It’s Just Good Teaching: Creating Inclusive Elementary Classrooms

Through Feminist Pedagogy

By

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Abstract

As Ontario schools become more and more diverse, inclusion in the classroom is becoming an ever more important issue for educators (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). This study examines how feminist pedagogy is used in elementary classrooms to contribute to inclusive learning environments. With a lack of current studies on the topic, and a lack of educator’s own voices on the topic, feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom has been relatively under researched within Ontario (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015). Using a qualitative research approach, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators who identified with using aspects of feminist pedagogy in their practices. Through the interviews, the participants identified key aspects of feminist pedagogy, including acknowledging gender difference, acknowledging the diversity of students, and focusing on critical thinking in the classroom. The study found that student empowerment and student autonomy are key factors of feminist pedagogy that contributes to inclusion in the elementary classroom. From these findings, a major implication for the broad educational community suggests that using strategies focusing on student empowerment and autonomy are effective ways to promote inclusion in elementary classrooms.

Key Words: feminist pedagogy, inclusion, student empowerment, student autonomy
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction to the Chapter

Marian Wright Edelman once said, “It’s hard to be what you can’t see” (Wright Edelman, 2005, para 5). This quote summarizes many students’ experiences with the Ontario public elementary school system. Ontario is now considered Canada’s most diverse province in Canada (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). This change means Ontario’s classrooms are becoming more and more diverse themselves. Despite the multiplicity of students seen in Ontario’s schools, there is a lack of diversity in curriculum content leading to a lack of inclusion for students in the classroom and school environment (Rensenbrink, 2001; People for Education, 2015). As explained by Frideres (2007), many educators have White Euro-Canadian social identities, which means through their teaching they are only bringing in one perspective. Teachers must actively include diverse perspectives in their classrooms to reflect all of their students’ social identities, not just White Euro-Canadian cultures, values and beliefs (Frideres, 2007). Not only do many educators have the same social identities in terms of cultural background but also school systems themselves were created based on certain gender specific perspectives:

School knowledge is most often based on the same androcentric, or male centered, epistemologies with the same assumptions about the world. Given new challenges from women, people of color, Third World peoples, gay and lesbian peoples, the poor, persons with disabilities, and other oppressed groups, this androcentric worldview is justifiably under attack. Knowledge comes from many sources (Rensenbrink, 2001, p. 150).

As explained by Rensenbrink (2001), one of the many aspects of feminist teachers is that they think of their students holistically, “Feminist teachers encompass the whole child.
Difference of gender, race, class, ability and other subject positions are all interconnected” (p. 149). Diversity is especially important in Ontario’s schools based on the amount of various peoples who live here. Feminist pedagogy is just one of the pedagogies that works to counter the lack of diversity in the curriculum and classroom learning. Feminist pedagogy shares similar views to Critical pedagogy, Anti-Biased Education and Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (Breunig, 2005; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Feminist pedagogy focuses on a holistic approach to education focusing on many key aspects such as incorporating multiple ways of knowing, including voices that are often underrepresented, focusing on empowerment of students and equal representation in learning content and environment in schools (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015; Christie, 1997; Capobianco, 2007; Coria & Taylor, 2013). These are only some of the key principles to feminist pedagogy that work towards inclusion of students. With these core principles in mind, it seems natural that feminist pedagogy can be used to create inclusive environments in the classroom. In this paper, I explore how elementary teachers have used feminist pedagogy to create a more inclusive environment in their classroom for all students.

1.1 Research Problem

Inclusion in the classroom is becoming ever more important to represent the growing diversity of learners in Ontario classrooms. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2009) reported that over 200 languages are spoken as first languages in Ontario. The report also commented on the 2006 census which saw 2.7 million people who live in Ontario identify as a member of a visible minority (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Along with a diverse amount of languages, races, religions and ethnicities, Ontario also sees a diverse population of newcomers to Canada and mixed families (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).
Inclusive education is defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009) as “Education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected” (p. 4). Equity and inclusion are becoming more important in education as classrooms become more diverse. Much of the research agrees that certain students are being excluded from the curriculum and the learning environment (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015; McCall, 1994; Hazel & Allen, 2013; People for Education, 2015). The research problem that this paper focused on is that certain students are being excluded in the classroom, based on their social identity, from achieving all they can from their education (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015; People for Education, 2015). Social identity, also termed social location, is referring to multiple aspects of a person’s identity, such as the following but not limited to gender, race, class, religion, family structure, sexuality, geography, and ethnicity (Hankivsky, 2014). The term intersectionality is also used by feminists to describe these relations between the different aspects of people’s social identities and how they are created and used to form systems of oppression and privilege (Hankivsky, 2014).

I have chosen to focus specifically on feminist pedagogy to support inclusion in the classroom rather than other pedagogies because feminist pedagogy takes into account a key difference, which is acknowledgment of gender difference and different ways of knowing based on gender in the classroom (Christie, 1997; Capobianco, 2007). Feminist pedagogy acknowledges that female students are still being left out of curriculum content in terms of representation through history, protagonist in books and authors (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015). Feminist pedagogy still focuses on all aspects of students’ social identity;
however, gender difference is specifically taken into account. Thus connecting to the main concerns of the research problem, which is leaving certain students and knowledge out of curriculum content and learning environments often associated with specific social identities. My research focuses on addressing how feminist pedagogy is used by elementary teachers in their classrooms in order to create a more inclusive learning environment for all their students.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

My research addresses the issues of how educators create a more inclusive classroom through the use of feminist pedagogy. Research on feminist pedagogy used in the elementary classroom has been generally under researched (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015). There are various aspects of feminist pedagogy that incorporate strategies for inclusion (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015; Capobianco, 2007). The key concepts of feminist pedagogy include incorporating feminine ways of knowing; challenging assumptions, values and beliefs; empowering students by valuing student voice and experience; and understanding and honouring multiple ways of knowing (Christie, 1997; Roy & Schen, 1993; Capobianco, 2007; Parry, 1996).

With the lack of research in this area, there are few scholars who have made direct connections between the uses of feminist pedagogy to contribute to inclusion and equity. Woodham Digiovanni and Liston (2015) have made the most direct arguments that feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom would directly contribute to an inclusive environment through the incorporation of diverse voices, pictures, books, and authors. Scholars have commented on the fact that there is a lack of diverse characters and perspectives found in books and texts used in schools (McCall, 1994; Sikes Scering, 1997). What is missing in the literature is a lack of current studies, a lack of qualitative studies, a lack of teachers’ own voices commenting on this issue, and a lack of research done on this topic, in Ontario in particular. My
research explicitly explored the connection between feminist pedagogy and creating an inclusive environment in the classroom.

This research is important to the education community because as the demographics in our classrooms becomes more diverse, it is important for all of our students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and learning environment. Every student is unique based on their social identity. Maher and Ward (2002) explain that all students come with a social identity and that affects the way they live in the world, “all children have gender, race, cultural and class positions; that they live in cultural contexts; and that these contexts are shaped by societal dynamics of power and privilege” (p. 98-99). Incorporating inclusion in the classroom is an important part of education because it ensures all students have equitable outcomes for learning no matter what their social identity is (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Inclusion and equity in classrooms are connected to greater academic outcomes for students; “School equity aims to promote academic success by responding to unique student needs” (Davies & Guppy, 2014, p. 155). Focusing on inclusion and equity in the classroom may help reduce student achievement gaps and increase student achievement overall (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). This research is important to the education community because it provides insight and strategies for educators on how to create inclusive learning environments through the use of feminist pedagogy.

1.3 Research Questions

The main research question that this paper focuses on is, “How can feminist pedagogy be used in elementary classrooms to contribute to an inclusive learning environment?” The following sub-questions helped answer the main research question:

- How is feminist pedagogy defined in elementary education?
• What are teachers’ experiences using feminist pedagogy in elementary classrooms?
• What are the benefits and limitations of using feminist pedagogy in elementary classrooms?

In order to answer these questions, I used a qualitative research approach, which I describe in detail in Chapter Three.

1.4 Positionality of the Researcher

I grew up in a rural farm community in Southwestern Ontario where gender stereotypes were everywhere, including my public school education. I still recall certain incidents from elementary school. In grade 4, for example, my class learned about medieval times. We spent one class looking at what women did during that time. I was very surprised to hear my teacher tell us that women during that time were only wives and mothers, simply because they were not allowed to be anything else. Then in my grade 11 class, we were asked to complete a research project on an invention that was created during the industrial revolution. My teacher gave us a list of possible options, all of which were invented by men. I asked if I could pick an invention not on the list, one created by a woman. My teacher’s response was that I wouldn’t be able to find one. Throughout my public school education, women were never an equal focus in the units we were studying. I had a hard time connecting to material that didn’t represent myself. I often felt disconnected to material learned in class. While, my male counterparts in class were learning about the various role models they could look up to; I was learning about how little women contributed to society. Not only did I struggle to connect to the material taught in class but it made me feel like my options for my future were limited.

These are just some of the reasons why I became interested in feminism and education. I want to make sure no other student feels left out of their education simply because they are
written out of the curriculum or taught as a side note to a unit. I felt as if my education was not inclusive to everyone. I had always wanted to be a teacher and knew once I became one I would work towards including all those aspects of my education that I thought were missing into my teaching practice. Being a feminist means I cannot separate my values and beliefs from my teaching, they will always intertwine. Understanding feminist pedagogy is important to me because I will use this pedagogy in my own teaching practice. I want to learn more about it’s benefits and limitations, and how to use it in the elementary classroom to create an inclusive classroom environment for all students.

