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**FEMINIST PEDAGOGY IN ALBANIAN SCHOOLS****Eriada Çela**University of Elbasan “Aleksandër Xhuvani”, Albania, [eriada.cela@uniel.edu.al](mailto:eriada.cela@uniel.edu.al)

**Abstract:** The transition from the communist regime to the pluralist system in Albania is a process that has lasted almost three decades. During this time the Albanian society and its institutions have made numerous efforts to progress and adapt to the contemporary way of life and policy-making. Despite major changes in all social and institutional dimensions during these decades, the totalitarian regime of almost fifty years in Albania still affects in many ways the way people think and act and the way educational institutions at all levels organize their work. Even though in the past polarized gender relations in society and education may have helped plan and organize a range of social and educational activities, today they are problematic as they create a hostile rather than cooperative climate. This paper presents feminist pedagogy as a useful alternative to help transform Albanian society and education today.

While in the communist past even long queues to buy daily consumer goods were divided on one side for men and on the other for women, gender today still plays an important role in all spheres of human and institutional interaction in Albania. The way people perceive, create or discuss social reality is influenced by "gender lenses", a metaphorical concept introduced by Sandra L. Bem, which emphasizes that secret assumptions about sex or gender are rooted in cultural discourses, social institutions, and individual psyche. Along with androcentrism and biological essentialism, Bem sees gender polarization as one of the three constituent elements of gender lenses, which need to be identified and made visible rather than obscured. Gender polarization occurs when "male-female differences have been emphasized and imposed concerning so many aspects of the social world that a false cultural link has been established between sex and every other aspect of human experience" (Bem, 1993, p. 2). The problem with gender polarization lies in the fact that harmful antagonism is created between boys and girls from an early age, which continues to become even more pronounced over the years until the creation of a large gender gap that begins in the perception of then it is strengthened and concretized in terms of salaries, job positions, and decision-making. The large gender gap in these areas constitutes gender-based discrimination, which mainly restricts girls and women by causing injustice to them in various areas, but also complicates in some areas the lives of boys and men in terms of stereotypes and certain expectations for them. This paper addresses the importance of feminist pedagogy in teaching while emphasizing the need for teachers to introduce gender equality practices in their classrooms.

**Keywords:** pedagogy, education, gender, teachers, Albania

**1. INTRODUCTION**

"The term 'pedagogy' refers to the processes of teaching and involves interactions between the teacher, learners, knowledge, and milieu. Lusted (1986) considers that pedagogy includes what is taught, how it is taught and how it is learned, and wider issues of knowledge and learning. It is these wider social issues of pedagogy – the problematics in many of the accepted assumptions about pedagogy – that are of major concern to feminist academics and teachers (Marsh, 2009, p. 260). To achieve full gender equality in the curriculum, all concepts of inequality need to be challenged, not just that of gender inequality. As bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins) explains her feminist pedagogy, visionary teachers know that democratic education cannot be confined to the classroom. On the contrary, as bell hooks maintains, pedagogy responds to the specific situations of each group of students, and as hooks states, education occurs not only within the classroom but wherever people are located. According to hooks, education is essential to the feminist movement because if women and men do not read, they are excluded from feminist awareness, political processes, and the labor market. The ability to read allows people, especially those marginalized or discriminated against by society, to gain critical awareness (Hooks, 2002). To reach this conclusion, hooks was influenced by Paulo Freire's concept about pedagogy and critical awareness. Critical pedagogy, as we find it explained by Paulo Freire (1992), involves questions that need to be asked by both teachers and students about dominant situations in society. These are questions through which both teachers and students in teaching and learning need to start to challenge all those practices, situations, and beliefs that enable the reiteration of inequalities and social oppression. The moment pedagogy challenges inequalities, it shows its empowering element.

