Exploring Feminism Within An All-Girls Middle School

**Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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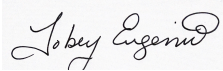and Education Studies Major at Clark University**

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Abstract

This praxis project stemmed from my own experience of attending an all-girls school. After deep reflection on my experience, I wanted to explore the ways in which an all-girls school provides feminist teaching or does not. Through my research, I have looked at the way current students at an all-girls school define feminism within their lives and their school. In this paper, I will explore the ways that feminism appears within an all-girls middle school. Through the perspective of four girls, I will delve into the complexities of feminism, both during structured class time and in the culture of the school. The objective of this research is to expand the ways that feminism is being taught and practiced within an all-girls school. Through interviews, I examine how the lived experiences of the girls illustrate feminist teaching and influence. By using intersectional feminism as my theoretical framework, I question the ways in which feminism should be taught within schools and the best frameworks to do so.

Keywords: feminism, women empowerment, intersectionality, middle school

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Introduction

My favorite fun fact is that I attended all-girls schools for 9 years. After sharing this comment, people follow up with mostly absurd questions alluding to a negative experience where I was forced to attend such schools. To their surprise, I not only chose to attend these institutions, but had great experiences filled with joy, growth, and friendship.

The day my older sister went to our middle school was truly the day that my life shifted. Through her eyes, I saw the power of attending an all-girls school. Each day she would come home with fascinating stories of learning about robots, famous mathematicians, and plenty of fun games played at recess. When it came time for me to apply, I knew that I would be a part of a growing, caring community. As I attended the school, I quickly learned how to use my voice through public speaking class, conflict management, and even making friends.

Within my experience at the school, I was able to truly look at how my voice fit into the world. My experience at school allowed me to use my voice in ways that helped both me and my community. While I was attending my middle school, I saw the need for a student council. I felt that as students, we should be able to organize and give back to the community. By practicing skills of advocating for ourselves, my friends and I started the first ever student council.

In the spring of 2017, my dad had fallen from a building at work. During these rough moments, I saw the power of community come together for me and my little sister who attended the school alongside me. Families from the school came together to donate meals to my family each week for months. Cards, prayers, and sweet gestures were given from many students in the community. This same year, the 8th grade class was going to Student Advocacy Day. We were tasked with writing a story that related to the bill that was being sent to the State House. I chose

to write about my family and the struggles my mom faced when taking care of my dad. Because of her inability to work in order to watch over him, it became extremely difficult to maintain finances and raise 3 girls. As I wrote this essay, I saw the importance of speaking up and using lived experiences to speak to legislators. As we took what seemed like a lifetime of a bus ride to Boston, my classmates and I were ready to defend the bill that would soon be passed in order to protect family members who take care of their loved ones during sickness.

During these moments, I felt the importance of speaking out, especially as a young girl. The lessons I learned from these difficult moments have carried on into my adulthood. The opportunity to not only see the process of a bill turning into a law, but also the chance to speak about my family to politicians emphasized the importance of my voice. Through the school, I was given this opportunity to speak and fight for a law that would have helped my family significantly.

This project has grown over years of reflection about my experience. When I came to Clark University, I enrolled in a course called Building Community Through Research *With*. I had no idea what the class was about, but chose it because it was the only education class offered. Little did I know that this class would shape the next four years at Clark. I started to realize the importance of educational research and how youth can be involved in this process. Through reflection on my own experiences as a young girl, I decided to focus my hypothetical research project by looking at the ways that girls see feminism and gender equality. This process inspired my praxis project and shifted how I view research.

The research question that I chose stems from my personal experience in all-girls' institutions. After reflecting on my journey, I am interested in how schools involve feminist teaching within their curriculum, but also within the culture of the school. The problem that I

researched and analyzed is looking at the way that students perceive feminist teaching and how the school looks at feminism.

The research I performed is a bias-aware approach to successfully frame questions in a way that does not assume one's experiences at a same sex institution (Oxford Review, n.d). It is also important to address the intersectionality that participants may have, including but not limited to race, class, sexuality, etc. Although my research is focused on how this school teaches and integrates feminism, it is significant to consider the identities and stories of the interviewees outside of feminism. This is further elaborated upon in my conceptual framework. To be humanizing through my research, I asked broad questions during my interviews to offer space for students to share as much and as little as they liked.