1.5 Overview of the Study

This research study encompasses five chapters, and one appendix. Chapter One includes the research problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, positionality of the researcher and an overview of the study. In Chapter Two, I provide a literature review on the topic. The main topics covered in the literature review are what is feminist pedagogy, why use feminist pedagogy in relation to creating an inclusive environment, what does feminist pedagogy look like in the elementary classroom. In Chapter Three, I provide an overview of the research methodologies. This includes the research approach and procedures, instruments of data collection, participant overview, data analysis, ethical review procedures and methodological limitations and strengths. In Chapter Four, I provide the research findings. Finally, in Chapter Five, the implications of the research are addressed. An overview of the key findings, implications, recommendations and areas for further research are included in Chapter Five. In the appendix of the research, a copy of the consent letter, the interview protocol and questions, and a list of resources provided by the participants from the interviews are included.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction to the Chapter

My research study aimed to examine the ways feminist pedagogy is used in elementary classrooms to contribute to creating inclusive learning environments. My research intended to gain insight into how to create an inclusive elementary classroom by using feminist pedagogy. First in the literature review, I look at definitions and understandings of feminist pedagogy. Next, I examine the benefits for educators to use feminist pedagogy in relation to inclusion. Then, I review literature that focuses on what feminist pedagogy looks like in the elementary classroom, in terms of activities and strategies. Finally, I describe what is missing from the research and provide insight to how my research fills those gaps.

2.1 Definitions of Pedagogy in Education

One of the major issues cited by research into feminist topics, are the variety of definitions and types of feminisms. In this section, I describe the various definitions of pedagogy generally in the context of education.

2.1.1 What is pedagogy?

Thompson (2006) describes pedagogy as combining the way teachers present information, create assignments and conduct assessment. It is described as the general process of how a teacher educates (Thompson, 2006). Thompson (2006) describes pedagogy as “[…] a powerful aspect of teacher education […]” (p. 203). Teachers should be aware of how to present information and assignments to students. Pedagogy focuses on how students will react to teaching and learning (Thompson, 2006). As Hazel and Allen (2013) explain, involving the community in discussions around pedagogy in relation to the school community helps members of the community have their voices heard and supports student learning. Pedagogy involves not
only the community that schools are immersed in but also the positionality of the teacher themselves. This includes how do they want to teach and what are their beliefs about education.

2.2 What is Feminist Pedagogy?

Many scholars have common aspects of what feminist pedagogy is (Christie, 1997; Capobianco, 2007; Sike Scering, 1997). The main concepts that are in common in much of the research are incorporating feminine ways of learning and knowing; challenging assumptions, values, and beliefs; empowering students; valuing student voices and experiences; and understanding multiple ways of knowing. Many of the key concepts of feminist pedagogy overlap with other pedagogies focusing in this area such as critical pedagogy, anti-biased education, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Critical pedagogy focuses mainly on teaching students to think critically and challenging the hierarchical structures schools create in education, which can lead to oppression (Breunig, 2005). Anti-biased education acknowledges differences between students such as cultural difference, family structure and language; and teaches students to be proud of their backgrounds and respect others (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Anti-biased education is rooted in speaking up for justice when there is unequal or unfair treatment or access for students (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, similarly to anti-biased education focuses on students’ social identities but also looks at how these differences are connected to student learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Feminist pedagogy aligns with all of these similar pedagogies but also includes a specific focus on gender difference. The following section will explain in detail the key elements to what makes feminist pedagogy different from other pedagogies.
2.2.1 Incorporating feminine ways of learning/knowing

Learning from a feminine perspective is a common feature of feminist pedagogy. Many scholars argue that the school system has been set up in a way to service the needs of masculine ways of learning and seeing the world (Christie, 1997; Capobianco, 2007). Maher and Ward argue that men and women do learn differently and we need to not only acknowledge this in our classrooms but also provide a space for learning differences (2002). Maher and Ward explain: “men and women think differently, men more argumentative, women want to understand through connections” (2002, p. 94). Christie’s (1997) article explains feminist pedagogy focuses on providing students with feminine perspectives for learning compared to the common use of a patriarchal system. Christie (1997) explains that the school system is designed to continue a patriarchal understanding of the world, while using feminist pedagogy in the classroom challenges those beliefs. Capobianco (2007) has a similar understanding of feminist pedagogy in her research. Capobianco (2007) explains feminist pedagogy as: “[…] being female-friendly, gender-inclusive, laboratory, and transformative” (p.3). The term ‘female-friendly’ is used by Capobianco specifically targeting her view of how science education does not try to involve feminine ways of knowing. Feminist pedagogy acknowledges and incorporates these differences of gender into the classroom.

2.2.2 Challenging assumptions, values and beliefs

Feminist pedagogy also works with students to challenge assumptions, values and beliefs. Christine (1997) explains, challenging sexism in the classroom as an important aspect of feminist pedagogy in order for all students to work together positively. Maher and Ward (2002) discuss sexism in the classroom, as well as racism and homophobia as common issues teachers experience in the classroom from students. Teachers need not only to talk about these issues but
also to challenge assumptions and beliefs associated with these forms of discrimination with their students (Maher & Ward, 2002). Challenging the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, as well as focusing on students’ difference in social identity is what Sike Scering (1997) believes is a key aspects of feminist pedagogy. Roy and Schen (1993) explain that all aims of a teacher’s responsibilities need to address these issues in order to make change:

As the web of feminist awareness widens its cast over classrooms at all levels, kindergarten through university, feminist educators need to abandon the hierarchical assumptions that separate them. As we empower voices, acknowledge diversity, and develop inclusive curricula and teaching strategies, we must apply the same revolutionary values to our own professional networks and relationships (p. 146).

These researchers put forth the idea that as educators who use feminist pedagogy, a key aspect is to challenge our own beliefs and have students challenge theirs. Robinson-Keilig, Hamill, Gwin-Vinsant and Dashner’s (2014), research examines feminist pedagogy focuses on the importance for learners to understand diverse perspectives and how these shape different solutions to social issues we face. They also describe core principals of feminist pedagogy as: “(a) challenging instructor/student hierarchy, (b) valuing student experiences and knowledge, and (c) facilitating critical consciousness” (p. 292). Many of these key concepts echo the other research on feminist pedagogy.

2.2.3 Empowering students

Another key understanding of feminist pedagogy is that it incorporates empowerment of students. Student empowerment is defined as providing students with the skills needed to have control over issues affecting them (Kirk et al., 2015). Student empowerment may look like a variety of personal attributes including self-determination, critical awareness, and self-efficacy
skills (Kirk et al., 2015). Capobianco (2007) explains that feminist pedagogy encourages student empowerment through rethinking about how education affects students’ personal lives. Empowerment of students is also key to Coria and Taylor’s (2013) definition of feminist pedagogy. These authors explain their key principals for feminist pedagogy as: “[r]eformation of the relationship between teacher and student, empowerment, building community, privileging voice, respecting the diversity of personal experience, and challenging traditional pedagogical views” (Coria & Taylor, 2013, p.6). Shrewbury (1993) also views student empowerment as an important aspect to feminist pedagogy. Shrewbury (1993) explains feminist pedagogy as a: “community of learners [who are] empowered to act responsibly toward one another and the subject matter” (p.8). It appears that to these researchers, student empowerment is a key part of what feminist pedagogy presents.

2.2.4 Valuing student voices and experiences

Student experience and voice is another feature of feminist pedagogy. Capobianco (2007) believes feminist pedagogy “is directed at developing curriculum and instruction that validate the voices, experiences, and viewpoints of all students” (p. 2). Parry (1996) also notes that student experience is a valued part of feminist pedagogy when he notes that “feminist pedagogy affirms the value of personal experience as a central component of learning” (p. 47). Students’ experiences, no matter how big or small, have a place in education and helps their understanding. Robinson-Keilig et al. (2014) in their turn believe that feminist pedagogy is focused not only on student experience and voice but that every student’s experience and voice have value, “Every student is involved, and each experience has values” (p. 294). The aspect of feminist pedagogy that these researchers focus on is thus every student and every student experience.
2.2.5 Understanding multiple ways of knowing

Feminist pedagogy not only takes into account that male and female students learn knowledge differently but also that there are various ways of knowing and understanding the world from a variety of perspectives. Christie (1997), for example, explains:

Unique features of feminist pedagogy include the following: honoring multiple ways of knowing and viewing the world, valuing independence and critical thinking, empowering all members of the community, engaging all members of the community, engaging its members in reflection, demanding that its members work together to get beyond sexism and other biases, and perhaps most importantly, producing and then reflecting upon the social reality of these classrooms (p. 148).

Many of the examples Christie gives connect with other researchers’ understanding of feminist pedagogy in the classroom. Parry (1996) states that feminist pedagogy takes on the kind of learning where students are accountable and responsible for learning and the teacher is not the holder of knowledge, “Feminist pedagogy promotes the awareness that knowledge is not a discrete body of ‘truths’ that the instructor knows and imparts to students” (p. 45). This idea also connects to student voice and experience. Student knowledge is valued in a classroom in which feminist pedagogy is used.

According to the above research, feminist pedagogy has many key aspects including learning from a feminine perspective; student empowerment; challenging assumptions, values and beliefs; understanding that student experience and voice are valued; as well as honoring multiple ways of knowing. I will now turn my discussing how these key concepts are used in the elementary classroom to contribute to an inclusive and equitable environment.
2.3 Why Do We Need Feminist Pedagogy in the Elementary Classroom?

This section examines why feminist pedagogy is needed in the elementary classroom to address particular issues.

2.3.1 Exclusion from the curriculum and the learning environment

Inclusion, or lack of inclusion, is a common theme among much of what has been stated as issues in education today (People for Education, 2015). Woodham Digiovanni and Liston (2015) explain that the need for feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom is due to a lack of female role models and voices in the curriculum. They explain the following:

For example, as students’ progress through the elementary level, women are conspicuously absent from the formal curriculum. Very few leaders in history have been women, very little mention is made of women in the fields of science and mathematics, and although women are becoming more prominent as authors of children's literature, most stories and poems given attention within the classroom still focus on male protagonists or are written by male authors. (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015, p. 124).

