
Why feminist epistemology matters in education and educational research

Valerija Vendramin

Introduction

I will start this contribution with a rather general yet, in my understanding, accurate description of feminist theory; feminist theory is a struggle for general knowledge and the reconstruction of common meanings, a struggle for concepts and traditions of thought (Bahovec, 2001: 5; Haraway, 1991: 82). I focus on feminist epistemology, including its influential concept of situated knowledges (which are, in short, ways of knowing that are self-reflective concerning the conditions under which they came into being and that postulate a critical stance towards so-called universal truths). I use the term “feminist epistemology” in the singular form, although the field is not homogenous. Nevertheless, there are some common factors, such as the emphasis on the use of gender as a central category in discussions and reconstructions of epistemic practices, norms, and ideals (according to Janack, 2004) and the reflection on the consequences of the inclusion of gender in such practices or the lack thereof.

Naturally, I make no claim that all the topics discussed which relate to feminist theory and epistemology fall exclusively within the domain of feminism, as they also occur in other epistemologies and philosophical traditions that thrive on scepticism and wariness of absolutes (Felski, 2000: 198), but I do maintain that it was feminism that bestowed upon them a specific dimension and gave rise to new considerations – especially the issues of epistemic responsibility and epistemic privileges. The demand for epistemic responsibility is one of the central concerns of feminist epistemology. “Epistemologists need to take seriously matters of social position, race, gender, sexuality and the like because social hierarchies can both limit the spheres of action available to agents from non-privileged groups and discourage those from privileged groups from

being accountable for their actions when they seek and claim knowledge” (Townley, 2006: 39, 40).

Within this framework, I try to describe those issues (e.g. problem clusters, conceptual workings and the like) where I see feminist epistemology as particularly relevant in education and educational research. Although central importance is assigned to the category of gender, this does not mean the exclusion of the importance of other social differences (e.g. social class, ethnicity, “race”, religion, heteronormativity, amongst others). Research tools and methodological solutions developed in relation to gender are important in order to understand discrimination and the differences that exist along various social axes, not to mention the particularly salient concept of intersectionality.¹

In the continuation of this contribution, I map three interconnected problem clusters where the findings and problematisations of feminist epistemology could be deemed most relevant to the educational field (this list is by no means exhaustive, only temporary). They are as follows: (a) the resistance towards taking things for granted; (b) rethinking the concept of objectivity; and (c) the review of mainstream research and self-reflexivity. All three could be considered key epistemological concerns/themes and are all the more relevant to the field of education as a result, be it in practice or in research as they, in various ways, deal with the acquisition of knowledge.

Resistance towards taking things for granted

My basic but nevertheless useful premise is that feminism concerns a critical vision and critical positioning “in inhomogeneous gendered social space” (Haraway, 1991: 195). It could also be claimed that feminist inquiry deals with hierarchical models of the creation and distribution of knowledge and takes a critical view on traditional (scientific) statements, which are usually accepted as universal truths. (However, if it carries out the task of reconstruction of common meanings, it should refer both to mainstream and feminist mainstream, which is not always the case.²)

1 Intersectionality, according to K. Davis, refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power. It was intended to address the fact that the experiences and struggles of women of colour fell between the cracks (sic!) of both feminist and anti-racist discourse (Davis, 2008: 68). But – and this should be at least mentioned here as further elaboration would lead us too far astray – the difference is yet again insufficiently theorised. The acknowledgement of differences among women, which is supposed to address (and redress) the exclusions which have played such a distressing role in feminist scholarship, as says K. Davis (2008: 70), still does not allow certain differences to enter the picture – multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life does not, for example, include power relations along the east-west European axis; this “periphering” is indeed rarely theorised appropriately in hegemonic English feminist theory.

2 See previous footnote.

Dealing with the taken-for-granted can be expanded in various directions: towards epistemology, towards methodology as separated from epistemology, and towards acquired meanings in everyday life. This kind of work should include issues regarding gendered knowledges, practices and competences, as well as ways of acquiring knowledge and the possibilities of destabilising the existing ways. This destabilisation, or at least an attempt at destabilisation, entails a struggle for common knowledge, for what will be accepted as a rational description of the world and how the world should be perceived – it is an on-going process and not a method in itself.

