

Pedagogical Credo Based on Feminist Pedagogy as a Way to Voice Personal Identities

Sigal Oppenheim-Shachar, Bar Ilan University & Levinsky College of Education,
Israel

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Abstract

The underlying assumption in teacher training programs is that formulating a pedagogical identity is an integral part of the process via which an education student becomes an education professional, who can support and defend her approach and actions, and therefore become a better educator. The literature shows that developing a pedagogical credo can support a process that renders teachers. However, it is not clear how we can support this process, and how to incentivize it. Complicating this is the fact that most teachers are female, so gender power relations are yet another perspective to be considered in the positioning process of incoming teachers. This situation requires them to decide whether to change or to assimilate, and because of this, many newer teachers quit teaching or burn out early in their careers. This paper is based on semi-structured interviews with 12 female education students. The interviews examined the development of a pedagogical credo based on feminist pedagogy after one year of student teaching. The underlying assumption is that creating a space anchored in feminist principles offers female education students a significant learning experience and the opportunity for personal exploration that gives visibility and a voice to an array of personal identities. To overcome these barriers, educators need an approach that can assist incoming teachers who want to act as change agents to negotiate their voices and act according to their credos. The opportunity to implement a feminist pedagogy and philosophy and an educational method that derives therefrom might ease the indecision between change and assimilation; it also has the potential to help them strengthen their capabilities and abilities to negotiate their credos.

Keywords: Feminist pedagogy, Pedagogical credo, pedagogical authority, traditional institutional culture, change agents.

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Introduction

In this short lecture I will describe the findings of a study, soon to be published in an article, which examined the development of a personal female pedagogical credo among pre-service teacher education students. The students participated in a one year pre-service practicum supervision conducted by me at 2015. These students, all female, studying towards a BA and a teaching certificate, and planning to teach in primary schools.

I designed the course – both contents and teaching methods, on feminist pedagogy principles, and on the literature-based approach that modeling which reflects my personal pedagogical credo, as their lecturer and practicum supervisor, can facilitate and accelerate the development their own pedagogical credo as future teachers', as well as their voice and the feeling that they are entitled to shape their own voice.

It is important to me as the teacher of the future teachers, to demonstrate the meaning of my feminist pedagogy that is to "walk my talk". Encouraging them to voice themselves, and "speak out". So, here today I would like to highlight the need to add gender as a topic into student training practicum. In order to address the social meaning of gender into the student's training process. I will show that it will assist them to develop their pedagogical credo, shaping their pedagogical authority while expanding their resilience resources and flexibility proficiency.

Theoretical background

First layer- Practicum can promotes strength and resilience

The practicum is of great importance in the teacher training process, for novice teachers (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). It was found to contribute to developing the student's pedagogic resilience, and their flexibility in the face of situations that may be stressful, blurred, ambiguous, and even arouse feelings of apprehension and helplessness. Aware of their personal credo, and having developed greater resilience and flexibility, the pre-service student and future teacher is better equipped to explore and understand the 'why' that drives her actions and reactions. In other words, as part of the process of formulating and articulating the personal pedagogical credo the novice also develops a systematic reflexive perspective, and is able to take ownership of her formal technical knowledge and make it their own (Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2011).

Second layer- gendered awareness can promotes strength and resilience

It is an empirical fact that women make up most of the teaching and management staff in the education system, particularly, but not exclusively in primary schools. Their quick burnout is also documented. Therefore, I find it interesting that very few studies have examined the possible relationship between burnout and gender identity among teachers. Morwenna Griffiths (2006) argues that among other things, the female teacher operates in arena that is predominantly female, but patriarchal and hierarchal in its culture. Such a space does not provide female teachers with equable conditions, which research shows are conducive for learning. Griffiths also argues that the hegemonic educational discourse is based on characteristics related to the masculinity

- individualism, competitiveness and performativity. A female teacher that strives to change the educational dialogue and to foster diverse learning methods often runs the risk of eroding her resources of resilience and opposition.