My research questions for this project were: How does a particular same-sex school use feminist approaches within their curriculum? How does the school integrate feminist ideals and teachings within the culture of the school? How do the students who attend this school feel about the culture and the sense of belonging within the school? What are the ways that the students feel the school could improve or expand upon? My research questions were solely looking at the ways that the students feel and perceive the teachings that they are experiencing. Once I analyzed my data and found themes, I reflected upon my research questions and decided to change them to better fit the data. The final research questions I used were: How do students interpret feminism within the school? How does feminism show up in different ways throughout the school from the perspective of the students? How do students reference other knowledge outside of structured lessons to define/understand feminism? By shifting the focus of my research questions, my questions aligned better with the data I ended up receiving through the conversations I had with the students.

Theoretical Frameworks

My theoretical framework is centered on intersectional feminism, directly using works from Lorde (1979), Crenshaw (1989), Collins (2000), hooks (2014), and the Combahee River Collective (1978). By using intersectional feminism, I have looked into the work that has been done in this field as a whole as well as the origination of the term "intersectionality". To start setting the foundation for my theoretical framework, I will start by looking into the idea of intersectionality coined by Crenshaw (1989).

Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality within her publication of *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. Within this research, Crenshaw concluded that there is a lack of multidimensionality within current feminist thinking. This idea is based on the fact that, "Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender." (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). This context is important to note as this is a part of what drove the concept of intersectionality. When looking at typical feminist practices, Crenshaw observed and experienced the ways that race and gender were viewed on separate planes of oppression. When this occurs, "not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when white women speak for and as women." (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 154). Centering white women's voices within the definition of feminism creates exclusion for all other identities to exist. The critique of definitions of feminism highlights the role that white women play within traditional white feminism. The definition of feminism does not encapsulate the ways in which race, gender, class, and even more identities, are affecting each other. In practice, white feminism is pushing forth

traditional experiences of white women consequently eliminating voices of marginalized identities who are also affected by the patriarchy. Thus, "feminism must include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-white women." (Crenshaw, 1989, p.166). This is directly related to the way that I am viewing the data collected within my praxis. It is crucial to frame my analysis in a way that includes the analysis of other identities of my participants in addition to their identity as a girl. Crenshaw defines this through her term of intersectionality.

The Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist lesbian organization during the 1970s, offers additional insight on the ways sexual oppression is directly impacted by additional identities. They write, " "We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual…" (Combahee River Collective, 1978). In similarity with Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality, the Collective explicitly states that racial and sexual oppression are not singular concepts. When looking at feminism, there is a direct intersection of identities that shape the way feminism shows up within our lives. My research is framed through a lens of acknowledgement of the simultaneous oppressions women face while asking students about feminism.

In similar ways, Audre Lorde's *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House* (1979) speaks directly to the significance of difference within political movements. Lorde's work highlights why intersectionality is crucial, but also useful when looking at feminism and other political movements. Lorde's work alluded to concepts of empowerment. She writes, "The failure of the academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is

a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. Divide and conquer. In our world must become define and empower." (Lorde, 1979, p.100). When looking at intersectionality, Lorde notes the necessity of defining and empowering, in comparison to dividing and conquering. By using the differences present within intersectional feminism, dismantling the patriarchy encompasses multiple identities making it necessary to "define and empower".

The fourth scholar who I draw upon for my definition of feminism is bell hooks who speaks on the ways that feminism has to and will involve Black and other women of color in the conversation and movement. The work within feminism needs to acknowledge that, "patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression..." making it crucial for an understanding of the intersectionality of race, gender, class, e.t.c. (hooks, 2014, p. 22). hooks presents readers with a new perspective that shows the ways that gender inequity and racism can be deeply rooted, and intertwined. When looking at the way that forms of oppression work with one another, feminism fits within this realm of intersectionality.

The final scholar that informed my definition of feminism is Patricia Hill Collins. Collins speaks directly to Black feminist thought as a critical social theory. To explicate further, Collins's research emphasizes the need for an intersectional feminist movement and theory. As she defines, "Black feminist thought encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a group. Such theory recognizes that U.S. Black women constitute one group among many that are differently placed within situations of injustice." (Collins, 2000, p. 31). Collins expands the idea of intersectionality by adding the inclusion of multiple groups who face systems of oppressions. This expansion allows for the complexity of intersectionality to be connected to race, class,

gender, ability, sexuality, etc. By using Collins within my framing, I recognize the systems at play within my participants' lives connected to the identities that they may or may not hold.

To offer a definition of feminism, I have used the concepts and ideas of the above scholars. Based on the literature above, the definition of feminism that is framing the totality of my research is that feminism can not exist holistically without the acknowledgement of intersectionality. Feminism needs to look at the intersectionality of identities of the people who are affected by the patriarch. Within this definition, it is necessary that empowering and defining occur in regards to starting to dismantle the patriarchy as a whole. At its core, feminism is a movement aimed at dismantling sexism and all forms of sexist domination. It is important to note that this definition represents where I am at the current moment in my reflection and thinking of feminism. This working definition is expected to change, shift, and grow over time.

