Feminist Pedagogy as a New Initiative in the Education of South African Teachers

Not much has been published about feminist pedagogy and teacher education in South Africa. The purpose of this article is to introduce the above to the South African education fraternity, where it has not yet found a comfortable home. The problem of the study focuses on two issues: the lack of an alternative teacher education perspective and experience in South Africa, and the possibility of teacher education for the new gender order, and a revival of the gender equity debate. The purpose of the study is to reflect on the gendered (patriarchal) teacher education models, enhance the pre-service teachers’ understanding of the power relations in education, and argue the case for the inclusion of feminist pedagogy in teacher education programmes. A qualitative conceptual document analysis was used as research design. The article is concluded with an exemplar teacher education module in which student teachers are introduced to a critical study of learning to teach (feminist pedagogy), and a feminist classroom setting.

Keywords: post-structuralism, feminist pedagogy and practice, agents of social change, connected and constructed knowledge, plural interpretation, gender invisibility and stereotyping
INTRODUCTION

Globally, teacher education is subjected to perennial attention and critique. Teacher educators who aspire to the inclusion of feminist pedagogy in initial teacher education programmes often embrace the opportunity to integrate feminist perspectives from all educational discourses in the debate. According to Cohee (2004:1), co-editor of the journal Feminist Teacher, the debate focuses primarily on the argument that the academy is a place of power, and that teaching the new may politize education that is inherently political not. During a teacher educator workshop entitled, Restructuring a Syllabus Based on Feminist Pedagogies, the participants put forward the argument that the academy is anything but apolitical, and using feminism in teaching merely makes the politics somewhat clearer (Cohee 2004:1). During the 2013 Annual International Conference on Diversity in Organizations, Communities & Nations, feminist teacher educators from a variety of teacher education disciplines have spent a substantial amount of time discussing the positive ways (activism, community building, empowerment, voice privileging) in which the theory and practice of their modules have changed over time trying out the principles of feminist pedagogy (Author 2013: Personal experience).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem of this study focuses on two issues: firstly, the lack of inclusivity of written sources, and the deconstruction of the identified concepts (content). The researcher critically engaged with the information contained in the existing body of knowledge and understanding of the phenomena related to teacher education from a feminist perspective.

Content analysis was used to analyse the books, conference proceedings, electronic documents, journal articles, and official education curriculum and policy documents. To identify and summarise the messages of the sources an inductive and iterative process of reading the documents and differences in the consulted texts that would corroborate and disconfirm the research question and purpose of the study were identified (Maree, Cresswell, Pieterse, Pieterse, Plano Clark & Van der Westhuizen 2012:70-71). The results of the content analyses were organised according to the following themes: the theoretical framework of the study (feminist post-structuralism), the relation between feminist post-structuralism and education (critical feminist pedagogy and practice), and an alternative teacher education system (feminist teacher education).

RESEARCH QUESTION

A descriptive research question was formulated for the study, namely How can the South African teacher education system be transformed to educate pre-service secondary school teachers to be agents of social change [as connected and constructed knowers] who will enable educators to identify gender bias devices of hegemonic discourse, and open up space for plural interpretation and gender-fair perceptions?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Given the above deliberation and the fact that two-thirds of the teachers in South African public schools are women, the purpose of the study is to put forward a new initiative in the education of pre-service secondary school teachers for them to become agents of social change in terms of gender invisibility and/or stereotyping in school knowledge, gender structure, gender symbolism, and individual gender in education (Arendt 2007:1; Britzman 2003:127; Fardon 2007:15; Weiner 2004:10). To this end, the purpose of the study is to challenge the traditional and more controversial critical frameworks (Steinberg 2000:5; Baruth 2009:16) and to move beyond the ‘broken images’ (gender invisibility and stereotyping), introduce the central tenets of feminist teacher education (post-structuralism, feminism, feminist post-structuralism, critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy) to enhance pre-service teachers’ understanding of the power relations in which they will work without being overwhelmed by them, and argue the case for the inclusion of a new pedagogy (feminist pedagogy) in pre-service teacher education programmes to encourage and achieve gender equity and social justice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research design of the study was a qualitative conceptual document analysis. A literature review of the current, and not so current, yet still sufficiently relevant literature appropriate to the topic of the study was conducted. The information for the study was gathered by means of a survey of a variety of written sources, and the deconstruction of the identified concepts (content). The researcher critically engaged with the information contained in the existing body of knowledge and understanding of the phenomena related to teacher education from a feminist perspective.