This is underscored by Belenky and her colleagues (1986), whose seminal work "Women's Way of Knowing" focused on "the development of self, voice and mind". They discussed women's ability to find their voice, their personal voice, particularly in contrast to silence – and in this context "silence" does not mean an absence of speech, but rather a state of being voiceless, silence in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless, and subject to the whims of authority. Beverly Skeggs (2005) who examine the hierarchal spaces produce (elevate or downgrade) value, explore the conditions under which women can gain some 'respectability'. In other words, resist the self-silencing processes.

Thus the relationship between giving voice, resilience and developing a personal pedagogical credo is significant, and must be taken into consideration in the work of the pedagogic supervisor (White, 2013), particularly if she strives to foster the voice, resilience and development of the future teacher who herself seeks to be an agent of change. (Like me, for instance).

One goal of the learning and practicum process is to prepare novice teachers to negotiate and bridge contradicting narratives, particularly in situations that carry the potential to create or heighten self-doubt. More specifically in power-based dialogues, for example with the school principal, the staff, parents, and even the pupils.

It has been shown that this can be countered by gendered observation that fosters awareness of the female teacher's traditional identity position, while strengthening the relationship between her varied identity positions and the knowledge she accumulates (Luke, 1996).

Hence, my argument so far is that a novice teacher who has not yet developed this awareness may: (a) tend to be silent, feeling less worthy to "speak out" and make her voice heard, especially if this voice carries a message that is in opposition to or deviates from the institutional discourse; and (b) may comply with social norms which demand that she conduct herself as a 'good woman' – in other words a caring teacher in the sense of being nice, mother-like and devoted. Moreover, this newly developed awareness can reinforce a sense of deservedness to express their personal pedagogic credo, fostered during the practicum. Taken together these processes can reduce the likelihood that female teachers will burn out, drop out, or give up the desire to carry out significant education processes.

Third layer- In what ways feminist Pedagogy can promotes strength and resilience?

To prepare students to negotiate these situations successfully, the mutual impact between professional identity and self-identity should be explored and examined throughout the education process. Students should be encouraged and guided to integrate formal pedagogical knowledge with their personal experiences, their experiences as students with their intuition and informed understanding of what will

be considered pedagogically fitting. This are some of the principles that drives from feminist pedagogy:

- A. Feminist pedagogy fosters meaningful learning, defined as learning that is collaborative, non-judgmental, and part of a non-linear and non-uniform process that invites diversity in pace, style and teaching practices, as an integral part of the learning environment (Webb et al, 2002).
- B. Feminist pedagogy fosters awareness of what can be viewed as an ironic state of affairs - that an education system that tends to be comprised mainly of women, also tends to be blind to the significance of gender. In other words, feminist pedagogy can be facilitative as it connects learning to identity positions, weakened voices and learning processes (Luke, 1996).

Based on this understanding of feminist pedagogy, I assume that learning based on feminist pedagogy principles can: (1) raise awareness; (2) foster learning conditions conducive to creating change; (3) accelerate the formulation of a pedagogical credo and pedagogical resilience; (4) create the desire to provide different learning conditions for their pupils. And to these I would add what feminist pedagogy can offer to the teachers themselves, enabling them: (1) to create environments where they will face less incompatibility and suffer less burnout (2) while at the same time experiencing themselves as change agents – in other words, strive to reproduce the same learning conditions for their pupils – an environment that is non-hierarchal, non-linear and non-judgmental.

My study posed two questions:

- A. Did the fact that I discussed my pedagogical credo, formulated in the spirit of feminist pedagogy, with the participants, and modeled its principles in the course setting, methods and dialogue, demonstrate to them the need and importance of having a personal pedagogical credo, and did this motivate them to develop their own personal credo?
- B. Which, if any, of the feminist principles which they learned and experienced in the course percolate into their language and pedagogical conception?