The goal of feminism is to eliminate all forms of injustice, oppression, and restrictions that come as a result of gender in all social interactions and institutional structures, starting from the formation of knowledge and continuing with its implementation at the individual, community, or institutional level, offering equal opportunities regardless of gender. According to feminist pedagogy, injustices and gender inequality in school can be transformed through interactions that occur within the classroom during the lesson, promoting a learning environment where the

principles of feminist pedagogy are applied, which often go in parallel lines with the principles of critical pedagogy. Some of these common principles of feminist and critical pedagogy are: recreating the relationship between teacher and students, empowering students through dialogue, building community, and respect for the diversity of personal experiences, challenging traditional views, and even how the lesson is explained in class. Enabling the application of these feminist principles in practice requires institutional commitment in terms of training, curricula, and textbooks as well as institutional support, although the main burden of implementing feminist principles lies on the teachers and their commitment to feminist pedagogy. Unfortunately, the philosophy of teaching based on feminist principles is not included in the preparatory programs of teacher education in Albania, yet.

A Eurydice report on the different achievements in school outcomes between boys and girls in Europe, concludes that the basic education curriculum is divided into formal curriculum and hidden curriculum. The official curriculum consists of the subjects taught in the school and the content they have, which vary from one country to another according to the national curricula. The hidden curriculum, on the other hand, “deals with everything that happens at school that is not 'formal', such as social relationships in the classroom or schoolyard, friendships between children, relationships between teachers and students, levels of bullying or bullying at school and so on” (Eurydice, 2009, p. 26). Mostly, the hidden curriculum turns out to be more harmful as it is based more on gender stereotypes which limit and harm children as they show gender bias in different directions. According to American researcher Janice Koch, gender bias in teacher-student interactions has been documented from kindergarten to the end of high school. Areas of instruction in teaching where gender differences are most common include:

- Teacher's questions and student's answers
- Air time for girls and boys
- The amount of time the teachers give them before answering
- Assignments assigned by the teachers
- Types of questions and sentences imposed by the teacher
- The teacher's attention to the appearance of the student (Koch, 2003, p. 261).

In addition to their interaction with the students, the teachers also display gender bias in informal conversations between them. According to Lynch, "this is because, in the course of the secret curriculum, stereotypical images of 'good and quiet girls' and 'strong, naughty boys' appear everywhere openly in school conversations, on posters on walls, in stories and the attitudes held by some teachers” (2009, p. 56).

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper juxtaposes a desk review of the gender and education literature with empirical research in Albanian classrooms. Firstly, this research replicates a survey conducted in Germany in 1995, which shows that the 'hidden curriculum' is applied during classroom interactions. As a result of this observation, regardless of the level of education taken into consideration, the inequality practices are the same: “Boys receive more attention from teachers than girls, ... about 60% of teachers' time. This figure is based on empirical evidence made available, such as persons in the role of observer and filming of classroom dynamics. This is not because teachers give preferential treatment to boys on purpose. On the contrary, they are often quite surprised when confronted with these findings which go in the opposite direction to their educational convictions of providing equal opportunities” (Abrahams & Sommerkorn, 1995, p. 14). The same observation has been replicated for this study in ten Albanian rural and urban schools in the district of Elbasan, and the same results appear.

Secondly, this research paper considers Claire and Holden's point of view, who suggest that enabling gender equality in the classroom requires carefully considering teaching citizenship skills. This element of the empirical research was enabled through a focus group discussion with elementary school teachers. As Claire and Holden suggest, we should consider the extent to which girls can lose or benefit from the interactions and ways of organizing work that can be built as part of effective civic education. At this point, it is necessary to recall some of the habits targeted and supported by civic education, as follows:

- Active participation - interactive learning styles
- Debate and discussion
- Spontaneous and elastic postures
- Conflict resolution
- Collaborative learning
- Public speaking - advocacy
- Research and presentation skills

In many of these habits, girls do not show difficulty but the following factors may influence their abrogation when it comes to active participation and to express these habits:

- Lack of self-confidence

- Awareness of how to participate
- Finding that their efforts are either not taken seriously or are dismissed
- Finding that the issues they want to raise are considered irrelevant
- Being forced to compete instead of cooperating
- The feeling of being excluded from citizenship issues (Claire & Holden, 2006, p. 14).