Conceptual Frameworks

For my conceptual framework, I will be looking at concepts that both expand upon intersectional feminism and relate to my definition of feminism. The following concepts relate directly to intersectional feminism in different aspects. In other words, I find these concepts to be crucial when understanding intersectional feminism within the scope of my research.

Community Cultural Wealth

As my project is directly asking students about their experiences, perspectives, worldviews, and knowledge, this conceptual framework helps situate my research through a different lens. The concept that I am looking at is Tara J. Yosso's *Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth*. Yosso's theory looks at the way that students gain capital and knowledge. Yosso defines 5 cultural wealth aspects: Aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, resistant capital, and linguistic capital

(Yosso, 2005). Yosso emphasizes the way that cultural capital has a mutualistic relationship within the theory. It is significant to highlight that Yosso's theory is applicable specifically to BIPOC people and communities. Community cultural wealth acknowledges that there are "accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of Communities of Color." (Yosso, p. 77). Through these different forms of capital, individuals derive their knowledge and meaning from different facets of their lives. These capitals are important and should be valued within the classroom specifically. Through my research, students may reference different forms of capital within our conversations. This is crucial for my research as I can look at the ways that students are using classroom-setting knowledge versus knowledge from their familial lives, social lives, or other capitals. By using Yosso's theory of community cultural wealth, I will situate my data as well as my research by looking at the ways that students use different knowledge bases in order to grapple with intersectional feminism.

Choice within the Education of Girls

This framework arose from the idea of choice being an agent of feminism for girls in schools. I am looking at how choice and agency may connect to the encouragement of intersectional feminism within schools. The literature used within this section of my framework looks at both choice within girls education, but also how choice can relate to feminist practice. [1] Choice within co-ed education is deeply explored, which led me to looking deeper into the way choice within schools can connect to feminism. As the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative defines, "Agency is a person's capacity to make choices and act in accordance with their values and desires." (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, n.d.). The idea of agency within feminism is significant and can be seen in literature. (Maitra, 2020). Within agency comes the act

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[1] I would like to clarify that I am not declaring that choice is the best practice and/or required for feminism to be taught within schools. Instead, I am offering choice as one route to feminism within schools.

of making decisions. However, agency involves more than just the act of making a choice from predetermined options, which are structured by current systems of oppression. This appears within educational systems as choice is seen as a productive educational practice. Through a curriculum that allows space for students to create their own projects, research, and learning paths, students are practicing decision-making (Miller, 2016). This is specifically interesting in the context of an all-girls school due to the connection of feminism. Within this concept, I would like to frame choice as a way to practice agency. Furthermore, choice within feminism can appear through empowerment. When empowering girls to re-invent the choices that are informed by the system, here is a sense of choice and agency.

Women Empowerment

My third conceptual framework relates directly to my working definition of intersectional feminism. When examining intersectional feminism, women's empowerment emerges as a crucial component for achieving its goals. Women empowerment can be defined in different aspects making it important to recognize the effect of the environment. From looking at empowerment through a lens of active change within feminism, "a version of empowerment that is fundamentally about changing power relations," comes to light. (Cornwall, 2016, p.344). When looking at the relationship of power and empowerment, the root word of power suggests ideas of giving power and taking power. To complicate this further, I believe women empowerment to look further than highlighting significant inequities, but to "...generate impetus to act together to change society."(Cornwall, 2016, p.344). To rephrase, women empowerment involves both acknowledgement of the systems that oppress women in an intersectional lens, but also motivate women to break down and rebuild these systems. The version of women's empowerment that I am using speaks to the dismantling of the system instead of empowering

women to remain within the system with a position of power. By expanding further as Cornwall suggests to instill methods of change, women empowerment motivates women to break down systems through an intersectional lens.

I would also like to acknowledge another perspective of women's empowerment that may appear within my data. There are perspectives and work done that speaks to the issues of pushing forth empowerment to marginalized communities. The idea of empowerment expands to looking at the importance of dismantling systems as empowerment. "Within the structural domain of power, empowerment cannot accrue to individuals and groups without transforming U.S. social institutions that foster this exclusion." (Collins, 2000, p. 277). In other words, real empowerment is systemic and not just personal. The empowerment used here looks at how the systems need to be transformed at a larger level instead of individual empowerment or success.