According to these scholars, women are being excluded from the curriculum. Throughout my own elementary education, I felt this exclusion of women from my learning. This was one of many reasons that lead to my interest in feminism and becoming a teacher. McCall (1994) agrees that women are being left out of aspects of the curriculum, as well as many students from diverse social identities. McCall explains that curriculum often reflects contemporary society’s perspectives (1994). McCall argues that history books and texts lack characters of diverse backgrounds (1994). Sikes Scering (1997) also notes of the lack of diverse perspectives in schools. The term used in her article is “structured silence,” noting that educators and schools are
not inclusive to all students, but rather reinforce dominate thinking of our society (Sikes Scering, 1997). These scholars explain that there is a lack of diverse perspectives throughout school curriculum and content.

Similarly, Roychoudhury, Tippins and Nicols (1994) explain that women are being excluded from aspects of science education. Their research describes how the kind of language used in science is male focused arguing this makes it harder for female students to connect to the material. (Roychoudhury, Tippins & Nicols, 1994). They also argue that schools reinforce the dominate world view of patriarchy through how they construct gender (Roychoudhury, Tippins & Nicols, 1994). Due to the lack of more recent studies, the arguments constructed may not fully relate to contemporary classrooms. Again, this speaks to the gap in the research on the topic.

Maher and Ward (2002) have also commented on the lack of female perspectives in the curriculum; “the lack of women’s perspectives in the curriculum and above all, the competitive world of the classroom that puts girls at a disadvantage” (p. 86). Maher and Ward explain that our curriculum content and classrooms should reflect the students that are in them as simply put they too are in the world outside of school:

We want to include women’s perspectives in the curriculum, because we believe that all groups should be represented in literature and in history, as they are in life itself. In language arts and literature classes, stories and heroes should reflect a whole range of human and cultural experiences and topics, including an equal measure of female heroines (2002, 86-87).

Hazel and Allen (2013) agree that inclusion is an important issue in schools. They argue that lack of inclusion in schools leads to academic underachievement (Hazel & Allen, 2013). Hazel and Allen (2013) explain, “Historically, certain groups of students have been less included
in the school community, and have had less academic success and persistence in schools. This is a great social inequality” (p. 336). They provide yet another example of where certain students are being excluded from the curriculum and learning environment. People for Education researched in Ontario schools that Aboriginal students experience lower self-esteem and academic achievement gaps compared to non-Aboriginal students (2015). Aboriginal histories and perspectives were often not included in Ontario classrooms (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The Ontario Ministry of Education states that having a “Eurocentric perspective in education had the effect of limiting the contributions of people from a variety of different backgrounds and excluding the experiences, values, and viewpoints of members of racial and ethnocultural communities, as well as Aboriginal communities” (2014, p.11). The Ontario Ministry of Education acknowledges that there are achievement gaps between students based on social identities (2014). There has been some light shed on this issue of inequality and lack of inclusion for groups of students to be able to succeed academically in the classroom based on their social identities.

Many scholars have noted the importance inclusion is in the classroom. McFadyen Christensen and Aldreidge (2013) explain that a classroom that uses critical pedagogy, much like feminist pedagogy, often experiences more inclusion of voices from students of all diverse backgrounds because these educators are more aware of students’ positionality and voices. Maher and Ward (2002) explain that acknowledging difference in the classroom could be beneficial for students to talk about what makes them unique. Maher and Ward explain:

Ultimately, it is not that we believe that all children are alike but that we believe they are all different—that is, they are all individuals and have unique talents and interest that teachers have a responsibility to develop in each one (2002, 87).
Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) also discuss how using a pedagogy that is concerned with all students and their needs will help foster a better community of learners. Using feminist pedagogy will also help to address all student needs and will ensure that no student is excluded from learning (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Many scholars agree that inclusion is a strategy that must be implemented in classrooms in order to see more equitable achievement outcomes for students.

From what many of these scholars have said there is clearly an issue with inclusion in education. Whether that is a lack of inclusion of diverse perspectives and voices in the curriculum and learning environment. Woodham Digiovanni and Liston (2015) believe that feminist pedagogy can help with these issues in schools:

Feminist pedagogy provides vision and clarity to critique the status quo, challenge current prejudices and inequities, recognize silences of the hidden curriculum, reinscribe the achievements of women and people of color, and enhance the likelihood that all young women and men will achieve their potential. The elementary school classroom is an excellent place to engage in feminist pedagogy (p. 129)

Feminist pedagogy is very useful to teachers in incorporating inclusion into all aspects of their classroom. My research explored ways in which feminist pedagogy helped to address issues of inclusion in the classroom.

2.4. What Does Feminist Pedagogy Look Like in the Elementary Classroom?

This section provides readers with a sense of what are some of the actual strategies implemented in the classroom that reflect feminist pedagogy. As stated earlier, there is a lack of research on this topic, therefore there are only few examples provided by some of the scholars through their research based on key concepts they use to define feminist pedagogy.
As seen from my earlier discussion, strategies focused on the aspect of feminist pedagogy that promotes inclusion of voices and opinions of those who are often left out of the classroom. Teachers using feminist pedagogy, should focus on incorporating multiple voices into the teaching content to represent a diverse range of experiences (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015). This could be as simple as putting up posters that reflect diverse groups of peoples or using books written and about people from diverse backgrounds, including Aboriginal peoples and women (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015). Another strategy that could be used in the classroom would be to encourage discussion and research on opinions of peoples’ voices whose are often left out of conversations such as women, people of lower socio-economic status, and Aboriginal people (Christie, 1997). There are a few concrete ways to incorporate diverse voices into an elementary classroom presented in the research such as including books written by and incorporating people with diverse backgrounds and encouraging discussions that include voices of people that are often left out of important issues such as Aboriginal peoples and women.

Another area where some scholars have provided strategies for educators is connected to feminist pedagogy’s sense of collaborative learning and empowerment. Christie (1997) explains that feminist pedagogy used in elementary classrooms should provide an environment for students in which students are engaged, allowed to reflect, collaborate, be cooperative, interactive, and they are encouraged to take risks. Christie explains: “A classroom based on feminist pedagogy is a community of learners where power is shared and where participatory democratic processes help learners develop independence” (Christie, 1997, p. 148). Roychoudhury, Tippins, and Nicols (1994) explains that classrooms using feminist pedagogy should also provide students with power to make decisions. Along with decision making power, student empowerment, student personal experiences and collaborative work should be
encouraged (Roychoudhury, Tippins & Nicols, 1994). Rensenbrink (2001) agrees that using feminist pedagogy in the classroom should be about empowering students and using a focus on collaboration. Rensenbrink (2001) defines that a classroom that uses feminist pedagogy might look like an alternative classroom, compared to a more traditional teaching classroom. Rensenbrink’s examples of an alternative classroom include: “learning that is active, participatory, whole-child, hands-on, independent, self-directed, and empowering” (p. 133).

Finally, the classroom environment needs to have certain expectations through a feminist pedagogical lens. Capobianco’s (2007) research interviewed teachers using feminist pedagogy about what their classroom in particular is like. According to the research conducted by Capobianco (2007), one teacher suggested classrooms need to be safe for students to feel comfortable asking questions, feeling valued, have opportunities, and learn and show respect. Another teacher responded by explaining that classrooms need to incorporate critical thinking, and personal experiences into conversations (Capobianco, 2007).

Some researchers provided strategies used in the classroom that follow the understandings of feminist pedagogy. These strategies included using books from diverse authors, and incorporating peoples’ voices into conversations that are often left out such as Aboriginal voices. It is important for teachers to understand a pedagogy but also know how to use it in the classroom appropriately. It is beneficial to have concrete examples of feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom. The interviews with the participants of this study address in more detail what feminist pedagogy looks like in the classroom and how it is used by the teachers themselves.
2.5 What is Missing from the Research?

It is clear from the above review of the literature that a number of aspects are missing in the research on this topic. First, there is a lack of research on feminist pedagogy in general, even at the elementary level “feminist pedagogical practices are relatively unstudied in and virtually unapplied to the elementary school level” (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015, p. 123). Secondly, there is a lack of current research. Many of the sources are dated from the 1990’s. This makes understanding feminist pedagogy more challenging since so much has changed from when most of the articles were written. Even Woodham Digiovanni and Liston (2015) critique this throughout their article “As our review of the literature revealed, […] few published sources have explicitly sought to bring feminist pedagogy into the elementary classroom” (p. 125). Third, there is a lack of qualitative studies on this topic. This leads to a major gap in the research, which is the lack of teacher voices and perspectives on the topic. Fourth, there is a lack of research on this topic specific to Ontario. Finally, none of the articles address any criticisms or limitation of feminist pedagogy. As a future educator, whose values and beliefs fit within feminist pedagogy, it is important to know what challenges or issues might arise with this pedagogy. My research explored a number of the gaps presented throughout this chapter. First, my research is qualitative which gave a voice to elementary teachers to talk about their experiences and knowledge on feminist pedagogy. Second, my research explores the relationship feminist pedagogy has with creating and contributing to an inclusive environment. I also address some challenges and limitations teachers had associated with feminist pedagogy.