The language theory confirms that post-structuralism is a development of structuralism, and seeks to critically extend the insights of structuralism. Post-structuralists radically foreground language, rather than structures, culture, and society which are all interpretations (Barrett 2005:20; Derda in Macksey & Donato 1970:247-272) emphasizes that subjects cannot exist outside of language, the entirety is mediated by language and meaning, and meanings cannot be fixed, because they are deeply contextual and are shifting endlessly. There exists a range of historically and culturally specific possible meanings(), and subjects can never get to the final real meaning, or structure of a society, action or text. For post-structuralists, the subject is a common factor in the analysis of organisations, social meanings, power, and individual consciousness (Weedon 1987:21).

For Weedon (1987:21), language is not reflecting an already given social reality but constitutes and gives meaning to the social realities for subjects, it becomes a critical site for the contestation of meaning, and offers humans various discourses which frame their experiences and ways they live their lives. The way humans give meaning to social relations is both fostered and constrained by their access to existing discourses. These discursive fields consist of competing ways of giving meaning to the world, organizing social institutions and processes, and offering individuals a range of subjectivity modes (Barrett 2005:19-27; Weedon 1987:26, 35). Foucault (as cited in Butler 1993:23) documented the historically-specific discourses which produced sexuality, and indicated that he did not reveal the ‘real truth’ about sexuality, but that ‘the real’ sexuality (what sexuality is) is a product of the historically-specific meaning and discourses (or systems) within which it is enacted, spoken about, or produced.

SUBJECTIVITY

Contrary to the humanist notion of knowing, knowable, and rational subjects, the post-structuralist theory of subjectivity is viewed as a site of dispute and conflict which are produced through a whole range of discourses, and is neither coherent nor
Davies (1993:12) argues that post-structuralism opens up the possibility of agency to the subject through making visible the discursive practices through which she/he is constituted as subject, and the world is made real.

The tensions and instabilities in an individual's subjectivity become visible in a post-structuralist analysis through an examination of the discourses and practices through which the subjectivities are constituted. These discourses and practices are often in tension, providing the subject with multiple layers of contradictory meanings which are inscribed in her/his bodily, social, cultural, and discursive identities (Davies 1993:31). According to Jones (1993:157-167), subjectivities are in motion and always under construction. Letts (2006:624) warns that it is not sufficient to reduce unproblematically to... giving voice to experiences, as if this is a source of true knowledge. All experiences are mediated, and the discursive construction of subjectivities reveals socially-constructed versions of understanding.

POWER AND AGENCY

In terms of the power and agency theory, it is important to start with the premise that post-structuralism propagates a different view of power (Letts 2006:624). Weedon (1987:136) contends that power is created by society using history, politics, and the circumstances of the situation. All social relationships are power relationships, and power is viewed as both a productive and repressive force. The principles of post-structuralism can be applied to all discursive practices to produce them (Butler 1993:23). They are individuals with an ability to respond to a certain response-ability that a post-structuralism can be applied to all discursive practices to produce them (Butler 1993:23).

Feminist post-structuralism and education: feminism pedagogy and practice

The answer to the question of what feminist post-structuralism contributes to education, is according to Valero (2004:35) and Youdell (2006:33) respectively: ... to make sense of, and identify ways of interrupting abiding educational exclusions and inequalities... and as... an attitude of critique to dominant... education research.

For this study, the focus is on the first-mentioned, namely the utilising of feminist pedagogy to make sense of and identify ways to address and transform gender exclusions and inequalities in the South African education system.

Concepts pedagogy and feminism pedagogy

Before discussing the premise and practice of feminist pedagogy, the meanings of the concepts pedagogy and feminism pedagogy provided. Watkins and Mortimore (1999:8) define the concept pedagogy as: ‘...a suitably complex model... [which]... specifies relations between its elements: the teacher, the classroom or other context, content, and view of learning and learning about learning.’ This academic model of pedagogy may be distinguished from the practitioner's model of pedagogy. In the practitioner's model, the emphasis is more on the dynamic interrelationships between all the role-players in the learning context, and the numerous influences on learning (Watkins & Mortimore 1999:1-19). Despite the distinction between approach (academic model) and application (practitioner's model), Giroux and Simon (1989-299) describe the concept pedagogy as an approach which seeks to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations.

The concept feminist pedagogy originated in the 1980s as a means to develop new teaching models which could challenge the dominant educational approaches (Craigbee & Saap 2004). Feminist pedagogy is a form of critical pedagogy and aligns itself with other forms of pedagogy, race, ethnicity, class, post-colonialism, and globalisation. It is grounded in the critical theories of learning and teaching, and facilitates critical and reflective learning processes. Critical pedagogy encourages social understanding and activism, and develops critical thinking and open-mindedness (Hoffmann & Stake 1998:79-97).

Feminist pedagogy is also grounded in feminist theory, and refers to an integrated approach to education (consciousness-raising, oppression and social transformation), teaching strategies, content approaches, classroom practices, and teacher-student relationships (Crabbte & Saap 2002:131-140). Hence, feminist pedagogy encourages the transformation of learners from passive recipients of knowledge to active knowers and agents of social change, and feminist teachers critically engage in dialogue and reflection about both what and how they teach (Currie 1998:347-360).