In the sphere of education, this especially concerns the curriculum and the hidden curriculum (research on this is discussed in more detail later). Particular attention should be drawn here to the hidden curriculum because a certain level of doubt and reconsideration is required in order to detect and analyse it, which is very much in keeping with the motto: “Behind the ordinary lies the extraordinary”.³ The hidden curriculum is an important concept in researching education that enables (even demands) “methodological flexibility and context-specific understandings”, and guards “against overwriting individual specificities with externally imposed ‘objective’ systems of meaning” (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995: 10). As a constant battle, it is not a question of what is true or false, but rather what counts as “truth”. The will to see things the other way around is what is required. A shift in our conceptual perspective, which can reveal false objectivity or false neutrality, is needed. When analysing or searching for gender bias,⁴ one must pay attention to so-called gender neutrality, which does not necessarily equate with gender-fairness (let alone with say “emancipatory discourse”) because it masks or hides the issue of gender altogether and thus works against gender equality rather than in its favour.

“Vision is *always* a question of the power to see” (as famously put by Haraway 1991: 192), and so the assertion made by the researcher (or scientist, or author) that she/he watches from everywhere and sees everything, that she/he has no desires, needs, convictions, backgrounds, is contentious (Haraway 1991, 192) and an evasion of responsible discourse; it is a view from a position that is transcendent – which is to say, above the level of human activity, above politics and power – and beyond lived experience. It does not have sufficient potential to identify the critical and interpretative core of knowledge.

3 Phillip W. Jackson defined the concept of the hidden curriculum in his *Life in Classrooms* (published in 1968). Jackson speaks of several key words that help describe “the facts of life” to which pupils (and teachers alike) must adapt and which are omnipresent in school life. These are: *crowds*, *praise* and *power*. These three elements give “the sum total of unofficial institutional expectations, values and norms”; they add a “distinctive flavour to classroom life” and collectively form a hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968).

4 As said before, by concentrating on gender, I do not exclude other differences.

Rethinking the concept of objectivity

The concept of objectivity can no longer mean – in light of feminist intervention – a view from nowhere, but instead a view from a clearly defined position (be it a specific identity or not – it depends on which feminist epistemology school we are indebted).⁵ In contrast to more traditional definitions of objectivity,⁶ feminist objectivity is achieved not through transcendence – the “god-trick” of being the Deity in relation to the rest of the universe – but rather through a dynamic engagement with partial perspectives that are the “result” of marginalised positions. The practice of feminist objectivity is about becoming – in this case, becoming answerable for what we learn how to see (Bartsch et al., 2001: 134). We should not forget the ethical and moral implications here, i.e. the challenge and responsibility to recognise power relations – also between the marginalised and the marginalised (Bartsch et al., 2001: 132). This means that even the view from the bottom is not “innocent” and that marginalized positions are in relation to each other (that is, not only marginal positions to the dominant one, but marginal positions to each other as construed through vectors of power) (ibid.).

The transformation of recognition systems and methods of observation requires the destabilisation of assumptions with regards to the “god-trick” (as D. Haraway terms the traditional positivist view of science), where everything is seen from nowhere, when vision is infinitely mobile and endless (Haraway, 1991: 188, 191). As mentioned before, vision is a question of the power to see. A view from a specific location, i.e. from the place where politics and knowledge are being built (Haraway, 1991: 239), can enable us to see and understand various aspects of the world and human activities. The “god-trick”, which promises vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully (Haraway, 1991: 191), is exposed.

This partiality (seeing situatedly) is of central importance, because feminist policy can no longer be based on a central, universal and common identity of women; a different form of solidarity or affinity must replace this notion. Partiality can therefore be understood as the recognition

5 I cannot go into this in great depth; allow me just to mention that this might mean the difference between identity politics and affinity politics, between the standpoint theory of feminist epistemology and the situated knowledges theory of feminist epistemology and also between the work of S. Harding and D. Haraway (the wording is according to Bartsch et al., 2001: 136).

6 Objectivity as a self-effacing “view from nowhere” from which we can produce knowledge that bears no trace of the imparter of such knowledge, turns out to be a rather young epistemic virtue that could date back to the nineteenth century when the elimination or minimisation of the impact of the representer’s agency and perspective upon the representation thus became the hallmark of objectivity. This is the kind of objectivity whose hegemony the standpoint theorists seeks to undermine (cf. Kukla, 2008: 290–292).

of the essentially “situated” nature of knowledge and our epistemic limitations, which leads a subject to take a critical stance and reflect upon how particular situations can influence her views. This might, therefore, be a political and methodological imperative – not to eclipse the perspectives of others (Fricker, 1994: 101 and 103).