How it all Connects

These three concepts are connected through many pathways. Firstly, community cultural wealth acknowledges and practices the idea that people carry valuable knowledge with them deriving from their lived experiences. Community cultural wealth can be activated through the concept of choice and agency. By engaging students through choice, students will be able to bring in their lived experiences to inform their choices. This relates further to the idea of women empowerment. When community cultural wealth and agency is centered, women empowerment is a possible outcome. To expand further, focusing on lived experiences through agency will allow women to be empowered to deconstruct the systems in place. The active openness to lived experience being important for students allows them to create their own choices leading to feeling empowered.

Literature Review

The literature being discussed directly relates or aligns with my research topic: Exploring the ways that a single sex institution may or may not integrate feminism within the school culture. Through research, the literature presented may include themes of feminism, single-sex schooling, gender equity, and forms of knowledge. This literature review provides literature from different themes that have informed my research and the academic conversation around my research.

When looking for my research, I started by looking on google scholar and searching up phrases of feminism in middle school. This led me to look at the way that knowledge appears within school and where knowledge is gained. I expanded this further by looking at feminist practices within the classroom and how they may appear in my data.

Knowledge

The first theme of literature that I am looking at is how knowledge is gained and where knowledge is derived from. This is relevant to the research I am completing myself as students are working with multiple funds of knowledge in order to place the events on the timeline. The author, Tara J. Yosso, researched how previous research done on cultural capital, such as Bourdieu's work limits the way that cultural funds of knowledge should be recognized in the classroom. Drawing on Critical Race Theory and Oliver and Shapiro (1995) who look at a model to explain the gaps of income between white and Black families, Yosso found that community cultural wealth addresses the ways that students of color have knowledge from lived experiences that should be valued in the classroom. Yosso coined the term community cultural wealth by showing how there are multiple ways that capital is gained. Through defining the different types of capital, Yosso is creating space for voices who are often left out of theorizing work. This

article connects to my praxis in the sense that different forms of capital can be present when students are drawing on knowledge they have to answer particular questions within the interview. Not only are students potentially drawing on knowledge gained from schooling, but also familial, communal knowledge.

Feminist Practices

The second theme that I am looking at is how feminist practices are within the classroom. Carillo researched how feminist practices are received in the teaching profession. (Carillo, 2007). Through her own experiences as a professor, she began to see the ways in which feminist teachers are perceived by their students. By looking at survey data, she found that students were viewing the lack of formal instruction in the classroom as a downfall of the class. Carillo illustrates how students in her class are viewing her teaching as she is trying to practice feminist pedagogy. This article connects to my praxis in the sense that students are reflecting on how feminist teaching is present in their schools. During this research process, this article has reminded me when analyzing to look at how the teacher may also see their own teaching in the classroom. Furthermore, this relates as it shows the ways in which students can view different choices in the classroom as either supportive or keeping them back from achieving their academic goals.

Another piece of literature that looks at the way that feminist pedagogy can be used is, *A Black Feminist Pedagogy* (Omolade, 1987). Omolade researched how being a black women professor has informed her of the ways that a black feminist pedagogy can be used in the classroom. Drawing on her personal experience as a professor, Omolade illustrates the ways in which feminist teaching is crucial in the classroom. Through these practices, students are given the space to learn about their own identities in the classroom, particularly looking at the Black

women experience in the education system. Omolade emphasizes how, "...Without an explicit pedagogy, Black women and all other working-class students will continue to be disregarded as participants in the learning environment." (Omolade, 1987, p.39). In order to successfully teach in a belonging way, it is crucial for there to be an explicit method and pedagogy.

It is important to note that the research for this literary review did not focus directly on a single-sex institution for middle school students. While doing research, it has been very difficult to find research that has been done on middle school girls that fits within the themes that I am looking for. Thus far in my research, I have found research done on self-esteem (Duax), interest in math (Paslov, 2016), and STEM (Ogle,Hyllegard, Park, Rambo-Hernandez, 2017). This research has fit into the realm of having the same target participants of middle school girls. These research projects use interviews, field notes, focus groups, and use research over different time periods.

Context

The site is an all-girls independent private school located in an urban setting. The school opened in 2008 and serves low-income girls. For the 2024-2025 school year, there were a total of 67 girls from grades 5th-8th. For my specific research, I chose to focus on participants who were ages 12-14. The participants in the interviews were from the 7th grade. For research purposes, there is no requirement of time to have been at the school, although it will be a question during the interview to see if there are any trends during certain years of the school.