Six basic principles of feminist pedagogy

Webbe, Allen and Walker (2002:20) and Weiler (1991: 449-474) identified six basic principles of feminist pedagogy. These principles are the reformation of the teacher-learner relationship, empowerment, community building, voice, critical thinking skills, and a broader understanding of truths.

Four ways to practice feminist pedagogy

The purpose of feminist practice is to raise the learners' consciousness about patriarchal oppression, empower them to take action, and assist them to learn specific political strategies. A teaching-learning environment is created where the learners' particular values and lived experiences (especially those of racial, cultural, and gender identities) are relevant. The power in the classroom is decentralised, and the learners are encouraged to voice their perspectives, realities, knowledge, and needs (Rose 1989:488). Robertson (1994:11-15) listed four ways to empower newly-qualified teachers to implement feminist pedagogy: They are the decenring of power, active learning, activist projects, and feminist assessment practices.

To decentralise power in a classroom is difficult, but, according to Garber and Gaudelius (1992:12-33), methods such as active learning and activist projects can assist learners to collaboratively create knowledge, question the patriarchal structures and power relations, and participate in social change. Feminist teachers empower learners by offering opportunities for active learning such as critical thinking and self-analysis, and the balancing of power between the teacher and learners in the classroom. This sharing of power creates space for dialogue which reflects among other things the multiple voices and realities of the learners, a more equal position between the teacher and her/his learners, the learners as known producers, and the decentralisation of the traditional understanding of learning and assessment (Robertson 1994: 11-15).

According to Dean (1996:239-240) and Rose (1989:487-488), activist projects encourage learners to identify real life examples of unfairness and oppression, take action against them, and recognise the potential of feminist discourse outside
of the academic context. The activist projects can take a variety of forms, such as the organisation of letter-writing campaigns for fairness and accuracy in media reporting, groups of learners participating in picket events to resist and challenge violence against women, and national marches for improving the living conditions of women in Africa.

Literature on feminist assessment practices is sparse, possibly because of the incongruity between the notions of feminism and assessment. Nonetheless, the feminist pedagogy literature includes examples of possible feminist assessment techniques. These techniques centre on the power structure of the traditional assessment system and focus on learner voice and agency to provide the learners with agency as they participate in the assessment process. The use of journaling and participatory evaluation(s), which are characterised by interactivity and trust, is considered to be pedagogically sound feminist assessment techniques (Arends 1999:17–38). Assessment techniques borrowed from critical pedagogy can also be considered as suitable feminist assessment approaches and techniques. These include learners who are participating in the creation of assessment criteria and peer- or self-assessment activities (Price, O’Donovan & Rust 2007:143-152). Accardi (2013:79, 83-87) argues that feminist assessment approaches can also be embedded into more traditional forms of assessment if learners reflect on, or evaluate, their learning experiences using product or performance assessment techniques. Debating, interviewing, and focus group exercises can be considered as appropriate assessment methods for feminist pedagogy, provided that the learners’ voice or knowledge are sought (Keessing-Stiles 2000:1-5).

A different teacher education: Applying feminist pedagogy to the education of pre-service teachers

As indicated in the problem statement of the study, most student teachers teach as they themselves were taught, and one way to break the cycle of the male-dominated, hierarchically structured educational system is to bring feminist post-structuralism to bear on teacher education, the usefulness of feminist post-structuralism is demonstrated to the student teachers in order for them to generate personal and professional development (Arends 1999:17–38).

A different teacher education: Applying feminist post-structuralism to teacher education, the usefulness of feminist post-structuralism is demonstrated to the student teachers in order for them to generate personal and professional development (Arends 1999:17–38). Assessment techniques borrowed from critical pedagogy can also be considered as suitable feminist assessment approaches and techniques. These include learners who are participating in the creation of assessment criteria and peer- or self-assessment activities (Price, O’Donovan & Rust 2007:143-152). Accardi (2013:79, 83-87) argues that feminist assessment approaches can also be embedded into more traditional forms of assessment if learners reflect on, or evaluate, their learning experiences using product or performance assessment techniques. Debating, interviewing, and focus group exercises can be considered as appropriate assessment methods for feminist pedagogy, provided that the learners’ voice or knowledge are sought (Keessing-Stiles 2000:1-5).

Section B of the module deals with the theme, Critical pedagogy in the classroom and school. In this section, the student teachers are provided with critical thinking skills to be sensitive to cultural differences (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class), and promote democracy, equity, and social justice in their future classrooms and schools. To achieve this, they are to be introduced to the critical pedagogy literature, with special reference to its central tenets (P. Freire and I. Shot), how it has evolved over time (I. hooks and R. Simon), and the critique within and directed towards it (C.A. Bowers, N. Burbules, H. Gireux, J. Gore, P. McLaren, and S. Parker). The focus is, however, on the feminist perspective (E. Elisworth & H. Weiler).

