism in order to focus their attention on the importance of classroom atmosphere and establish commitment to kindness (Copp & Kleinman, 2008).

2. Name it!

Explicitly talk about varying scenarios of inequality and inequity women face. These conversations will look very different in a first grade class as compared to a high school class. Teachers know the emotional maturity of their students and ought to be sensitive to that. For teachers with younger students, this could be as simple as sitting in a circle and holding a whole-group conversation regarding why it is unfair if a girl does not get to do the same activity or job that a boy does. For older students, it may be small group discussions accompanied by a writing exercise on negative implications of gender inequality and the harm of sexism going unacknowledged. It could also be small groups examining how they inadvertently reproduce sexism, and making plans for bettering the future and their own actions (Copp & Kleinman, 2008).

3. Encourage positive talk on a daily basis!

Language is an extremely powerful tool that can be used for both good and evil. As teachers, we embody gender equality and are positive role models for our students to set the standard for proper behavior (Shrewsbury, 1987). Kindly let students know why utilizing sayings such as “like a girl” to define a negative performance are disrespectful and hurtful. While it may be simpler for teachers to pretend they did not hear such a comment, they owe it to their female students to shut down such behavior immediately. The implications here would be to dismantle the sexist language that often goes unnoticed but that has extreme psychological effects on a girl’s self-confidence and self-identity.

4. Aim your teaching at dismantling dominant narratives.

It can be easy to rely on pre-made resources such as textbooks to guide your lessons. However, textbooks fall privy to presenting a male-dominated story that excludes female experiences, challenges, and voices. Wherever time permits, do your best to create resources or edit existing resources to include women’s voices and experiences. For example, when discussing Scientists that have made large contributions and discoveries, include women such as Maria Merian or Chien-Shiung Wu. Be careful not to generalize one singular narrative to describe all women. Use terminology like ‘some women’, ‘many women’, etc. to delineate that not all women will align with your statements.

5. Lessons with a feminist trajectory do not have to always be complicated!
Note that you may have to revisit your lessons.

While students would love an elaborate lesson instructing the foundational understandings of feminism equipped with interactive technologies and activities, that is not always practical or possible. Class discussions and free-writing exercises are simple ways to get students thinking about gender oppression. For example, a whole-group writing activity asking students about the negative implications surrounding the fact that our most well-known and studied Scientists, explorers, authors, play-writers, political leaders, etc. are all men is an extremely beneficial entry point to discussing inequality with room to explore examples, show images, and branch off to other exercises. Note that you may have to revisit your lessons multiple times as students require time and patience to grasp such large concepts and convoluted issues.

6. Turn to the Program of Studies of any subject area in your preferred Grade and look for areas that can be entry points for feminism.

The Program of Studies often lacks specific and expansive outcomes attending to gender inequality. For example, when discussing the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Grade 9 Social Studies, place an emphasis on Women’s Suffrage and take it one step further by examining *why* Canada’s allowance of only white women the right to vote at this time is extremely problematic. The implication here is that students receive more in-depth knowledge on women’s stories and also comprehend that the experiences of marginalized women do not look like those of white women who still possess privilege based on their race.

7. Have discussions with students about why women’s voices, experiences, and opinions regarding diverse topics have not received the proper attention (Sandell, 1991).

Including female perspectives is important, as is talking about why inequality is damaging for girls. However, neither attend to the societal structures of inequality that currently exist both unconsciously and consciously in the minds of citizens. It is critical to address with students what is limiting women from achieving equal amounts of success, equal opportunities, and equal pay to their male counterparts. The goal is hopefully to bring awareness to the invisible obstacles that women face, and acknowledge that girls cannot just do whatever they set their mind to because of societal factors that limit their accomplishments.

8. Encourage positive collaboration and respectful discussions between female students.

Fisher (1993) stresses that when girls have the freedom to collectively explore their class work in connection to their own feelings, opinions, choices, and actions, they are more likely to feel accepted and supported. Likewise, Shrewsbury (1987) believes “The classroom becomes a model of ways for people to work together to accomplish mutual or shared goals, and to help each other reach individual goals” relating to “gender justice and overcoming oppressions” (p. 7).

9.You may face backlash or critique for going against the norm.

In an instance where your pedagogical choices are questioned by staff or parents, you can use outcomes that pertain to gender (albeit there are few), multiple perspectives, current events, citizenship, leadership, responsibility, and collectivity as Canadians to provide a justification for your infusion of feminist pedagogy that will be backed by Alberta Education as it attends to mandatory curricular outcomes. Do not forget that you are the leader of your classroom, you possess power and agency, and ought not be intimidated because of your choices (Briskin, 1994).

10. Realize that you (unfortunately) cannot do it all.

Inequality is an outlandishly complex issue and is prevalent in every single facet of our society. It is impossible for teachers to take on every aspect of the matter with so many other requirements on their to-do lists. What is most critical is not addressing every component of inequality, but rather “teaching in a particular way: recognizing the relations of power- based on gender, class, race, and sexual orientation- that permeate the classroom” (Briskin, 1994, p. 462). It is about teaching students *how to* *think* about the existing social structures through a new lens that illuminates areas of injustice, so that they make continue to scrutinize and name what is prejudiced while demanding an alternative.

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