For mainstream thinkers, so-called “subjective” views are suspect in part because they are associated with embeddedness or situatedness (and, by extension, with the female). To be embedded is to be immersed in relationships and connections that interfere with the rigor and purity of vision presumably required of empirical science (Greene, 1994: 433). One should point out (yet again) that this does not necessarily mean sliding down “the slippery slope of subjectivism” (Pendlebury, 2005: 53) or relativism according to the “anything goes” principle. It does mean, however, transcending the story “that loses track of its mediations just where someone might be held responsible for something, and unlimited instrumental power”. (Haraway, 1991: 187). It means taking subjectivity seriously.

So, two important insights follow from here: firstly, the acknowledgement of the influence of gender as a category for analysis and organisation; and, secondly, the deconstruction (or redefinition) of traditional commitments to truth, objectivity and neutrality. Or, as stated by Sh. Pendlebury (2005: 53): “Objectivity requires taking subjectivity into account,” as knowledge is not above the level of human activity with all its values, desires, politics, yearnings, machinations and so forth. “How can a human mired in such a stew produce knowledge that is not” (St. Pierre, 2006: 251)?

The review of mainstream research and self-reflexivity

Mainstream research of gendered practices and the importance of gender (here I refer of course to the area of education) is defined here as research that is perhaps too narrowly focussed on the question of gender discrimination and achievement and is described by, for example, terms such as “equity research”, “social equality of genders” and “equal opportunities”.⁷

It is at the same time implementationally, institutionally and/or financially linked to the use or establishment of extensive statistical data capture. It is privileged in terms of support of supranational bodies. Academic and professional interest and media attention is, like financial supporters, most of

7 This issue is increasingly rephrased as a necessity to “boy turn”, because boys are supposed to be lagging behind as far as achievements/knowledge/opportunities are concerned. As the debate in the Anglo-American space has demonstrated a decade ago (in Slovenia, this is now becoming a prominent issue), the underachieving boy – presented in popular debates, in media and circles of practice-oriented educators – needs to be analysed very specifically (what are the priorities, what are the extra-educational interests, etc.).

ten drawn to the results of analysis that include, monitor or present large datasets. Research so based, and the promotion of its results, matches the technocratic development of society. The same basis in a general technocratic strategic orientation can also be identified in the selection of themes that struggle for attention in the process of decision making and grant allocation by relevant bodies (Šribar and Vendramin, 2011: 153).

Moreover, the political influence on science “extends all the way to scientific categories by which we define and understand and form gender in research. The basic categories, which in this context we mostly experience as entirely self-evident, are ‘female’/‘women’ and ‘male’/‘men’. They are linked through declared desired social-structural relationships between the two largest gender social groups, which is strategically the starting point for the research concerned” (Šribar and Vendramin, 2011: 153). So, to start with, even the categories of research seem to be insufficient, not to mention blindness to various intersections.

Here, I return to the aforementioned concept of situated knowledges as developed by the American historian of science and feminist theoretician, Donna Haraway. This concept has proven to be extremely useful in the epistemology and methodology of investigating our worlds as it includes self-reflexivity, i.e. a consideration of the material, historical and social conditions in which the knowledges came into being, and the power relations in the research process (Prins, 1995: 354). (There is, of course, still some room for further conceptual work.) This can serve as an appropriate and influential “cognitive and political tool for more adequate knowledge judged by the non-essentialist, historically contingent, situated standards” (Haraway, 1997: 198). These knowledges reflect the perspective of the subject, which can only be partial, limited, and not universal. They are related to the contexts in which they originate or are created in, they do not “pretend” to be from everywhere (and therefore actually from nowhere).

As succinctly pointed out by Bartsch et al. (2001: 138–139), this is not about mere “standpoint-taking” (as in standpoint epistemology of S. Harding) where the ethical issues concerning appropriating the view of the other may not be adequately addressed. This position also invites romanticising the view from below and the data gained from this view actually turns out to be specular or only what the researcher speculates that view might be – and fails to appreciate the full weight of the politics of representation. This is also Haraway’s point, for her, “reinvented self as other‘ becomes both a topos, or site of invention, and a trope, or metaphor for reimagining the world” (Bartsch et al., 2001: 138–139).