For Section C of the module entitled, Feminism: education, pedagogy and practice the student teachers are to start with a study of the background to and short history of the development of feminism and gender in education, followed by an exploration of the argument for the adoption of feminist pedagogy to promote gender-equitable practices in the classroom, school, and beyond. The focus in this section is initially on knowledge of the concept feminist pedagogy: its six basic pedagogical principles, four of the ways to practice feminism pedagogy in the classroom, and feminist assessment practices.

The attention then turns to the interrelated contexts which are important for successful feminist teaching, namely authentic dialogue between the learners and teachers as equally knowing subjects, and the social reality of the learners (Freire 1984:49). In this section, the student teachers, in groups of 6, are to design an activist project for Grade 10 learners. The project has to include the following: an appropriate title, a brief overview of the activities, and a launch strategy.

For connected and constructed feminist pedagogical knowing experiences, the student teachers are placed in an experiential learning context (teaching practice schools) which will eventually culminate in individual reflective journals of their practicum experiences, with reference to a few female tales.

As concluding activity for this section, the student teachers are to individually compile an essay using the topic: Talking relevance an alternative teacher education for South Africans! The purpose of the activity is for the student teachers to acknowledge that their study of the feminist pedagogy module occurred within a feminist classroom setting. As background information for this activity, the student teachers are to study two chapters (Chapters 8 and 9) from the book Women’s Ways of Knowing authored by Belensky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), which introduces them to women’s pedagogy.

In Section D, the student teachers are to create individual learning portfolios. A learning portfolio is a flexible tool which engages student teachers in a process of continuous reflection and collaboration on selective evidence of learning. This section is modelled on Zubizarreta’s (2004:1) simple learning portfolio model which consists of three components, namely reflection, documentation, and collaboration.

The learning portfolios of the student teachers are to contain the following assessment evidence: individual written narratives on Casey’s vignette (Circle 1, Reflection), individual practicum reflective journals (Circle 1 and 2, Reflection and Documentation), group activist projects (Circle 3, Collaboration and Mentoring), and individual “Talking relevance …” essays (Circle 2, Documentation).

Refer to Figure 1 below for a schematic representation of the assessment procedure for the module.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the case for feminist pedagogy as a new initiative in the education of South African teachers was argued. It was demonstrated that South African teachers could be educated to be agents of social change to transform South African learners from passive recipients of gendered knowledge to active agents of change who can identify gender bias devices of hegemonic discourse, and open up space for plural interpretation and gender-fair perceptions.

Very little research has been published in South Africa about feminist tales of teacher preparation for certification. This article was an attempt to promote the standing of feminist teacher education research in South Africa. The value of post-structuralism was demonstrated as an eclectic theoretical framework which can be utilised by educational researchers to not only problematise the relationship between gender and teacher education, but also examine and re-examine the relationship from a variety of perspectives. These perspectives will allow for contradictions and resistance, a multiplicity of positioning within the context of interaction, and the voice of the researchers to emerge. In response to Francis’ (1999:387) argument of “… whether a theory which deconstructs other theories, but appears to provide nothing with which to replace them, can be relevant …”, it was illustrated that feminist post-structuralism is much more than an effective tool with which to deconstruct the cultural processes responsible for constituting structures of oppression in pre-service teacher education programmes, but that it provides a way of understanding the world through a plurality of voices and perspectives.

This may result in the recognition and connection between people of competing viewpoints, and social and educational transformation in South Africa. Feminist post-structuralist analyses have yet to be used widely by female and other gender-conscious educational researchers in South Africa, and relatively few research reports of good practice to guide researchers have been published. This lack of research findings contributes to the difficulty of arguing the logic of combining feminism with teacher education in South Africa, and
persuading a cynical readership of its value as an alternative teacher education paradigm.

To turn things around, this study is concluded with two generic recommendations:

Increased scholarship in feminist pedagogue and teacher education: This is one of the ways to break away from the conventions of traditional teacher education and practice. To assist South African teacher educators who want to make strategic gender interventions across a range of educational aspects – from policy analysis to pedagogy, and research to the field experience – it is recommended that the topic, feminist teacher education and pedagogy: the theories, scholarship and practice, be a standing theme on national and international conference programmes. The conference papers should then be submitted to the international journal, Feminist Teacher, to disseminate more information about feminist pedagogy and teacher education, nationally and internationally.

Innovation and evolution of initial teacher education: For teacher educators who want to step out of the traditional teacher education paradigms where student teachers are told how to do much more than cross borders in schools with increased scholarship in feminist pedagogy and teacher education:

REFERENCES


