

Transgressing the Boundaries: Re-Imagining Gender in Education

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Abstract

In this paper we attempt to understand how organisational culture and structural conditions that occur simultaneously with the global processes of restructuring education, in which asymmetrical and unequal nature of social relations of gender are reconstructed through discourses of masculinity, rationality and leadership, inform such restructuring. We argue that schools and universities in South Africa are sites for the enacting of gender and that the conceptions of gender shape the provision of state-supported education. We agree with Lengermann & Niebrugge's (2008:456) assertion that feminist educational thinking views the intersection of education and gender through a variety of lenses (gender difference, gender inequality, gender oppression, and structural oppression). Therefore, feminist educational thinking not only shapes how we think about education but what we do in education as teachers, academics and citizens within the country.

Keywords: gender, feminist theories, education, organisational culture, structural conditions

1. Introduction

The advent of democracy in South Africa since 1994 has brought about significant strides to address socio-economic, cultural, educational, political issues, setting the values for a transforming, inclusive democratic society. The values enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa include non-sexism, non-racialism, and respect for diversity cultural and ethnicity for all members of society. Within the sector education, redress, access, equity, quality, inclusion and massification are addressed.

Arguably, we have recently seen a number of women occupy senior positions in different sectors including the government, police force, education, mining and business industries. Lengermann and Niebrugge (2008:452) make the point that although there are aspects that have been oppressive and discriminatory and which need to be rethought, challenged or discarded, for the generation of women who were subjected to marginalisation, there has been much that was beneficial and transformative: more women than ever are active in many spheres of business, politics and education.

While a significant number of women are now gaining international repute, this conceptual paper argues that intellectual marginalisation of women and gendered relations still persists in education. Therefore, this paper, a political-feminist project, shifts the gaze from a descriptive narrative to a more polemic stance that problematises gendering in education. The primary goal is to challenge the socially constructed boundaries that often repress women's significant representation and visibility as knowing 'agentic' subjects (Ritzer, 2008:521). Furthermore, it aims to increase the visibility of feminist work and to promote the recognition of the aesthetic and intellectual impact of women in society (Thembinkosi Goniwe 2012:63), and how this can influence progressive education that liberates both women and men (Portes, 2005; Giddens, 2000; Bourdieu, 1987; Apple, 2004; Freire, 1993).

2. Problematising Gender

Hatch and Cunliffe's (2006: 273) see gender as constitutive of organising, defining feature of collective human activity,

regardless of whether such activity appears to be about gender. In their view the gendering of education involves a struggle over meaning, identity, and difference; this on-going discursive struggle occurs amid, and acts upon, gendered institutional cultures and structures. Such struggles (re) produce social realities that privilege certain interests in particular those of men. In line with the arguments, poignant feminism's basic questions are: (i) And what about the women? (ii) Why is all this as is? (iii) How can we change and improve the social world so as to make it a more just place for all people (iv) And what about differences among women (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 2008:451-452)? Feminist theory deconstructs established systems of knowledge by showing their masculinist bias and the gender politics framing and informing them (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 2008:452).

In light of the above, we further beg the questions: Are women today sufficiently represented in major socio-economic, politico-cultural and education fields or are they fundamentally invisible? How gendered are women's positions in these sectors? What are the power relations that situate women? What is the condition of female in the industry? Are black women viewed and treated equally to their white female counterparts? How does a globalised knowledge economy contribute to women's marginalisation, situatedness and inferiorisation? How is gender reproduced through the hidden curriculum in our classrooms perpetuating marginalisation, objectification and signification of others? What are its contents and its ways of transference? Who is not only educating but designing, theorising, critiquing and assessing the curriculum or knowledge being transferred? How does our behaviour and language as teachers express and maintain dominant cultural understandings of women and men and thereby structure power relations in schools and universities (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006:274)? To this end, Giroux (2005: 8) argues that institutions of education are deeply implicated in producing those aspects of dominant culture that serve to reproduce an unjust and unequal society.