Due to my own connection with the school, teachers and administration from the site are interested in the work I am doing as they have expressed it will be helpful for them to get feedback on how to improve the culture and curriculum. Because of this circumstance, I am

receiving feedback and advice throughout this process from a mentor of mine who still works at the school. Although we are not directly collaborating, I feel it is important to state that an on-site teacher will be providing feedback and advice throughout the praxis process.

Positionality

Because of my personal connection with the school itself, I feel it is important to explicitly describe my positionality both in terms of the problem I am exploring, and the school itself. I currently serve as a member on the Graduate Support Board for the school alongside my mother. This committee meets every 3 months to go over ways to support graduates in career planning, internship finding, and any other concerns that we feel are important. Being on this committee means that I am directly still involved with the school which can affect the way that I interpret and view the students I am working with.

I am coming from an outsider perspective that also has lived experience. I graduated from the school in 2017, which I would like to take into account when looking at my conversations with current students. Although it has been some years since my attendance, some structures of the school have remained the same while others have shifted. Although my own experiences at the school are valid and real, it is important to note that during my research I am going to be upfront with the students by sharing that I am an alumna. As I have been reflecting on my own experiences and choices, I have concluded that during the interview process I will share my experiences when I feel they are important and crucial to the conversation. With some participants who may not be open to sharing, I may share a story of my own from the school to spark a conversation, or even give an example.

In terms of my positionality in the world, my own perspective as a low-income girl who is first generation American, I really view school as a space that can instill self-love and support. Through my own experience at the school, I was given the opportunity to attend a boarding school which made many opportunities available to me that I do not believe I would have had if I attended another school. Because of this positionality, I feel that the school is an important institution. Although it is important and can help students with more opportunities, I do believe that there are always improvements to be made.

In all, my positionality within this project is overall an observer and reviewer. As I am looking in towards a school that I attended, it is very likely that many changes have been made to structures, curriculum, and even enrollment of students. Furthermore, because we are now in the academic year of 2024-2025, the time is socially, historically, and even politically different than when I was enrolled in the school myself. I hope within this project to keep my positionality clear to students and I hope to come to terms with the fact that my insight and own experiences can be an asset if I choose to use my stories in that way.

Methodology

My chosen method for my praxis research upholds a space where participants feel humanized and valued while also providing a critical space for grappling with feminism. In order to do this, I decided to incorporate images into the space so that students can have an interactive, intentional hands-on activity that will be used to ask questions. In terms of the activity, research can be conducted in a way that students will feel valued as their opinions are being heard. I gave students space to share whatever they were thinking as well as allowing them to take the space to ask their own questions. Two images were introduced in the beginning of the

interview. Students were then asked what they saw in the images. The students described what they saw in the pictures with no follow-up questions asked. Overall, integrating a space where complex issues can be explored while also providing a humanizing space required attention to how the research participants were feeling when I conducted the research.

My research stemmed from a research fellowship that I completed my sophomore year at Clark. This research delved into the complexities of attending an all-girls school, specifically when looking at gender norms and women's history. This project inspired my Praxis research. My original research questions for Praxis were:

- How do teachers provide feminist teaching approaches within the classroom and school culture?

- How do students view gender equality within a same-sex institution?

- How do students feel about attending their school?

After receiving and analyzing my data, my questions changed to:

- How do students interpret feminism within the school?

- How does feminism show up in different ways throughout the school from the perspective of the students?

- How do students reference other knowledge outside of structured lessons to define/understand feminism?

I collected data through interviewing four students in the 7th grade at the school. Together we spoke about what they liked about the school, what they did not like, how they would define gender equality, and other questions related to these topics. Through fruitful conversation, we developed solutions to what they see as improvements at their school. My interviews were

anywhere from 20-40 minutes long. These interviews were held in person at the site. The questions that students were asked were:

1. What do you see in this image?

Image one shown:

2. What do you see in this second image?

Image two shown:

3. Have you ever heard the term "gender equality"?

    a. If so, where have you heard this term

    b. How would you describe this term

4. Where have you seen gender equality or inequality in your own community, or life?

5. Do you think that OSS teaches feminism?

a. If so, how? What lessons would you say fit into this category?

6. Do you like going to school here? What is your favorite part of going to this school?

7. What is your favorite subject?

8. What have you learned the most about at school?

9. What advice would you give to other students looking at coming to your school?

10. If you could change one thing about the school, what would it be?

a. Feel free to share anything else that you would like to about the interview or anything that is on your mind?

While completing research, I made the decision to use pseudonyms to represent the girls who I had conversations with. The table below shows the name of the student and some fun facts about them that they chose to share with me.