2.6 Conclusion

Feminist pedagogy has a number of key concepts including: learning from a feminine perspective; student empowerment; incorporating multiple ways of knowing; challenging
assumptions, values and beliefs; and understanding that student experience and voice are valued and important to learning. Many scholars agree that inclusion in the classroom has become an expected practice in many schools, but it is not as easy as it seems. Some of the researchers have presented how some students, based on their social identities, are still excluded in the classroom whether that is through curriculum or the learning environment. Feminist pedagogy has many qualities that could address those issues. These include strategies to use in the classroom such as incorporating posters that reflect diverse students and providing students with a safe space in the classroom. Despite much of the research done so far, there are still a great deal of information lacking. My research helped fill some of those gaps as well as encourage other teachers to explore feminist pedagogy because of the many positive strategies it can bring to a classroom.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction to the Chapter

Chapter 3 provides details on the research approach, procedures, and data collection methods. My research examined how teachers use feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom to create an inclusive learning environment. This chapter details the research approach, data collection, participant information, data analysis, ethical review procedures and methodological strengths and limitations.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

My research follows a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research focuses on gathering information mainly from words through the use of observations and interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Qualitative research is an in-depth exploration of social contexts and behaviours (Lauer, 2006). As my data collection method, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three educators. The data was then transcribed, coded, and analysed following the procedures of qualitative research.

Qualitative research is used when “little is known about a certain topic or when an inductive approach is deemed more appropriate to learn more about a topic” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 30). Since my topic of feminist pedagogy in the classroom is relatively under-researched (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015), using qualitative research was an appropriate approach to my study. Morse and Richard (2002) state:

The purpose [of qualitative research] is to understand an area where little is known or where previously offered understanding appears inadequate...If the purpose is to learn from the participants in a setting or process the way they experienced it, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what they experience, you need methods that will
allow you to discover and do justice to their perceptions and the complexity of their interpretations. (p. 28)

My research uses educators’ own experiences and opinions on their uses of feminist pedagogy in their classroom and/or teaching practices.

There are many benefits to using qualitative research including the fact that this kind of research can be interpretive and critical in understanding new information (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative research can also be used as a liberating action for people whose issues and/or voices are often not represented in research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Based on these benefits, a qualitative approach is especially appropriate for this topic because of the lack of research in this area and the lack of educators’ opinions and thoughts on feminist pedagogy in the classroom.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

For this research study, I conducted semi-structured interviews to collect my data. Semi-structured interviews in qualitative research are considered flexible, with some order and preparation (Bryman & Teevan, 2005). Often, semi-structured interviews involve open-ended questions which are created before the interview; unplanned questions or topics are also often discussed in semi-structured interviews depending on the responses of participants (Morse & Richards, 2002). Semi-structured interviews are beneficial because a great deal of information can be learned in a short amount of time with the participant(s) (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). There is a lot of flexibility with semi-structured interviews in terms of questions that are asked and the possibility to follow up with the participant(s) (Bryman & Teevan, 2005). Using semi-structured interviews were appropriate to my research because I wanted to learn from
educators how they were including feminist pedagogy in their classrooms from their experiences. Conducting interviews provided me with the in-depth information into this topic.

Protocol around semi-structured interviews is important because it keeps the data collection methods the same with each interview. Lauer (2006) describes structured and unstructured interview protocol by stating that “Structured interview protocols ask specific objective questions in a predetermined order. Unstructured interview protocols ask more open-ended questions, and the order often depends on interviewee’s answers” (p. 37). Semi-structured interviews are a mix of these two interview protocols. Creswell (2013) explains that part of the interview protocol should include informing the participant(s) of the purpose of the study, and making sure they are aware their participation in the study is on a volunteer basis. Part of interview protocol from Creswell (2013) also describes recognizing reciprocity by “giving back to participants for their time and efforts in our projects -reciprocity- is important, and we need to review how participants will gain from our studies” (p. 55). In my study, the participants were able to critically think about their teaching practice and gain insights into their own thinking around feminist pedagogy. I believe that participating in the interview with me, in turn, helped my participants learn something new about their own pedagogy and practice.

My participants were given the interview questions before the interviews so they could prepare for the questions being asked if they chose. I provided the participants with an overview of the research study including the purpose of my study, and how long the interview would be. My interview questions were organized under the topics as follows: Background Information, Educator Perspectives and Beliefs, Educator Practices, Supports and Challenges, and Next Steps (Refer to Appendix B).
3.3 Participants

This section provides an overview of the sampling criteria I used in finding participants for my study, as well as the sampling procedures and the biographies of the participants in the study.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The sampling criteria for my participants focused on a number of areas: the participants had to be past or present educators; they had to either be teaching or have taught at least one elementary grade (this includes any grade from kindergarten to grade six); and the participants needed to identify with using aspects of feminist pedagogy in their classroom and/or teaching practice. The participants needed to be educators of elementary grades in order for me to fill in one of the major gaps in the research; the lack of research on feminist pedagogy in the elementary grades. It was imperative to my research that my participants used feminist pedagogy in their teaching practice in order for me to gain an understanding of how it is used in the classroom and how it contributes to inclusion. The participants did not need to identify themselves with the label of feminist pedagogue or feminist, but they did need to use some of the key concepts of feminist pedagogy, identified from the Literature Review, in their teaching. The participants were provided with a description of what the key concepts of feminist pedagogy entailed before agreeing to participate in the study.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

For my study, I used a convenience sampling method and chain method, also known as snowball method, for recruiting my participants. Convenience sampling is described by Bryman and Teevan (2005) as a sampling method that a researcher uses to recruit participants, using available recourses that the researcher has at hand. Chain method is described as the researcher
finding participants, then asking those participants who they know and so on (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In terms of my research, this is an appropriate method because of the scope and parameters of the research guidelines. Using the chain method often yields participants of the same interest on a certain topic (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I asked fellow students, professors, educators and my participants who they knew in the field of education that had an interest in feminist pedagogy. Then I asked these people if they knew anyone else, creating the chain method through the use of resources at my disposal. I also asked family members and friends who were in the education field or who knew of people in the education field if they could recommend anyone fitting the criteria for my research.

3.3.3 Participant biographies

My first participant is referred to as Jennifer (a pseudonym) throughout this paper. Jennifer has been a classroom teacher for twelve years, teaching grades four through eight. Jennifer was teaching at an urban all-girls independent school at the time of the study. She has a background in Drama, English and Science. Jennifer explicitly identifies as a feminist and along with using feminist pedagogy in her classroom, she has shared that she also incorporates anti-oppressive education, critical pedagogy, and inquiry-based education.

For my second participant, I used the pseudonym Lisa. At the time of the interview, Lisa had been teaching for twenty-six years in a small city neighboring a rural area. Lisa has taught kindergarten through grade eight. Four years prior to our meeting, Lisa started working half time as Librarian and half time teaching. Lisa has a background in English and Psychology. She identifies as a feminist and incorporates pedagogies such as student centered learning and inquiry based education into her teaching.
My third and final participant is referred to as David. David had been a teacher for twenty-five years in a rural community at the time of our interview. His background focuses on environmental studies. David has an intermediate qualification with a geography specialist and has taught grades four through eight. Although David does not identify himself as a feminist, he indicated that he uses aspects of feminist pedagogy in his teaching. Other pedagogies that David is using in his teaching include collaborative learning, critical pedagogy, and a focus on student voice.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is described as a summary of the data in which meaning can then be made “The goal of data analysis is to be able to clearly summarize your data […]” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 520). It is important to note that analysis of the data occurs on information that is presented in the interviews but also what is not presented, referred to as ‘null data’. As Ryan and Bernard (2003) maintain, “Researchers have long recognized that much can be learned from qualitative data by what is not mentioned” (p. 92). Ryan and Bernard (2003) note that often participants leave certain information out for several reasons, either because they did not understand the question, or chose to specifically not mention something. In my research, thus, I also considered what information was not discussed during the interviews.

Data analysis of interviews involves multiple steps including coding. Coding is “[…] designed to reduce the information in ways that facilitate interpretations of the findings” (Lauer, 2006, p. 48). Coding is the creating of themes, categories and labels based on the data collected (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Once the coding is complete, an interpretation of the data follows, and “Interpretation in qualitative research involves abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 187). In my research, I used the following
steps to complete data analysis. First, I transcribed the interviews of the participants. Next, I coded the transcripts individually, using the research questions to guide my findings. From there, I gathered common categories of information from each transcript then synthesized the information into themes. Finally, I conducted my own meaning-making process on the findings from the interviews in comparison to prior literature.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Ethical procedures are especially important in qualitative research because research is often gathered through observations or interviews with people (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Ethics are important to address in a research study because they help guide researchers, and uphold values (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). In my research, I followed a number of ethical review procedures. These included protecting the participants’ identity. I ensured confidentiality throughout my research through the use of pseudonym for the participants, as well as removing any identifying factors in the data such as names of schools and locations. The interview recordings were stored on a secure, password protected laptop. I received voluntary and informed consent from the participants prior to beginning the interview process through a written consent form. My participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the research study at any time prior to my submission of the study. The participants were aware that my research had no known risks associated with it. I provided my participants with the option to review and change any information they provided me on the transcripts and written analysis of the information. I chose to follow these ethical procedures as a way to allow my participants to be fully engaged with the research as possible. Providing participants with informed consent allowed them to be completely aware of what expectations I had during the interviews and what they expected from me. Giving the option to participants to read and edit data collected in the
research process allowed participants to be in control of how their voices and opinion were represented. Overall, using these ethical considerations helped strengthen my research because the participants were able to fully engage with knowing they had control over the information they presented.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

My research is limited given the study design. Given the scope of the research, I was only able to interview a small number of teachers because of the Masters of Teaching Research Project ethics review and guidelines set by our program. Furthermore, as Marshal and Rossman (2006) maintained, a limitation to qualitative studies is the information cannot be generalized about a topic. Interviewing only a few teachers means my research can only provide information on feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom through my participants’ understandings. The information I gathered will only be applicable in the context it was formed.