3. Literature Review: Feminist Theories

Central to feminism is that women are systematically subordinated, and bad faith exists when women surrender their agency to this subordination, for example, through acceptance of religious beliefs that a man is the dominant party in a marriage by the will of God (Rowbotham, 2010:5). Simone de Beauvoir labels such women "mutilated" and "immanent" (Simone de Beauvoir, 2010:773). Research indicates that feminist researchers embrace two key tenets, namely, (i) their research should focus on the condition of women in society, and (ii) their research must be grounded in the assumption, that women generally experience subordination (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008:450). Nancy Cott (1977) makes a distinction between modern feminism one primarily concerned with social differentiation, attentive to individuality and diversity. Other issues deal more with women's condition as a social construct, gender identity, and relationships within and between genders (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008:452). Politically this represents a shift from an ideological alignment comfortable with the right, to one more radically associated with the left; and for me, the struggle to push the progressive project of transgressing the boundaries of marginalisation and subjugation commonly taken for granted. Thus, feminist research rejects value-free orientation (apolitism) in favour of being overtly political by doing research in pursuit of gender equality (Portes 2005:31). Themes explored in feminism include discrimination, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping, art history and contemporary art and aesthetics (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008).

Relevant to the arguments we develop in this paper are feminist theories and theoretical aspects of feminism espoused by Lengermann and Niebrugge (1995) and others. These theories are pertinent due to their interdisciplinarity and international community of scholars, artists and activists (Lengermann and Niebrugge 2008:450). Useful for conceptualising women's emancipation is leading theorist, Clare Dalton's (2001) feminist legal theory which is based on the feminist view that law's treatment of women in relation to men has not been equal or fair. The goals of feminist legal theory, as defined by Dalton, consists of understanding and exploring the female experience, figuring out if law and institutions oppose females, and figuring out what changes can be committed to. This according to her is to be accomplished through studying the connections between the law and gender as well as applying feminist analysis to concrete areas of law (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008:463). Feminist psychologists, such as Jean Baker Miller, sought to bring a feminist analysis to previous psychological theories, proving that "there was nothing wrong with women, but rather with the way modern culture viewed them." These theories are useful in shaping our understanding of women's personal experiences of gendering in education.

Educational theories (Portes, 2005) are also useful for our arguments because they intersect different feminist theories through a unique and reciprocal bond. Educational theories introduce a third wave of feminist thinking in education one that takes account of both global changes to the economy and politics, and changes in theorizing about that world (Giroux 2005:37). It is important to emphasize that feminist educational thinking not only shapes how we think

about education but what we do in education as teachers, academics, and citizens (Portes 2005:29). According to Lengermann & Niebrugge (2008:456) feminist educational thinking views the intersection of education and gender through a variety of lenses (gender difference, gender inequality, gender oppression, and structural oppression). It examines schools and universities as sites for the enacting of gender and it explores the ways in which conceptions of gender shape the provision of state-supported education. It highlights the resistances subordinated groups have developed around ideas of knowledge, power and learning and it seeks to understand the relationship of education to gendered conceptions of citizenship, the family and the economy.

Thus, feminist educational thinking is fundamentally political. It fuses theory and practice in seeking to understand contemporary education with the aim of building a more just world for women and men. In so doing, it acknowledges the reality of multiple 'feminisms' and the intertwining of ethnicity, race and gender (Lengermann & Niebrugge (2008:455). In terms of the sites in which we work feminist educational thinking increasingly addresses the impact of globalisation on education (Giddens, 2000). Portes (2005:29) has noted that in contemporary educational policy debates, economic efficiency driven by ideological macro-economic discourses of globalisation and political economy rather than social inequality is a key concern." The schools and universities in which we work have been profoundly affected by the growing dominance of ideas of social efficiency, market choice, and competition driven by technological advancements and globalisation (Giroux 2005:113). In a rapidly changing world in which an ideology of profit has come to define all relationships, the question of gender is often lost, but in fact it is central to the way power is enacted in education as in society as a whole.

The debate on intersectionality raises the issue of understanding the oppressive lives of women that are not only shaped by gender alone but by other elements such as racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, disableism. These are also formed not only by the explicit, well-documented 'big ideas' of modernity or by rational forward moving developments, but as often by hidden, private or overlooked contingencies signifying and producing gender difference (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006: 273). Contemporary feminist theory addresses such issues of intersectionality in such publications as "Age, Race, Sex, and Class" by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Another example of intersectionality can be seen through bell hooks' (1984) publication, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*.