Ella	She loves dancing! She takes part in competitive dancing and has a great time. It is one of her favorite hobbies that brings her joy.
Jenna	Jenna is involved in many sports, such as lacrosse, basketball and recently track. She enjoys spending time outside and running around with friends.
Isabel	Isabel's favorite part of her day is getting to be creative. She loves working with different types of media and has enjoyed lots of activities within the STEAM field.
Alex	Alex wants to be a surgeon when she is older. She has enjoyed watching different shows that highlight the life of being a surgeon. Alex hopes to work in a big hospital one day.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I used discourse analysis by looking at each transcript closely. Discourse analysis is a process that looks at the ways in which text can inform who the speaker is, and what their cultural models or worldviews are. By looking at textual details, conclusions can be drawn about who the person is, what they believe, and how they feel about a particular question or subject. Lens one from discourse analysis asks the reader, what social identities does the participant have? What are their positionalities? The second lens asks us to look at what "work" the speaker is trying to do? For this lens there are multiple options of what they may be trying to do with their language. Here are seven examples of social functions:

1. Establish authority/expertise

2. Connect

3. Exclude/demean

4. Convey emotions

5. Share info/knowledge

6. Convey values

7. Persuade

These seven examples were not all found within the interviews, but are meant to serve as examples that could be found when looking at what "work" the speaker may be trying to do. The final lens looks at what cultural models/figured worlds the speaker is showing through their speech. (Black, 2006, p. 21).

Findings

The findings presented look at the interview data as well as my own observations of and insights about the context of the school. The first theme looks at the shift in perspective from feminist content to feminist pedagogy. The second theme delves into the divergent interpretations of feminism starting with the school perspective and ending with the student perspective. The next theme focuses on the intentionality of feminism through the lenses of choice and empowerment. Then, the theme of daily experiences highlights the impact of homework and challenges. Finally, the last section looks at the way students contextualize gender within different identities of class and sexuality.

Feminist Pedagogy versus Feminist Content

The research project was initially focused on teaching feminist content through outlets like women's history or facts about women. However, the research became complicated by feminist pedagogy. There are differences between teaching about feminism and using feminist pedagogy. When initially looking at the data, I focused on looking for key terms through feminist content. However, I became challenged by the idea of feminist pedagogy being present within the data. From looking at practices of feminism within the classroom and school culture, I have developed themes that look at both feminist content and feminist pedagogy. Within the discussion section, I will be looking further at the complications of feminist content and feminist pedagogy through a theoretical lens of intersectional feminism.

Divergent Interpretations of Feminism

School Context

 For part of my research, I looked directly at the ways that the school defines itself through their website and other public resources. This section is used to both provide context for

my data, but to also complicate the ways the school defines feminism or does not. Through doing

so, I would like to start this section by looking directly at their published mission statement. For

the sake of anonymity, I will be including certain sections of the mission statement to take a

deeper look into.

On the surface of the mission statement, I noticed that the only time girls was mentioned

was within the section that states the mission/goal is to, "educate and inspire economically

disadvantaged girls". This interested me specifically because of my own experience at the school

as a student and as a member of the alumni advisory board. I felt that the school does so much

more than inspire and educate. As the statement continues it states, "empowers students to step

into the future with valuable life skills and a mindset of achievement and excellence by

providing a safe, supportive, and academically challenging environment." Through the schools

definition it seems that the school may see a main goal of excellence through academic

challenge. In my opinion, the cultural model that is being presented through the mission

statement is that the environment the school is creating will lead to a certain mindset that results

in academic excellence and achievement. The focus on excellence and academics within the

statement illustrated the way that the school may not see feminism as an idea that needs to be

actively defined in their mission. When I say actively, I specifically mean that it is not done with

intention. Instead, the school may view the act of educating women through a challenging

curriculum as a feminist way of teaching.

At this moment, I would like to clarify that I am not making any claims to say that the

school does not believe in feminist approaches, but instead I'm looking at the direct language

used to define the mission. In one way, the school is recognizing the importance of a powerful,

challenging education. Within the website, the school outlines the history of the school and the

importance of the name being connected to powerful women. Specifically, the website states, "We steadily graduate ambitious and empowered young women." The wording that the school uses on the website illustrates a sense of feminist thinking. With the history showing that the school has girls graduating who are ambitious and empowered, the school is also emphasizing womanhood. The choice of including this sentence in a separate section from the mission statement in my opinion may give off unintended focus on academics instead of women empowerment directly. Through phrasing such as "challenging environment" the school advertises a rigorous academic challenge. While educating women through challenge is a part of feminism, I wondered how the students are receiving this message. Through the next section, I looked at what moments revealed how the students defined feminism through direct speech and word choice.