My research study has a number of methodical strengths such as interviewing educators currently practising in Ontario, a context in which there is a lack of research done on this topic; focusing on elementary classrooms which is under-researched; and interviewing educators to learn about their understandings of the connections between feminist pedagogy and inclusion in the classroom. As mentioned in my Literature Review, one of the major gaps in the research in this topic is the lack of educators’ voices on the use of feminist pedagogy (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015). Qualitative research is often used to empower people whose voices, opinions, ideas and/or stories have been silenced or underrepresented (Creswell, 2013). My research has given educators the chance to speak out about their thoughts on feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom.
3.7 Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, my research study follows the approach and procedures of qualitative research. I have explained my research approach and procedures. I have provided information on my data collection methods, which involved semi-structured interviews. I explained my sampling criteria for recruiting participants, which focused on finding educators that are interested in or are using feminist pedagogy in elementary classrooms. Participant procedures for my research followed that of convenience sampling and chain methods. I included short participant biographies. My data analysis included transcribing the interviews, coding, categorizing and then eliciting themes. My ethical protocol is laid out including aspects of confidentiality, informed consent, and the right to withdraw. I have also included limitations and strengths to my research. The main limitation to my research involves the scope of my research only interviewing a few participants. The strengths to my research involves including the voices of educators which has often been left out of the research. The next chapter will provide details on the research findings.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter discusses the research findings that emerged through the data analysis of three interviews with three Ontario elementary school teachers. During the analysis process, my main research question helped guide my focus through the analysis of the interviews: How can feminist pedagogy be used in elementary classrooms to contribute to an inclusive learning environment. Through the data analysis process, four main themes emerged: Teachers’ Definitions of Feminist Pedagogy in the Elementary Classroom; Feminist Pedagogical Strategies used to Encourage Student Autonomy and Student Empowerment; Resources Used to Support the Elementary Classroom Through a Feminist Pedagogy Lens; and Challenges and Resistance to Feminist Pedagogy. Each of the four themes will be analysed through sub-themes. Throughout the chapter, I will present and discuss the findings, present the participants’ voices and make connections to the Literature Review.

4.1 Teachers’ Definitions of Feminist Pedagogy in the Elementary Classroom

One of the major difficulties with understanding feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom is the wide variety of definitions it has, which makes this pedagogy hard to define. Throughout the interview process the participants were able to define what feminist pedagogy means to them and how they use it in their classrooms. Three key aspects emerged from the interviews: feminist pedagogy acknowledges gender differences; diversity of learners; and focuses on critical thinking in teaching and learning. My findings showed that two of the participants defined feminist pedagogy in relation to acknowledging gender difference in the classroom. The participants also described acknowledging diversity of learners in the classroom as a key element to feminist pedagogy. Finally, the participants described how critical thinking
through their teaching and the students’ learning is another key aspect to feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom. These key aspects of feminist pedagogy are similar to what was found in the literature (Capobianco, 2007; Christie, 1997; Sike Scering, 1997; Roy & Schen, 1993).

4.1.1 Acknowledgement of gender differences

A key aspect of feminist pedagogy according to the participants in this study is acknowledging gender differences in the classroom. David explained that the focus of feminist pedagogy, for him, was to ensure equity in the classroom. He described feminist pedagogy as “[...] practices that ensure that girls are offered an equal share and voice in the classroom and in their learning.” David followed up by saying that the male students in his class need to learn to take a step back sometimes and allow others to have a voice. Jennifer also spoke to this:

I have read the research and boys get more attention from teachers. Both positive and negative, they get called on more, they interrupt, they get higher grades. Their voices are more valued. It is just a part of the world we live in.

Jennifer and David both acknowledged that focusing on the gender differences in their classrooms can be used positively as a way to create inclusion and equity for all students. Capobianco (2007) and Christie (1997) confirm the acknowledgment of gender differences as a key piece to feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom. Lisa did not bring up gender difference as a specific aspect of feminist pedagogy but talked more to the intersectionality and diversity of students in general.

4.1.2 Acknowledgement of the diversity of learners

Along with acknowledging gender differences among students, the participants described acknowledging the intersectionality and diversity of their students as key to understanding feminist pedagogy. Intersectionality refers to how people describe their social identity in relation
to all aspects of themselves (Hankivsky, 2014). Jennifer explained: “what it starts with for me is sort of viewing how I teach through the lens of my students and looking at their place in the world.” Lisa had similar thoughts about understanding students’ identities as key to student growth; “Feminist pedagogy is when, so basically I walk into a classroom and I look at all of the people there and I say everyone in this classroom will succeed. They will succeed at what level they can get to.” For Jennifer and Lisa, feminist pedagogy focuses on the intersectionality of the learners. David also discussed the importance of understanding students as a whole. He focused more on understanding the home life of his students and how that impacts them inside and outside the classroom. Overall, all the participants mentioned a key factor to feminist pedagogy is understanding who the students are in all aspects of their lives.

From the literature review, understanding the diversity of students is at the core of feminist pedagogy. Christie (1997) focuses on understanding that there are multiple ways of knowing and learning for students which comes from who they are as individuals. Parry (1996) also speaks to valuing students’ experiences as individuals. Understanding students and who they are in all aspects of their lives are key to feminist pedagogy in order to ensure student growth and achievement (Parry, 1996).

4.1.3 Focus on critical thinking in teaching and learning

Finally, all participants discussed the importance of critical thinking as another key aspect of feminist pedagogy. Jennifer explained, “I really want my students to question. To not just accept authority.” Jennifer’s teaching practices focused more on social justice work and making sure her students were well informed about the world around them; but also providing students with skills needed to critically think and understand issues around them. These ideas align with Sike Scering (1997) who explains that feminist pedagogy challenges the hierarchical
systems that schools put into place. Lisa tends to focus on infusing critical thinking skills through inquiry based education. Lisa described a lesson in which she explicitly focused on teaching critical thinking to her students based on popular culture topics. David, who had been in the profession for twenty-five years at the time of the study, explained how his practice changed from when he started. He explained how he focused more on incorporating self-expression from his students while also focusing on developing students’ critical thinking skills. Roy and Schen (1993) also recognize critical thinking as a key aspect of feminist pedagogy. They suggest that feminist pedagogy’s focus on critical thinking skills allow students to think critically, challenge and change social issues in society and social issues affecting their own lives.

The participants had overlapping and quite similar views of how to define feminist pedagogy compared to the literature. The key understanding around the acknowledgment of gender differences were present in David and Jennifer’s interviews. However, Lisa did not explicitly mention gender as an important aspect of the pedagogy. All the participants described the importance of understanding the diversity of their students in some way as an important part of feminist pedagogy. The participants also described critical thinking to be key, but the ways in which it was implemented in classroom practice differed among the participants.

4.2 Feminist Pedagogical Strategies used to Encourages Student Autonomy and Student Empowerment

Throughout the interviews the participants discussed many strategies they used that aligned with feminist pedagogy. What all these strategies had in common was encouraging student autonomy and student empowerment for their students. The participants discussed that creating safe spaces in the classroom and through their teaching practice, teaching life skills and using student needs and experiences in the classroom all work to promote student empowerment
and student autonomy. Although the literature mentions student empowerment as a key strategy to feminist pedagogy, the participants focused more heavily on student empowerment and autonomy than what was mentioned in the literature (Coria & Taylor, 2013; Shrewbury, 1993). The following sections describe the feminist pedagogical strategies and practices implemented in the elementary classroom by the participants that encourage student autonomy and empowerment.

4.2.1 Creating safe spaces

Throughout the interviews the participants discussed the importance of creating a safe community in their classroom for all students. Jennifer explained that safe spaces in her teaching practice was about the way lessons were taught and how accessible they were to students, “I think at the simplest level looking at every activity you do and making sure everyone has a space in it. Making sure that everyone is able to do something that maybe has multiple points of entry, and re-entry.” While Jennifer’s idea of safe spaces focused on the teacher directed opportunities for students, Lisa’s focus on safe spaces consisted of students taking charge of the creation of the inclusive community:

The students have to feel like this is their classroom, these people are the most important people in their life and they are part of what they are doing. That is so strong in terms of creating an inclusive classroom. I can be as inclusive as I want, but that person over there cannot include that person and that person.

Lisa’s focus on inclusion ties back to student empowerment and autonomy more directly as she invites her students to take charge of creating the inclusive space themselves. Lisa is cautious about teacher directed creation of safe spaces because she believes students cannot authentically be forced to be inclusive, it must happen on their own terms. While David also
focuses on safe spaces in his classroom, his focus is more on the one-on-one relationship the students have with the teacher:

I think the most important thing is to be welcoming, give the students a chance. [...] give them the feeling that they belong. That you are going to be fair and that you value them. You always have to take time to build one on one relationships so that the kids feel that they are part of your class and that you’ll listen to them.

David teaches junior/intermediate grades so his focus comes with experience of older students’ engagement in the classroom. David explained that creating safe spaces is so important at this age for the students because he sees even more of a divide among the students based on gender in the classroom. He explained that female students, between ten and thirteen, seem shy and afraid to speak up in class. David explained that if the students feel safe and comfortable with him they will eventually become more comfortable speaking up in front of the whole class.