So, to put this slightly differently: the stance of the omniscient, universally separated (deemed an objective observer in a different conceptual

framework) observer is impossible in our theoretical framework, which can lead to two conclusions. First, the observer is always “somewhere”, at a certain social location, which simultaneously enables and constrains his or her view (Pendlebury, 2005: 55). Second, the legitimization of knowledge claims is intimately tied to the networks of domination and exclusion (Lennon and Whitford, 1994: 1).

It is not simply due to bad practice that such imprinting occurs; it is inevitable, as claimed by Lennon and Whitford (1994: 2). In other words, knowledge is always rooted in the particular perspective of knowledge producers and it is therefore important that we make transparent the procedures involved (Letherby, 2004: 183). This is my referential framework here, although I am aware of the difficulties of the purely relativist paradigm and do not claim that all the content of science is *permanently* tainted with the ideological biases of the powerful (as equally asserted by Anderson).

Clearly, I do not claim that there are no limits to self-critical capacity, be it in mainstream research or in more critically oriented research, not to mention the reflections of the unknown, the lack of knowledge and ignorance (cf. Tuana, 2006), the positive thematisation of ignorance as having instrumental epistemic value and ignorance as a methodological tool or device (as put forward by Townley, 2006).

Nevertheless, these epistemological issues are closely related to the methodology of research, or – in this case – of inquiry into the curriculum, as well as different everyday situations in educational institutions and the advantages qualitative methods often, but not always, possess (see Vendramin and Šribar, 2010). We therefore need to examine what is (also) happening in the field of current national and international educational research and attempt to establish what can be deconstructed via feminist epistemology: first, the obsession with objectivity and the supposed elimination of bias (through the use of “positivistic” methods); and, second, overlooking the bias of power inherent within this approach. There is little recognition of the wider questions of bias as to which evidence is considered to “count” and who selects it. The research is seen as an outside working on the social reality, not itself to be its constitutive part (Archer, 2003: 29 ff) – which means also non-responsibility for the results and interpretations of data.

Last but not least, the same problems are highly acute in discourses that have the potential to prescribe and direct the nature of academia. The normative, narrow emphasis on method as a means for ascribing “soundness” or “validity” threatens the diversity of academic practice (Archer, 2003: 36). There also is another issue at play: the evaluation of scientific results in general.

Conclusion

I have attempted to map some of the problem areas where feminist reflection can open up an important road to – conditionally speaking – better opportunities (with gender at the forefront or as one of the determining aspects of the intersections).⁸ Here, I have focussed attention on the epistemological bases of certain practices and, via the concept of situated knowledges attempted to relate this to various research aspects. Generally speaking, the struggle with taken-for-grantedness where feminist epistemology and educational studies meet as part of a wider field of education, paves the way towards a view “from the other side” and, at the same time, towards “better” research results.

To summarise, the impact of (conceptually developed) feminist research in education can be manifold. Firstly, it can help to reconstruct the domain of conventional research (see Vendramin, 2011), be it in terms of content or in terms of methodology. It can draw attention to problems in the conduct of mainstream social research and bring to the surface hitherto neglected aspects of social reality. Furthermore, it can add a new view (lens, prism) to the perception of the world and challenges gender ethics, female subjugation and discrimination (Sarantakos: 60).⁹

The important feminist emphasis is on the manner in which the knowers/known are particular and concrete, and not abstract nor universal. In other words, we are always enmeshed in social relations that are generally hierarchical and historically and culturally specific, which – in a simplified way – affects our perception of the world around us. Rather than presenting the theories as flat, two-dimensional maps, we can study the ways in which we – as teachers, students, researchers and writers – are positioned “inside” the social and educational phenomena which are the objects of our inquiries; rather than stressing and bringing objectivity, accuracy and truthfulness to the fore, we speak about the processes, procedures and apparatuses where truth, knowledge and belief are produced (Middleton, 1995: 90–91, 95).

Once we break the established flow of thought, we can situate and attempt to reconstruct the reality of the other and bring to light what is hidden “under the surface of ideological common sense” (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995: 19). With the help of situated knowledges, one can generate knowledge that reaches beyond the established dominant models, e.g. the

8 As to “conditionally speaking” – see above, where I problematize the use of such terminology and touch upon the preference of gender.

9 Feminism here is not meant to be just another perspective among many; this would be highly problematic, but rather that, in a sense, feminism can indeed open new ways of looking/seeing.

models of recurring biases and those establishing common sense thinking related to gender (and this refers both to schools and to wider areas of life).