Hooks (1984) similarly advocates for a movement that does not isolate black women or women of colour. She says, "I advocate feminism" rather than "I am a feminist" to avoid the assumption that women's issues are more important than issues such as race or class. Not only does she emphasize class and race but also she focuses on the role men must play in the feminist movement. According to hooks, the second-wave feminists "reinforced sexist ideology by positing in an inverted form the notion of a basic conflict between the sexes, the implication being that the empowerment of women would necessarily be at the expense of men." She points out that if women are the only ones responsible for feminism, then feminist ideology only serves to reinforce the gap between the sexes in terms of the division of labour. Moreover, women cannot be solely responsible for abolishing sexism because, she says, "men are the primary *agents* maintaining and supporting sexism and sexist oppression, they can only be eradicated if men are compelled to assume responsibility for transforming their consciousness and the consciousness of society as a whole." Because of this, men who support the fight against sexism are those with whom women need to band together.

4. Gendering in Educational Institutions

Bradley (1999:20) proffers that current changes in organisations are altering class and gender relations that influence the way researchers theorize them. She argues that Sociology is no longer so exclusively preoccupied with class, and it has now turned its attention to other forms of inequality especially those of gender and race or ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, region (geo-politics) and religion. Arguably, Bernal (1999:301), for example, asserts that most feminists of colour recognise that, gender, race, ideology, class and sexual orientation determine the allocation of power and the nature of any individual's identity, status and circumstance within the education sector. He further points to the, "endarkened" feminist epistemologies that he deems crucial in this debate because they speak to the failures of traditional patriarchal and liberal educational scholarship and examine the intersection of race, class, gender, ideology, power and sexuality.

5. Restructuring Education and Social Relations of Gender

Chisholm (2001:387) argues that organisational culture and structural conditions that occur simultaneously with the global processes of restructuring education in which asymmetrical and unequal nature of social relations of gender are

reconstructed through 'discourses of masculinity, rationality and leadership' inform such restructuring. Given the nature of these changes, she makes the point that the stage is set for conflict and contradiction between policy goals and outcomes. In South Africa she argues, a powerful agenda for social justice has emerged and it is shaping the re-composition of the state and bureaucracy while simultaneously new discourses of leadership undermining the position of women have emerged. In this regard, feminist theory deconstructs the systems of knowledge by bringing forth their masculinist bias and knowledge biases. Knowledge is thus deconstructed to find the hidden behind what is presented to the masses by those who are in power (Ritzer, 2008:452).

6. Gendering Knowledge

Given that the generation and production of knowledge has been an important part of feminist theory, critical such questions as: "Are there 'women's ways of knowing' and 'women's knowledge'?" "How does the knowledge women produce about themselves differ from that produced by patriarchy" (Bartowski and Kolmar 2005:45)? A notable contribution in a globalised knowledge society and economy is the growing number of publications in scholarly educational journals (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008:455). A feminist approach to epistemology thus seeks to establish knowledge production from a woman's perspective (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008:450). It theorizes that from personal experience comes knowledge which helps each individual look at things from a different insight. There is however, a persistent view that there is an ongoing erasure of women from the cultural capital. This is view echoed in Linda Nochlin, the art historian's groundbreaking essay published in 1971, entitled: 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' in *ArtNews* in which she investigated the social and economic factors that had prevented talented women from achieving the same status as their male counterparts. One should however, acknowledge that this publication dates back forty years ago. Much has changed since then worldwide, due the influence of technological advancements which drive and intensify globalisation and internationalisation of the knowledge economy opening cross border markets and determining which knowledge should be offered in schools and universities for relevance of a globalised and globalising world including marketisation and commodification of knowledge.

Despite the exponential growth in knowledge, women today are still preoccupied with issues of subjugation and marginalisation because of knowledge that supports difference (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006:272). Art historian Griselda Pollock, in Europe from 1980 onward, continually challenged the dominant museum models of art and history that have been so excluding of women's artistic contributions, and has been articulating the complex relations between femininity, modernity, psychoanalysis and representation. As stated earlier, interrupting gender questions are issues of identity, politics of education, race, class, sex and cultural difference. These issues challenge us to examine them in the context of the global, national and local changes of education and in particular what specific space is available for feminists within education to mount a challenge to educational practices which encourage gendered and other forms of discriminatory practice (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008:455).