The literature also speaks to creating safe spaces as a classroom strategy of feminist pedagogy. Jennifer’s views of safe spaces align more with Woodham Digiovanni and Liston’s (2015) thoughts on safe spaces which include allowing students to feel comfortable in the classroom and seeing themselves reflected throughout the classroom lessons and materials. This approach requires more teacher direction and initiation in the classroom as it is up to the teacher to include these aspects in lessons and the classroom design. Lisa’s and David’s approaches to safe spaces align with Christie (1997) and Sikes Scering’s (1997) ideas that promote students feeling safe in the classroom in order to feel comfortable with their peers and educators they interact with.
4.2.2 Teaching life skills

Throughout the interviews, the participants mentioned various activities and strategies that focused on teaching their students skills that do not necessarily come from curriculum documents. The participants expressed an importance on teaching life skills in order for students to become empowered in their learning and to be autonomous. The term life skills in this case refers to skills similar to what can be seen on the elementary report cards as learning skills. These include examples such as responsibility, self-regulation, and cooperation. Life skills is also about teaching to the students’ needs, which may be topics not in the curriculum. Jennifer explained teaching life skills as “What you are doing is not just Math, Science and English, but you are also teaching how to be in the world.” Jennifer’s teaching practice focused on the whole child and discussing topics that the students bring up, that may not be part of the curriculum but need to be addressed. Lisa’s teaching placed emphasis on connecting real-life issues to the students’ own experiences and she stated that “Learning is always real. […] Like the whole mental health thing. It’s about learning to teach these kids that they can become leaders even though they are struggling with some mental health issues.” Lisa thus catered to what the students’ needed and what could improve their learning overall. David talked about teaching life skills to his students because he noticed the differences between male and female students at ten to thirteen years old and explained that “The explicit teaching of how to be assertive, how to speak up for yourself, how to voice opinions. It is often difficult for boys and girls at that age to connect.” All the participants stated that teaching life skills to their students is embedded in their practices. It was only David who explicitly explained that he believed his students were not getting this education at home and that is why he focused on teaching these skills. Lisa and Jennifer seemed to teach life skills more for the general success of their students, to ensure
student autonomy. While the literature agrees that student empowerment and autonomy are important to feminist pedagogy (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015; Coria & Taylor, 2013; Shrewbury, 1993), teaching life skills to encourage empowerment and autonomy is often not addressed. As mentioned in the Literature Review in Chapter 2, one of the major gaps in the research is the lack of inclusion of teachers’ voices on feminist pedagogy (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015). This may explain the scarcity of feminist pedagogical classroom strategies in the literature.

4.2.3 Incorporating student needs and experiences

The participants explained that a key part of feminist pedagogy is to understand who the learners are. In relation to that, understanding learner needs and experiences are key to empowering and creating autonomous students. All the participants expressed a focus on student needs and experience as part of their teaching focus. When asked to explain more about feminist pedagogy in her practice, Jennifer stated that it “[…] start[s] with our students’ experiences and exposing our students to systems of oppression and asking them to recognize their privilege. Asking them to work together to make the world a better place.” Jennifer believed that knowing her students’ needs would help her to plan lessons and units that target her students’ strengths and areas of improvement.

Lisa expressed that understanding students’ needs and experiences are essential in having an inclusive community in the classroom. She stated, “I think to have inclusion you really, really, need to understand where the kids are.” David’s understanding of student needs and experiences focused more on who the students are as people when he said, “I think specific things like allowing kids with different interests and passions to have flexible learning and to follow along with what they really like to do”. David maintained that all of these strategies help to contribute
to inclusion in the classroom when students feel their needs are being met. All the participants in this study understand and incorporate student needs and experiences into their practices, but each of them focused on different aspects of what this might look like in the classroom. One of the major reasons to use feminist pedagogy in the classroom is the fact that some students are excluded from the curriculum and their learning needs are not met (Hazel and Allen, 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Not only will incorporating student needs and experiences into the classroom help to empower students and create autonomous learners, but also to support student growth.

Overall, all the participants described how they use safe spaces, strategies to teach life skills and methods to incorporate student needs and experiences into their practices as ways to encourage student empowerment and autonomous learners. The literature aligns with the participants focus on empowerment of students and student autonomy as a key part of feminist pedagogy (Sikes Scering, 1997; Hazel & Allen, 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Including teachers’ voices into the conversation explains how educators using feminist pedagogy encourage student empowerment and student autonomy through specific strategies.

4.3 Resources Using a Feminist Pedagogy Lens Used to Support the Elementary Classroom

All the participants discussed several resources, specific to feminist pedagogy, which they use to develop their practice. Lisa and Jennifer spoke about published material that they use in their classrooms. Jennifer explicitly talked about using social media while Lisa discussed using current events through which she uses a social media focus. David focused more on in-class collaboration strategies he uses with his students. Jennifer also described her experience using support from colleagues to help improve her practice. There is a lack of research on feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom, leading to a lack of resources for elementary
educators (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015). This section will address the resources the participants have used to support their elementary classrooms through a feminist pedagogy lens.

4.3.1 Published materials

Jennifer and Lisa both discussed their use of published materials to help support their learning as educators in feminist pedagogy and to provide them with support in their classrooms. David did not mention that he uses published material as a resource specific to feminist pedagogy. Jennifer spoke to both academic and non-academic literature, “I read a lot of feminist publications, [and] the magazine Rethinking Schools.” Lisa, another participant, discussed using picture books that have an equity focus to help support her classroom:

I specifically take time and effort to choose a book that talks about equality but not with coming out and saying ‘this is equality’. It has it embedded in the story and then we can get discussion going around it.

Lisa uses picture books as a way to bring up difficult topics with her students (For a full list of resources suggested by the participants, refer to Appendix C). Woodham Digiovanni and Liston (2015) examine the use of picture books in the elementary classroom to promote the inclusion of voices that may be left out of the conversation. Lisa also describes using documents and publications from the Ontario Ministry of Education. Lisa explains that these resources are useful for teachers to gain insight into incorporating student empowerment and autonomy into the classroom.

4.3.2 Social media

The use of social media in the classroom to support educators’ learning and students’ learning was not mentioned in the literature. This could be from the lack of current research on the topic (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015) since many of the research articles on feminist
pedagogy predate the 2000’s. Despite this, social media was a focus for Jennifer and Lisa, while David did not mention using social media in his teaching practices. Jennifer talked explicitly about using social media for her own learning as a feminist educator:

[…] The internet and social media are amazing things. Like Twitter, I started using twitter in the last few years and just in terms of following other people around the world who are doing work, it is just inspiring so you get inspired by people’s ideas

Jennifer talked about how she used twitter in the classroom as a way to engage students and make connections to real-life learning. Lisa explained how she uses newsfeeds and current topics often found on social media as a way to teach lessons to the students. She said, “So when you bring in current and relevant things, you look at it through different lens, you say “well what about this?” Both educators use social media as a way to improve learning for themselves and for their students.

4.3.3 Collaboration

Jennifer and David spoke about collaboration as a resource to help them expand on their practice of feminist pedagogy in the classroom. Jennifer talked about collaborating with colleagues who shared similar views as her. Collaboration appeared to be easier for Jennifer as she worked at a private all-girls school which has a social justice focus for all grades. David shared that he used collaboration among students more than when he first started teaching “[…] more small group conferencing when I did before when I started teaching. And goal setting for students so they are clear on what they are working towards.” David explained that he collaborated more with the students one-on-one as the teacher. He implemented small group work and discussions among students in his practice. According to the literature, collaboration in the classroom as part of learning is a key strategy of the feminist pedagogy (Roychoudhury,
Tippins & Nicols, 1994; Rensenbrink, 2001). Both Roychoudhury, Tippins and Nicols (1994) and Rensenbrink (2001) describe how collaboration between the teacher and the students, as well as collaboration between students themselves is focused on more through feminist pedagogy than other approaches.

Through the interviews, the participants were able to provide resources they have used to help improve their learning and their students’ learning through a feminist pedagogical lens. Although not all the participants spoke to the same topics, there was still an overlap between the use of publications, social media and collaboration as prominent resources.

4.4 Challenges and Resistance to Feminist Pedagogy

The participants were asked about the limitation of using feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom. All the participants expressed examples of resistance and challenges they faced, which in turn creates limitations for using the pedagogy. Time restraints, colleagues, parents and assessment and evaluation were mentioned as challenges and resistance to feminist pedagogy.

4.4.1 Time restraints as challenges to feminist pedagogy

Lisa and Jennifer spoke about time restraints as challenges they face when implementing aspects of feminist pedagogy. Lisa explained that, “People have to start understanding that the lesson in itself, if it is real then it takes a lot of time. It does not come out of a text book.” As mentioned earlier, student needs and experiences are key to feminist pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Student needs and experiences also change over time, making planning difficult. Jennifer also mentioned time as a challenge to feminist pedagogy when she stated that “I think some of the challenges are needing to be flexible can sometimes interfere with planning and long range thinking. Time is such a huge factor.” Jennifer is discussing the fact that feminist
pedagogy takes into account student needs and experiences, which are often changing. This means that teachers using feminist pedagogy need to be flexible with lessons and units. However, creating long term plans is difficult if teachers also need to be flexible and ever changing depending on student needs and experiences.

4.4.2 Parents and colleagues as a resistance to feminist pedagogy

David and Jennifer both noted that parents acted as resistance to feminist pedagogy. Jennifer explained:

Parents. For me it is about resistance. The word feminist is just so political and misunderstood. It is a trigger word in the sense that it elicits a lot of emotions in people and sometimes makes it hard for them to hear what you say after you use that word.

For Jennifer, the lack of understanding of feminist pedagogy causes resistance from parents, as they are often misinformed about the term. David described an experience he had with a parent who spoke against his teaching method of encouraging female students to be leaders and speak up more in class. David explained that stereotypes play a major role as a barrier to feminist pedagogy from the parents. As David teaches in a rural area, he explained that the family life for many of the students is very stereotypical and when he pushes students to challenge that structure, he often gets parents resisting him. Sike Scering (1997) explains that feminist pedagogy is about critical thinking and challenging patriarchal systems, specifically the school system. However, the research only talks briefly about challenging students to see the stereotypes in their own lives.

Lisa disagreed with the other participants’ views on parents as resistance to feminist pedagogy. Lisa referred to colleagues as being challenges to feminist pedagogy in the classroom. Lisa explained that other teachers often question her teaching practice, “[…] you are always kind
of being challenged by teachers.” Lisa shared that she had one teacher say “I don’t get it, why are you doing this, how do you evaluate this?” Lisa responded by saying that “Well I don’t know how to evaluate it, but the evaluation seems secondary to the learning.” Her focus appeared to be more on the outcome of learning and growth for her students rather than on the formal assessment and evaluation piece that concerned her colleagues.