Student Interpretations

From the data, one cultural model that can be delved into deeper through the conversations I had, the structure of the school, and prior knowledge about certain lessons/activities, is that students are defining feminism differently than how the school may define feminism. Through reading over the transcripts multiple times and speaking with my professor, Jie Park, we concluded that students may be viewing feminism in a more structural, formal way. Within my conversation with Ella I asked, "where have you heard the term gender equality?" Ella responded with "I think I've heard it in humanities." (Interview, 3/2025). In order to look at the quotation directly, it is important to note that the wording I used of "term" may have caused Ella to think directly about where she heard the word "feminism" explicitly within the school. Because of this assumption, it may be that Ella thought directly of places at school where the word "feminism" was used, such as humanities class. In a similar manner, Alex

referenced both humanities and health class within her response. When asked, " Where have you seen gender equality, like in your own life, at school, or in another community you are a part of?" Alex answered with, " Well, we look at a lot of like, we look at a lot of like posts and videos, especially in fifth and sixth grade, our humanities teacher had us look at a bunch of like posts on social medias." (Interview, 3/2025). Alex referenced a particular class from a distinct time period. The specific structured time that Alex referred to illustrated the way that she is viewing feminism within school. Instead of seeing feminism as something that can be happening within school culture, Alex and Ella both used examples of structured class time where the word "gender equality" or "feminism" was used in a lesson. In Alex's response, she used a specific example of what was done in humanities that related to feminism. This relation between social media posts and feminism serves as a distinct learning moment. In other words, Alex may have seen feminism as something to learn about instead of something that is embodied, practiced, and integrated within the school culture and community. This can be due to multiple reasons and is based on the sole interviews I completed along with information about the school. The school is actively holding space for lessons and activities that are built around women empowerment. These activities include, building your own business in Creative Suite, building and constructing robotic boats, taking part in museum exhibitions, Student Advocacy Day, and many more. The students are taking away feminism from specific lessons where the word was mentioned or used explicitly in a certain way. This being said, there are different cultural models showing what aspects of the school are using feminism from the student perspective versus the school perspective.However, from knowledge of the school's lessons/activities for the students, there seemed to be a disconnect between what students are connecting with feminism versus what the school is seeing as feminist teaching. It is evident that the school provides activities and lessons

that are directly related to feminism and/or women empowerment more specifically. However, when the students are asked what feminist lessons they have learned, many answers involve examples of health class, allyship, or 5th/6th grade humanities class. This interesting complexity complicates the way that students may be viewing feminism as a strict definition instead of a concept that is integrated within the school culture and major events.

Design of a Feminist Project

This now leads to my finding centered on how the school is using feminism within their teachings. The following information is based on my informal discussion with students and staff as well as my own understanding of the school's principles and main events. When meeting with the 7th graders, I had the chance to view their independent projects. These projects are their own business product that they will be able to sell to the community and school at their end of year event. When speaking with all the girls about their projects, there was a sense of pride. The girls had to come up with their idea, gather materials or request materials, learn about unit price and practice this process, and then sell them in the future at the end of the year. By having these conversations, it was very evident to me that this process was empowering them as women and as business owners. It became very interesting when students did not refer to their projects as a place where they see feminism. I am keeping in mind that this could be contributed to many different factors.

One factor that may have affected the response of the students was my specific word choice regarding the question. My specific language of, "where have you seen feminism" or "do you think [school name] teaches feminism?" may have led to students referencing the direct language of feminism at school. Another factor that I looked into is the possibility that there is a disconnect between the lessons and defining the reason why these lessons are important. For

example, when looking at the businesses the students are creating, posing questions such as,

"Why is it important that women own businesses?", "What are the pros of women-owned

businesses?", "How can owning a business empower us?". By posing these questions to the

class, students can discuss ways that their businesses relate to women empowerment in a more

concrete manner helping the connection between their work and feminism. The school is doing a

wonderful job at allowing choice of project, which allows students to exercise their own thinking

and creativity. This relates to feminism directly by empowering the students to freely think and

create. This expression is extremely important for youth, especially young girls. I believe in

giving reason for teaching specific lessons or activities as it allows students to identify the

importance in lessons.