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mo simptome, ki označujejo nasprotno težnjo opredelitvi izobraževanja kot »velikega družbenega izenačevalnika« in kot instrumenta socialne mobilnosti navzgor. Nedavni film, *Anonymous* (2011) Ronalda Emericha, ki je zgrajen na mitu Shakespearjevega ne-avtorstva, je tak primer.

Ključne besede: izobraževanje, družba, šola, ideologija, moč, raziskave, Shakespeare

Valerija Vendramin

Why feminist epistemology matters in education and educational research

The starting point of this contribution is feminist epistemology and above all its influential concept of situated knowledge (as developed above all by D. Haraway in science). Their importance for the field of education is investigated as well as the presentation of certain fundamental postulates highlighting above all the socially embedded knowing subject whilst paying attention to the practice of feminist objectivity. Furthermore, the hidden curriculum, which can be taken to be an epistemological topic, is brought to the forefront, on the basis of which, the range of the approach taking into consideration situated knowledge is illustrated. By focusing on the category of gender (but not excluding other social axes of domination) a common sense approach is taken, which prevents an insight into the specificity of context and self-reflection on how we reached understanding, what the "tacit" cultural premises are and which domination relations help define our views in education.

Key words: gender, curriculum, feminist epistemology, situated knowledges

Valerija Vendramin

Zakaj je feministična epistemologija pomembna za vzgojo in izobraževanje ter njuno raziskovanje

Izhodiščna točka mojega prispevka je feministična epistemologija in predvsem njen vplivni koncept umeščenih vednosti (kot ga je v znanosti razvila predvsem D. Haraway). Izpostavim poskušam njuno relevantnost za polje vzgoje in izobraževanja. Dotaknem se nekaterih temeljnih izhodišč, predvsem družbene umeščenosti spoznavajočega subjekta, in opozorim na prakso t. i. feministične objektivnosti. V nadaljevanju postavim v ospredje prikriti kurikulum, ki ga berem kot epistemološko temo, s katero ilustriram domet pristopa, ki upošteva t. i. politiko umeščenih vednosti. Ob kategoriji spola (ob čemer ne izključujem drugih družbenih osi dominacije) se poskušam spopasti z zdravim razumom, ki onemogoča uvid v specifičnosti konteksta in

(samo)refleksijo, kakšne so »tihan« kulturne predpostavke in kakšna so oblastna razmerja, ki sooblikujejo naš pogled v vzgoji in izobraževanju.

Ključne besede: spol, kurikulum, feministična epistemologija, umeščene vednosti

Grzegorz Michalski

Methodological problems of historical and educational research on associations

The concept of association has been present in the writings of social pedagogues since the time of Helen Radlinski. It was only Aleksander Kamiński who gave theoretical meaning to this category. He believes that the association is an organized group striving to achieve common goals, which has its own organizational structure and members complying with fixed and internally sanctioned rules of conduct. In the search for historical and educational data of the association, the ideological and political character of the problems cannot be ignored. Discussing the question of the evaluation of source quest in the historical and educational research on associations, the necessity to make criticism of the collected data cannot be ignored. Without developing this issue further, however, the difficulties that a researcher may face while classifying the collected material as valuable for further use have to be mentioned.

Key words: methodology, association, research, criticism, data

Grzegorz Michalski

Metodološke težave zgodovinskih in pedagoških raziskav o društvih

Koncept združevanja je bil prisoten v spisih socialnih pedagogov vse od časov Helene Radlinske. Šele Aleksander Kamiński pa je tej kategoriji pridal teoretski pomen. Meni namreč, da je združenje organizirana skupina, ki si prizadeva za doseganje skupnih ciljev, ki ima svojo organizacijsko strukturo in člane, ki se držijo trdnih in mednarodno sankcioniranih pravil obnašanja in ravnanja. Pri iskanju zgodovinskih in izobraževalnih podatkov o združenjih ne moremo prezreti ideološkega in političnega značaja problemov. Pri razpravljanju o vprašanju evalvacije pri iskanju virov v zgodovinskih in vzgojnoizobraževalnih raziskovanjih združenj ne moremo opustiti potrebne kritičnosti do zbranih podatkov. Ne da bi ta vprašanja še naprej razvijali, pa moramo omeniti težave, ki jim je raziskovalec lahko izpostavljen, ko razvršča zbrano gradivo kot dragoceno za nadaljnjo uporabo.

Ključne besede: metodologija, združenje, raziskovanje, kritičnost, podatki