These habits were included and rephrased as questions during the focus group discussion with teachers. The literature consulted for this paper (Abrahams & Sommerkorn, Claire & Holden) offered concrete and helpful insights on issues to be considered regarding feminist pedagogy in education.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this research paper align with both studies cited above. Firstly, during the observation, the teachers manifested several situations of classroom interaction by addressing girls and boys differently. For instance, they allowed boys more often to speak over girls but not the opposite, they complemented and reprimanded boys and girls using different words and different expectations. Also, the hidden curriculum of gender-differentiated treatment is evidenced in different tasks assigned to boys and girls, thus perpetuating gender bias in education. One fifth-grade teacher who was close to reaching her retirement age asked boys for help when she needed to hang up a map and a poster on the classroom wall, and she asked the girls to remain a few minutes after class to help her tidy up the classroom. Later, when asked the reasons behind the different requests made for boys and girls, the teacher argued her decision by stating that she does not think boys and girls are better at different tasks, but she asks help from those students she thinks best fit the required role to help her. The fact that teachers are surprised by this different treatment of boys and girls in the classroom shows that it occurs unconsciously, so all teachers need to be exposed to gender equality training.

Gender bias encountered in classroom interaction between teachers and children may indeed be unconscious, but it perpetuates a sense of alienation in less privileged children and prevents them from developing personally, academically, or professionally (Davis, 1993). During the focus group discussion, most teachers stated that they do not make gender differences in the way they address their students. Although this statement implies equal treatment between boys and girls, it essentially means that teachers do not impose gender justice and impartiality in classroom practices. On the contrary, if the attitude held by teachers reproduces "unconscious gender bias", then it is proven that, as Sadker claims, "sexism continues to be a way of life in our schools ..." (Sadker et al., 2009, p. 58).

The focus group with teachers and the observation in their classrooms were used to some extent as action research as teachers had the opportunity to reflect on their interactions with boys and girls in teaching, which also made teachers aware of the practices of their teaching. Once the gender bias of the teachers was identified, it was discussed whether it was intentional or unintentional, whether it was done to promote gender justice or gender injustice. Little by little during conversations with teachers, the hidden bias in their teaching practices was put into question and gradually weakened.

All of the above factors, if not addressed in time or understood by teachers as gender-biased situations, increase the opportunities for gender inequality in the classroom, which negatively affects both boys and girls. In Albania, where many group activities are still organized at an early age by placing girls and boys in teams against each other, these activities may implicitly reinforce the idea that boys and girls are adversaries, not collaborators.

### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In this day and age, Albanian education policymakers need to consider feminist pedagogy as a necessary approach to the formation of boys and girls, as the formal curriculum is as much a gender issue as the teacher-student interactions or socializing with each other. The topic of gender issues in the classroom cannot be simplified by criticizing prevailing stereotypes, as the depth of these issues tells us more about the layered effects of curriculum and pedagogy on perpetuating belief systems that consider women and girls less important and the achievements of men and boys as significant. For boys and girls, curriculum and pedagogical transformations that value both formal and informal contributions of women and men guarantee an excellent education that would not exist without the opportunities provided for gender justice. At a time when Albanian education is affected by various issues, it is necessary to educate boys and girls with the principles of gender equality by perceiving each other as partners and not adversaries.

Although there are not many empirical studies in Albania that focus specifically on gender-biased interaction in the classroom and school, various observations highlight the fact that gender stereotypes in Albanian educational settings are present in many forms of interaction. These gender stereotypes expressed in the curricula, in the family, or at school are extremely harmful to both girls and boys, as they can undermine girls' self-confidence in different directions or lead them to the wrong models if feminist pedagogy is not integrated. To avoid as much as possible the

negative impact of gender-based stereotypes on the lives of boys and girls in schools, it is necessary for the Albanian state to deliberately develop policies and undertake concrete gender equality initiatives in education by providing teachers with special training on teaching practices where the negative consequences of gender stereotypes are addressed.

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