A few words about the methodology- participants, procedure and ethical aspect -

The participants –

Ten pre-service education students studying towards a BA in education and a teaching certificate, and planning to teach in primary schools. Most were from blue-collar families, third-generation to immigrants from North Africa, Middle East and Central Asia, also known as 'Mizrahi'. Their families of origin were predominantly traditional, with a gendered division of labor, gendered expectations and sometimes also a gendered hierarchy. They tended to doubt that they were entitled to assert that they 'know', and were inclined to interpret the definition of a 'good teacher' as someone who is sensitive, caring and devoted.

While most of the participants explicitly stated that they chose to become teachers because they saw it is a mission, one-on-one conversations indicated that for some it was an 'automatic' choice, as teaching it is perceived to be a convenient occupation,

especially for women. Others ultimately ended up in this study program after they experienced low academic efficacy.

The procedure-

As noted I designed the course curriculum and the setting based on feminist pedagogy. For example, the learning process and setting fostered collaboration and trust and was experiential, interactive, and relational. Also, students participated in what I will call peer circles conducted during the year. Reminiscent of ‘consciousness or awareness raising’ circles of the 1960’s and 70’s, the participants sit in a circle and discuss their experiences in the practicum and as students, exposed to different perspectives while also finding commonalities.

Furthermore, lesson topics were written on the board at the beginning of each class, and participants were invited to contribute questions, initiate a discussion and simulate ambiguous, blurry and anxiety-creating situations, as part of a discourse that stresses a setting free of judgment, competition and comparison. The goal of the first stage of the learning process was to enable the participants integrate official, formal and theoretical knowledge with personal knowledge that emerged from their experience.

Collection and analysis of findings-

Data was collected from the final course papers and from semi-structured interviews, and analyzed based on thematic coding (Charmaz, 2006)

Ethical issues-

In my capacity as their lecturer and practicum supervisor I was concerned that study participants might feel pressured or coerced to participate in the study. I took several steps to address this issue: I made it very clear that they would participate of their own free will and with their full consent; in an interview I conducted I asked each one to choose a pseudonym; after the academic year ended, and I completed the article I sent them each a copy; finally, I received their full consent before approving the article for publication.

I share with you this because it reflects in my opinion, the respectable dislodgement, and demonstrates the ways, I try to practice and maintain feminist pedagogy.

The findings- Three major themes-

First theme – What story do I tend to tell myself about myself?

You know, all my life I heard background noises, positive and negative voices... Let’s say my mother, my brother, and now also you – you tell me – ‘don’t worry Or, you can do it... It is a small feat for you, we believe in you’. And negative voices that say, you’re black and no one really trusts you here. Like for example what happened in the first class I taught as part of the practicum, when I didn’t succeed in standing in front of the class and talking.

Sigal: And what ultimately won over?

Or (smiling): of course the positive voices. What, look at me, how I cope and overcome... a success story!

As Or is a second generation to Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia, and she often experiences a judgmental and stigmatizing attitude that could have jeopardized her sense of self-worth. In the face of this attitude, that could have caused her to doubt her abilities and roused feelings of unworthiness, she was able to motivate herself and overcome the reservations she had internalized, while allowing the supporting and positive voices to be heard and help her cope. Through this process she finds and develops her power and, together with the external support she is open to accept, creates an internal dialogue that translates her coping efforts into a 'success' story.

The experiences described by these future teachers indicate that most of them are ambivalent about their abilities. Some are scarred by past experiences which they continue their efforts to overcome. Now, through the process they experienced in feminist pedagogy, they are able to examine past experiences without judging themselves, equipped with understanding and knowledge they can use to tell themselves the story in a new way that is empowering and infused with elements of success.

Second theme – translating an emotional experience into cognitive insights

I learned how in the peer circle in your class there is a feeling that it is safe to speak out and talk. It brought about a very significant change in me. And I would take it to other places, also to my pupils. The possibility and ability not to judge, to receive and to find positive things. To take things in a positive direction, and later conceptualize the experiences and feelings, this was a personally strengthening experience (Hili).