**4.4.3 Assessment and evaluation as challenges to feminist pedagogy**

Lisa saw assessment and evaluation as the toughest challenges. She explained that assessment and evaluation are challenging to feminist pedagogy because “at the end of the day everyone must receive a grade”, while a lot of the skills and learning through feminist pedagogy are hard to quantify. Lisa said “So marking is my biggest difficulty. Especially if you really take the time to create an inclusive classroom because then you are working so hard at leveling.” Lisa explained how the grading system in schools creates a divide and makes it difficult to create an inclusive environment among students.

All the participants expressed opinions of what they experienced as resistance and challenges to feminist pedagogy: time restraints, parents, colleagues, and assessment and evaluation. The variation in the participants’ answers could be explained by the community, they worked in, school location, and years of teaching experience each teacher had.

**4.5 Conclusion**

Throughout the data analysis process, four main themes emerged from the interviews with the three participants. First, a major theme is teachers’ definitions of feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom, which focuses on three key aspects. These include acknowledging gender differences, acknowledging the diversity of learners and focusing on critical thinking in teaching and learning. Jennifer and David spoke about the importance of acknowledging gender
difference in their classrooms in order to support all learners. Lisa discussed understanding the learner more generally rather than focusing specifically on gender. All the participants described the importance of understanding and incorporating the diversity of their learners as an important part of supporting student achievement. Critical thinking was also a key piece to feminist pedagogy for all the participants during the interviews. As mentioned earlier, a gap in the research is the lack of teachers’ voices in the understanding of feminist pedagogy. The three participants were able to provide examples of their definitions of feminist pedagogy in more practical ways compared to the theory-based literature surrounding the topic.

The second theme that emerged is feminist pedagogical strategies used to encourage student autonomy and student empowerment. Throughout the interviews, all the participants focused on how they incorporate strategies in their practices to encourage student autonomy and empowerment. These strategies include creating safe spaces, teaching life skills and incorporating student needs and experiences into the classroom. A major gap in the research is understanding feminist pedagogy at the elementary level. These examples provide more information for educators using feminist pedagogy as to what it could look like in the classroom.

The third theme to emerge from the analysis are resources for using a feminist pedagogy lens to support learning in the elementary classroom. Publication materials were expressed as useful resources for two participants: Lisa and Jennifer. Social media was explicitly discussed by Jennifer as useful to her own learning, while Lisa expressed the usefulness of incorporating current events often found on social media sites in order to help engage her students. David did not mention publication materials or social media that he uses to support his understanding of feminist pedagogy. However, David explained that collaboration in the classroom was his greatest resource. Jennifer described the use of collaboration among colleagues to be useful to
expand her knowledge of feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom. The participants used a variety of resources in order to support their learning of feminist pedagogy and to support their classroom.

Finally, I found that all the participants expressed challenges and resistance to feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom. Time restraints were only a challenge for Lisa and Jennifer, in terms of planning lessons and units. Parents were discussed as a source of resistance to feminist pedagogy by Jennifer and David. Lisa described colleagues as more of a resistance to feminist pedagogy. Assessment and evaluation were discussed by Lisa as challenges to feminist pedagogy. Including the participants voices in learning about the challenges and resistance to feminist pedagogy sheds light on the under researched area of this topic. As mentioned earlier, much of the literature did not mention limitations to feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom. As for the differences among the participants’ answers, geography, teaching experience, and community could all be factors as to the divergences found in their answers.

The participants are from very different areas and backgrounds and yet, their use of feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom supports student learning in much of the same ways. The participants described feminist pedagogy in similar terms as the literature did. However, when it came to how the participants use the pedagogy in the elementary classroom there was a greater focus on student empowerment and autonomy, which was not as apparent in the literature. My hope for this research was to understand how feminist pedagogy contributes to inclusion in the elementary classroom. The participants discussed ways feminist pedagogy improves students learning and shared their opinions on why this pedagogy is beneficial for today’s students. In Chapter Five I will discuss the implications of these findings in more detail. I
will discuss both broad and narrow implications, as well as provide recommendations and areas for further research.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter will review the key findings from the interviews with the three participants. The interviews focused on various questions relating to how feminist pedagogy contributes to inclusion in elementary classrooms. I will describe the implications of the research both broad, on the educational community, and narrow, on my future practice as a teacher. An explanation of the recommendations from the research findings will be discussed. Areas for further research will be described.

5.1 Overview of the Key Findings and Their Significance

Four main themes emerged from the interviews with the three participants. Those themes are:

1. Teachers’ Definitions of Feminist Pedagogy in the Elementary Classroom
2. Feminist Pedagogical Strategies used to Encourage Student Autonomy and Student Empowerment
3. Resources Using a Feminist Pedagogy Lens used to Support the Elementary Classroom

The first theme, the participants described their understandings of feminist pedagogy. From their definitions three key aspects of feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom emerged. These key aspects include acknowledging gender differences, acknowledging the diversity of learners and focusing on critical thinking in teaching and learning. These findings contributed to the overall understanding and definition of feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom from practicing teachers’ perspectives.

The second theme that emerged was feminist pedagogical strategies used to encourage student autonomy and student empowerment. Throughout the interviews, all the participants
focused on specific strategies, and activities they used in their classroom practice. These strategies contributed to student empowerment and student autonomy, which also contributes to inclusion in the classroom. The strategies the participants included in their practices were: creating safe spaces, teaching life skills and incorporating student needs and experiences into the classroom. These strategies contributed to the understanding of how feminist pedagogy contributes to inclusion in the classroom.

The third theme that emerged from the analysis of the interviews were resources used by the participants to support their elementary classrooms. As well, these resources supported the participants’ own knowledge on the use of feminist pedagogy. The participants explained that they used a variety of resources in order to support student learning, such as publication materials, social media, and collaboration with students and colleagues in the classroom. Not all participants used every resource described. David explained he mainly uses collaboration as a resource. Jennifer and Lisa both use publication materials, and social media. Jennifer also identified with using collaboration with colleagues as a resource. This finding helped to contribute to the lack in the research on resources for educators focusing on feminist pedagogy.

Finally, I found that all the participants expressed facing some kind of challenge and resistance to feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom causing limitations to the pedagogy. David and Jennifer described parents as resistance, while Lisa described other colleagues as resistance to feminist pedagogy. Jennifer and Lisa agreed that time constraints in planning lessons and units were challenges. Since feminist pedagogy focuses on student experiences and using student knowledge in the classroom, time becomes a factor as planning lessons to these aspects becomes difficult with time constraints. Lisa described assessment and evaluation as challenges to using feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom. The difference in the
responses from the participants could relate to the community they teach in, background experience, and years of teaching experience. These findings contribute to the understanding of the limitations to this pedagogy. Overall, the participants provided a great deal of information on topics, questions, and gaps in the research on feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom.

5.2 Implications

This section outlines the broad implications of my findings on the educational community in relation to using feminist pedagogy in elementary classrooms. I also outline the narrow implications of my research for my future teaching practice.

5.2.1 Broad implications

Three broad implications of this study focus on what was important to the participants and how these implications affect the larger educational community. First, strategies focusing on student empowerment and autonomy are effective ways to promote inclusion in elementary classrooms. The participants explained many strategies and activities they used in their classrooms that supported the encouragement of student empowerment and autonomy, and ultimately inclusion in the classroom. The strategies and activities the participants described included creating safe spaces, teaching life skills and using students’ needs and experiences in the classroom. According to the participants, empowering students is a key aspect to feminist pedagogy in order to create inclusive elementary classrooms because it means each student is valued and is included in their own way. Encouraging students to take ownership of their learning, make decisions, and speak up for themselves are important skills as students become more independent (Roychoudhury, Tippins & Nicols, 1994). This implication can help policy makers and the Ontario Ministry of Education know what kind of strategies, such as creating safe
spaces, teaching life skills and using students’ needs and experiences in the classroom, to use when considering frameworks and strategies to promote inclusion in schools.

Secondly, using feminist pedagogical resources that focus on diversity, in teachers’ classrooms supports inclusion. Both Jennifer and Lisa explained that they used resources in their classrooms, such as books or social media, to include diverse perspectives and encourage discussions about equity. This encouraged and supported inclusion in the classroom, as the students were able to relate to characters, situations and current events, which expressed a diverse range of experiences. Woodham Digiovanni and Liston (2015) explained that including resources into the classroom that show a range of diversity among characters and authors promotes inclusion among the students. Students are able to see themselves in the resources and materials, making them feel valued and included (Woodham Digiovanni & Liston, 2015). This implication can help teachers know what kinds of resources are beneficial to use for creating inclusive classrooms.

Finally, a third implication from the findings is educators who have a current and comprehensive understanding of feminist pedagogy are able to better prepare for resistance they may face from parents and colleagues. All the participants expressed experiencing some kind of resistance to feminist pedagogy from people, either parents or colleagues. The participants explained resistance often comes from people misinterpreting or not understanding the concepts of feminist pedagogy. Jennifer even mentioned in her interview that she stays away from using the word feminism when she is speaking to parents because it is too often misunderstood. Jennifer also described having current research to back up her reasoning behind using feminist pedagogy. David and Lisa talked about how they frame the use of feminist pedagogy in relation to simply wanting success for their students when they are talking to others who may not be
aware of the definition of the pedagogy. In the next section, I will discuss the narrow implications on my future practice as a beginning educator.

### 5.2.2 Narrow implications

The findings of my research answered many of the questions I had surrounding feminist pedagogy. Two major implications from the findings influence my future practice as a beginning educator. First, an implication was the understanding of what kind of challenges and resistance I might face using feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom. The participants expressed multiple areas of challenges in feminist pedagogy such as assessment and evaluation, time constraints; as well as resistance to feminist pedagogy from parents and colleagues. Understanding these resistances and challenges will help me in my future practice to prepare for situations I might face with these challenges. I can inform parents and colleagues about any misunderstandings they may have about the definition of feminist pedagogy to limit resistance. I can also learn more about the topic to improve my practice of the understanding of assessment and evaluation and time restraints on supporting student success.