Simone de Beauvoir provided an existentialist dimension to feminism with the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex) in 1949/1957. As the title implies, the starting point is the implicit inferiority of women, and the first question de Beauvoir asks is "what is a woman"? Woman she realizes is always perceived of as the "other", "*she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her*". In this book and her essay, "*Woman: Myth & Reality*", de Beauvoir anticipates Betty Friedan in seeking to demythologise the male concept of woman. "*A myth invented by men to confine women to their oppressed state. For women it is not a question of asserting themselves as women, but of becoming full-scale human beings.* (776)." "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", or as Toril Moi puts it "a woman defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in the world, or in other words, through the way in which she makes something of what the world makes of her". Therefore, woman must regain subject, to escape her defined role as "other", as a Cartesian point of departure. We resonate with the latter because our preoccupation with gender discrimination is informed by our historicity and location borne out of our struggles of working in a white male dominated higher education environment. The socially constructed experiences of subjugation, exclusion and psychological oppression often made us feel incompetent and therefore dependent on men.

7. How do Women Respond to Gendering in Education?

Indeed, Simone De Beauvoir (2010:771) alludes to this binary view, claiming that woman does not stand in front of man as subject but as an object paradoxically endowed with subjectivity; she assumes herself as both *self* and *other*, which is a contradiction with disconcerting consequences. The latter statement reinforces a binary view of gender that underpins

the everyday actions and interactions of men and women, thus reinforcing domination and subjugation (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006:273). The questions we further pose are: How do women deal with the intersections of race, class and gender to advance progressive activism that tackle political issues of marginalisation that repress voice and diversity? How do we transgress the socially constructed boundaries that marginalise others? How do we impact on the aesthetic, intellectual, educational and political spheres, now and in the future?

This is an argument for democratic deliberation in education, in which members of various constituent groups, including men and women have genuine input into the educational process (Zeichner 2009). An engagement of this nature allows space for inter-disciplinarity, in which teachers and researchers with diverse epistemological orientations are able to create and share knowledge, learn from each other and then transfer this knowledge to their students. Our quest is to extend intellectual conversations by constructing appropriate contexts to tap critical, civic skills so that our students are able to critically examine their transformative roles in society as engaged citizens.

Such a thesis would argue for a dynamic reflexivity that provides pedagogical spaces for our students' investigations, analyses and cultural responsive communications, premised on the view that they can learn to be producers of useful knowledge. Responding to gendering in this way enables us to use students' cultural wealth or cultural capital and social life to develop a knowledge production pedagogy that embraces a socio-cultural community connectionist theory of learning and inclusion (Zeichner 2009: xvi). This calls for formidable alertness towards the critical shifts in pedagogies of knowledge production, and the scope for and constitution of practical educational innovations that are shaping the education of the rising generation of global and local cosmopolitan students (Thomas 2005:8). We are thus, challenged to re-write the possibilities for new meta-narratives and identities in our teaching and learning activities in education.

In our quest for progressive education we need to argue for a critical pedagogy that de-centres the teacher and re-centres the student as the subject of the educational practice. In doing so, we will recognise, engage and critique in a way that will transform any undemocratic social practices and institutional structures that produce and sustain inequalities and oppressive social identities and relations within our classrooms. This allows us to connect critical awareness (transformation of consciousness) and social action (engagement) to the process that we would pursue to ensure that we transgress subjugation and oppression.

8. Conclusion and Implications for Gendering in Education

Hatch and Cunliffe (2006:275) point out that the implications of studying gender is that if the current gender constructions lead to devaluing women's work and keep women out of positions of power, in the name of justice, these constructions need to be challenged and changed. This, calls for the need to transgress the boundaries and to re-imagine education in the context of a progressive and transformative educational project that confronts existing political and economic inequalities (Giroux 2005:9) and commits to social justice and equity (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008:451). To contribute to the struggle for justice, as black, female academics we see our role as progressive teachers and researchers, working with students, peers, schools and the surrounding communities. The aim is to collectively engage the knowledge and experiences through which female students author their own voices and construct their own social and intellectual identities as future leaders and professionals in economic, civil and political spheres. From our vantage point, progressive teachers need to take cognizance of the tacit knowledge and experiences that constitute the students' individual and collective voices, which they utilise to interrogate their lived experiences. In the process we become involved in a continuous and reflexive project of change management within academia, both in our research work and in our community engagement projects. This provides us with a learner-centered pedagogy, focused on the students' knowledge base, strategic processing of their thoughts, their motivation and development; and a reflective understanding of their educational and social identities within the academy and in the broader society. We will also be able to share personal life experiences, raise feminist consciousnesses about our work and ways of thinking (Lengermann & Niebrugge 2008:458). The ability to collaborate enables women to share knowledge and individualize their experiences and insert more emotion into their work, but also learn about the collective experiences among one another, and empower themselves as individuals and a group.

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