Constructing a different and empowering narrative is made possible through a different way of experiencing learning, an environment and process that are pleasant and accepting owing to the principles of feminist pedagogy. For example the peer circle I described before, that enables the participants to reveal their vulnerability, give it a place and a voice, witness that they are not judged by others, and then weave this new experience into a new story which they shape and own.

The discussions as mirroring, enabled me to take responsibility, to think professionally. You said what you had to say, but you did not impose it on us, leaving us to maintain our own opinion (Almog).

The discourse conducted in the peer circle enabled the participants to expose both their less known and more well-known parts, without fearing judgement. It also helped them integrate, formal knowledge with personal knowledge. This is not as common in teaching processes based a model of accumulated knowledge, that usually requires advance preparation and planning which establishes a setting based on hierarchical relations of knowledge (Shulman, 2005, 2002), ranking which knowledge is more worthy and which is viewed as less worthy. The need to transmit contents may sometimes hinder the ability to focus on the process, and most of all the learners. As Griffiths and her colleagues note (Griffiths & Greene, 2002), under these

conditions teachers usually tend to give priority to operational learning that reinforces a competitive climate, rather than to integrative or transformative learning.

Which leads to the third theme – equipped with developed or heightened awareness and understanding of why they act and react as they do and an alternative interpretation, the participants can now examine and decide for themselves what they choose to take with them from the course and from what they experienced, both into their personal life and into their classrooms as future teachers.

A good teacher is a teacher that can be open to all kinds of possibilities in teaching, and then the child will also be open to this. If the child knows that I do not judge him based on his achievements than he will be less ashamed and pressured, and will be more open to learning. [As a teacher] it is difficult to be open, because all the time you are asked for grades, grades... progress, and this has a closing effect. But I will insist on conveying such a message. Because I remember how I felt when I was transparent, when I was not seen or heard in class. (Shoval).

Shoval's understanding that this is a parallel process, which she will strive to create for her pupils, strengthens her understanding of the relationship between content and process, and enables her to see the context, what she can take from every experience, and through it continue to echo her knowledge about what she knows to be most conducive way to teach and learn. This will also inform her ability, power and sense of worthiness and deservedness, so that she no longer experiences herself as transparent. She can also take this knowledge to her classroom so her pupils do not experience these feelings, at least in the school setting, as she creates a positive learning environment she herself experienced.

In conclusion-

Many novice teachers are afraid to speak up since they view themselves as less worthy and less knowing, so much so that they may detach from their personal experiences, not trusting their personal knowledge. Unsure of themselves they tend to rely on formal, technical, rational knowledge that is detached from the broader context, to pass this on to their pupils. In doing so, as Griffiths argues, they replicate the same learning modes and the same class climate that classifies and categorizes worthy and less worthy knowledge, worthy and less worthy pupils.

In order to find ways to address the Issue, she arise, I described a course based on feminist learning principles - egalitarian and collaborative in a participatory, experiential, inclusive setting, where 'speaking out' is practiced and possible. And tolerant listening and deep reflexive dialogue are the guiding principle.

The study findings show that a pre-service teacher training framework, designed and conducted according to these principles, can gradually foster an expanded sense of worthiness and pedagogical authority. It is a transformative process, as students learn to recognize, identify, name and trust their abilities and own their knowledge. By modeling the setting and the process of feminist pedagogical principles, those that have the authority to qualify future teachers can offer pre-service teachers the opportunity to observe and experience feminist pedagogy first-hand, in the hope that

it will motivate them to replicate the process and create a transformative experience for their own pupils.

I can only hope that the change I observed in my students was not only rhetorical or superficial. That the principles and methods which place value on collaboration, interaction and mutual respect will enable them to maintain an educational climate and implement learning processes in their classroom that challenge dominant competitive and uniform systematic learning processes, as they strive to address fixed social hierarchies (at least in their classroom), and replication of gendered power relations, and power relations in general.

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Contact email: sigal.oppenhaim-shachar@biu.ac.il