The second implication from the research that influences my future teaching practice is understanding that activities and strategies that focus on empowering students have a positive effect on inclusion in the classroom. The participants talked specifically about creating safe spaces, teaching life skills and incorporating student needs and experiences into the classroom to encourage student empowerment. I would like to incorporate all of these strategies into my teaching, but specifically I would like to learn more about creating safe spaces and teaching life skills in my future classrooms in order to better support my students. As explained by Coria and Taylor (2013), feminist pedagogy focuses on teaching students a variety of skills that are not explicitly taught in the curriculum such as empowerment. I would like to learn more about
strategies to use to incorporate these ideas into my future practice. Considering the implications discussed in the above section, I will now suggest recommendations based on these implications in the next section.

5.3 Recommendations

Considering the implications of this study, the following recommendations focus on specific stakeholders including teachers, administrators, school boards, and the Ontario Ministry of Education I will provide more information on the specific recommendations relating to each stakeholder below.

5.3.1 Teachers

The recommendations I suggest for teachers include several professional development workshops and access to specific information about definitions of pedagogies and strategies of implementation of the pedagogies. First teachers should have professional development workshops on the empowerment strategies (creating safe spaces, teaching life skills and incorporating student needs and experiences) suggested by the participants in this study; to understand what the strategies are and how they work in the classroom.

Second, teachers should have professional development workshops on feminist pedagogy and its benefits in the classroom to ensure teachers are familiar with its understandings and definitions. Third, teachers should have access and be given updated information, in the form of newsletters or workshops, on current pedagogies in the educational community, including feminist pedagogy. This may come from the Ontario Ministry of Education or educational research organizations that are researching this work. This will help teachers improve their practice to better support the changing demographics of Ontario’s schools. Learning about current pedagogies will also help teachers address current social issues facing students and
school communities. Keeping teachers up to date on current pedagogies will also ensure all teachers are familiar with current research in the educational field.

Finally, teachers should have access to feminist pedagogical related resources that represent diverse people and perspectives. The participants described using resources in the classroom that reflect the diversity of their students as an important part of creating an inclusive environment. Woodham Digiovanni and Liston (2015) also described this as an important piece to students feelings valued in the classroom when they are all represented in the material.

5.3.2 Administrators

Recommendations for administrators include focusing on inclusion at the school wide level. First, I suggest administrators have access to professional development on strategies related to student empowerment and inclusion. Second, administration should encourage student empowerment through providing school wide leadership opportunities for students. Third, administrators should ensure that all school activities, events, resources and displays represent diverse students to ensure inclusion in the school community. Fourth, I recommend that administrators be given professional development on relevant and current pedagogies, including feminist pedagogy that may be of use in their school community to support students. This will ensure that all administrators are up to date with the current educational research relating to pedagogies, which may be used to support their school community. Finally, I recommend that administrators continue to learn and research about their students’ and school community needs. This will allow administrators to consider what kind of pedagogies their educators can incorporate to better support student success. Incorporating activities to get to know the interests of the students and the community would be beneficial to understand the community needs.
5.3.3 School boards and ministries of education

I have chosen to include school boards and ministries of education together as stakeholders for the same recommendations as they both focus on creating policies and resources for schools and educators. The first recommendation I suggest for school boards and ministries of education is to include strategies that encourage student empowerment and autonomy into frameworks and policies discussing inclusion in schools. One document in particular, *Education’s Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014), lays out a four year plan for supporting inclusion in schools and classrooms. Throughout this document, ‘empowerment’ is discussed very little. Yet the participants in this study revealed how student empowerment and autonomy have a great effect on inclusion. Finally, I suggest ensuring resources that are sent out to schools and educators take into account and include the diversity of students.

5.4 Areas of Further Research

Although this research has answered many questions related to feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom, there are a range of areas to be researched further, to better understand and deepen knowledge on this topic. First, further research should be done on comparing feminist pedagogy to other pedagogies. Considering the information gathered from the participants about the definition of feminist pedagogy and the similarities between feminist pedagogy and other pedagogies, such as Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy, critical pedagogy and anti-biased pedagogy, it would be beneficial to conduct comparison research on these pedagogies among each other. As Woodham Digiovanni and Liston (2015) explain, feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom context has had little research done on the topic,
making it difficult to differentiate this pedagogy from others. Further research would better support educators’ understandings of specific benefits to each of these pedagogies.

Another area of further research that would be beneficial would be more research on the strategies the participants suggested in supporting student empowerment and autonomy to understand the connections to inclusion. The participants discussed using safe spaces, teaching life skills and incorporating student needs and experiences into the classroom to support student empowerment, which in turn contributes to inclusion. The literature found that student empowerment is a key aspect to feminist pedagogy, but few examples of what the use of this strategy might look like in the classroom was described (Capobianco, 2007; Coria and Taylor, 2013; Shrewbury, 1993). A study focusing on understanding strategies relating to empowerment and inclusion would help to deepen educators’ knowledge on creating inclusive classrooms.

Finally, further research on in-service elementary teachers who use feminist pedagogy in their practice would be beneficial. This research would be useful in order to learn more about this pedagogy, from teachers who are actually in the field. Completing a similar research study, focusing on elementary teachers, but including more participants would provide a wider range of understanding to feminist pedagogy. This would also help to understand the connections between feminist pedagogy and inclusion.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The purpose of this study was to explore feminist pedagogy and its connections to creating inclusive environments in elementary classrooms. The participants spoke to the success they have found in their classrooms mainly through strategies and activities they focus on to encourage student empowerment and autonomy, which contributes to creating an inclusive environment. Although student empowerment was mentioned in the literature as a component to
feminist pedagogy (Coia & Taylor, 2013; Christie, 1997; Capobianco, 2007; Shrewsbury, 1993), it was not highlighted in the literature as a key feature of feminist pedagogy to contributing to inclusion in the classroom. This could be explained through the lack of research done on feminist pedagogy and the lack of teachers’ voices in the research.

Inclusion continues to be an important initiative pushed by the Ontario Ministry of Education in order to achieve success for all of Ontario’s students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Yet, student empowerment and autonomy, which was a main focus for the participants to create inclusion in their classrooms, was mentioned very little in the ministry’s document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). My study revealed that further research should be done between the connection of strategies and activities encouraging student empowerment and the connections between creating inclusive classrooms. The participants also revealed limitations to the pedagogy in which they have faced. This provided information on this topic which was lacking in the research. As for myself as a beginning educator, knowing the challenges to this pedagogy also helps me to better prepare for the challenges I may face in the future.

The participants shared their inspiring stories of using feminist pedagogy in the classroom and how it has shaped and contributed to the success of their students. This study has allowed me to see the amazing work teachers in the field are doing to ensure all their students are successful and valued in their classrooms. As one of my participants, Jennifer, explained in her interview, “I think that at its heart, what it stands for, respect and inclusion, are essential for teaching. Good teaching is feminist pedagogy in my opinion.”
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APPENDIX A: Letter of Consent

Date:

Dear

I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on how teachers use feminist pedagogy in the elementary classroom and their teaching practice to contribute to an inclusive environment. I am interested in interviewing teachers who use and have an interest in feminist pedagogy in their teaching practice. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer. The only person who will have access to the research data will be my Research Coordinator Angela MacDonald and myself. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form attached, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Olivia Eaton
Email: olivia.eaton@mail.utoronto.ca

Research Coordinator: Angela MacDonald
Email: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Olivia Eaton and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: _______________________________________

Name: (printed) __________________________________________

Date: ___________________________________________
APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol/Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn about how educators use feminist pedagogy in their classroom and teaching practice to contribute to an inclusive environment. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on feminist pedagogy. If the interview is going longer than anticipated I may skip questions and only ask a select few. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information
1. What is your educational background?
   a. Where did you attend university and what major(s) did you have?
   b. What school did you attend for your teacher education training?
   c. Do you have additional qualifications in education? If so what are they?
2. How many years have you been teaching?
3. What grades do you teach/have you taught?

Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs
4. Do you identify as a feminist?
   a. How do you define feminism?
5. What pedagogy(ies) do you identify with in your teaching practice? (past and present)
6. How do you define feminist pedagogy?
7. How do you define inclusion?
   a. How do you define inclusion in terms of an elementary classroom?

Teacher Practices
8. What does inclusion look like in your classroom and/or teaching practices?
9. In what ways do you use feminist pedagogy in your classroom and/or teaching practice?
   a. How does it inform your teaching?
   b. Are there any strategies, activities, etc. in particular that you use because of feminist pedagogy?
10. Do you notice any ways in which using feminist pedagogy contributes or encourages inclusivity in your classroom?
   a. If yes, explain situations or examples in which feminist pedagogy directly contributes to creating an inclusive environment in your classroom/teaching practice.
   b. If no, explain how feminist pedagogy does not contribute directly to creating an inclusive environment in your classroom/teaching practice.
11. What are some limitations to using feminist pedagogy in your classroom/teaching practice?
12. What are some benefits to using feminist pedagogy in your classroom/teaching practice?

**Supports and Challenges**
13. What are some challenges you have faced using feminist pedagogy?
   a. What are some challenges in terms of activities and strategies of implementation?
14. What resources do you use or know of that can help teachers use feminist pedagogy in their classroom/teaching practice?

**Next Steps**
15. What advice do you have for teachers interested or who use feminist pedagogy in their teaching practices?
16. Is there anything I haven’t asked that you would like to comment on?

Thank you for your participation in my research study.
APPENDIX C: List of Feminist Pedagogical Resources Provided by the Participants