Intentionality of Feminism

Choice

An emerging theme that became present within the data analysis process is the concept of

choice. When asked what her favorite subject was, Alex responded with, "probably the whaling

museum project, because we wrote, like, an essay too. So it was, like, fun." (Interview, 3/2025) I

followed up with her response by asking if she liked writing. In her response she said, "no, not

really, but like, I, like, I was doing immigration, so it was fun to learn about that, while also

being like, we did, like a skit we had to do, then the project, and, like, I stayed after, like one day

on, like a Saturday." (Interview, 3/2025). Although Alex recognized that she does not enjoy

writing, she pointed out different aspects of the project that she took part in that made the

experience enjoyable for her. The multilayered project directly relates to a feminist practice that

is involved in schooling, choice. Although it is not clear if the intention was to use choice as a

feminist practice, it brought up wonders of the intentionality of feminism within schooling. The

school is doing a great job at involving choice within the culture of the school. However, students are not recognizing this free choice within the interview when asked about feminist lessons or if the school uses feminism. Because of this, I have been looking at ways that explicitly stating the reasoning behind a lesson or the importance of the lesson may benefit the students as well. The students are recognizing these lessons or activities as "fun" or their "favorite", which is a great aspect of teaching. Needless to say, students are enjoying many different lessons at the school in general. I think that by explicitly opening up dialogue about the importance of these activities or lessons, students will have the opportunity to dive deeper into the way that feminism is integrated in their school community.

Empowerment

An emerging theme that arose from the data is the idea of women empowerment as a feminist act. This theme developed from insights shared in two separate interview conversations. Firstly, my conversation with Jenna expanded my personal views on what women empowerment looks like. When speaking with Jenna, I asked, "Do you think that [school name] teaches feminism, like at school?" (Interview, 3/2025). In response to this question, Jenna said, "Yeah, I think they're very heavy on feminism." (Interview, 3/2025). To start looking at her words, I would like to look deeper into the word choice of "very heavy" when describing the way the school teaches feminism. Jenna expressed both a message of empowerment she is receiving while also acknowledging that they are "very heavy on feminism" within the school.

Within my conversation with Jenna, she also shared a moment of uplifting from the school. "They teach a lot about like women and everything that a woman can do, and that there's really no limit, yeah." (Interview, 3/2025). Using phrases such as, "no limit" allude to a sense of

empowerment and possible confidence coming directly from the school as an explicit message. Within this phrase, I looked at how this message can benefit young girls within a school setting.

In a similar manner, my conversation with Isabel revealed themes of women empowerment through direct messages. To help with framing Isabel's answer, I will first look into my question directly. I asked Isabel, " Okay, so what lessons or like memories can you remember that would fit into, like the feminist category?" (Interview, 3/2025). This question came about directly from looking at the way that my conversation with Isabel was going so far. Isabel was a little hesitant to share, so I decided to reframe my question in a way that allowed her space to think of memories or lessons instead of looking directly at strict definitions of what feminism was. Isabel shared, " teaching us to be who we are, like no matter what anyone else says." (Interview, 3/2025). I would like to take the next couple moments to unpack this response further by looking directly at Isabel's words. Looking at the use of pronouns, Isabel used "us" to signify her role as both a student and girl. By using a collective pronoun, such as "us" or "we", Isabel is speaking of herself as part of a group or shared identity. This is significant to note as this message of empowerment is possibly a general message from the school. It is unclear what aspects of the school have directly taught Isabel the message of being who you are. However, the use of the word "teaching" could be connected to school culture. I say this because of the way that Isabel offered this message compared to the responses of other participants. When asked the same question, both Ella and Alex responded with direct structure of lessons. To review, Alex referenced her experience in humanities class in 5th and 6th grade while Ella shared her experience in health class during 5th and 6th grade. Due to this comparison, there is complexity in the ways that messages regarding women's empowerment are present within the school. While there is room for recognition of the structures that are built to hold back women, I would like to

complicate this idea by looking at how women's empowerment is a form of feminism that allows youth to feel comfortable breaking down barriers and learning how to do so. This posed the question of what role does women's empowerment have within feminism? Is women's empowerment the most effective action in teaching girls to challenge and break systems of the patriarchy?

Daily Experiences

When reading through the transcripts, I noticed a recurring theme throughout all transcripts. To begin this finding, I would like to establish that this finding is framed in a way that poses multiple questions. Through my research, I have found that my findings are meant to spark more conversation about feminism within the school. Instead of offering larger claims, I have decided to look deeper into the language that the girls used to see common themes and identities. I found that this has allowed me to check myself and make sure I am humanizing the data within this paper. It has been extremely important to me that the lives of the girls shine through with their individuality. Firstly, I looked through the transcripts to identify when students used phrases that alluded to their everyday experiences at the school. This process led to the emergent theme of daily experiences of the girls. Throughout the interviews, I asked questions surrounding what the students would change about the school and if they enjoyed going to school here. When looking at these responses, I noticed that the students chose answers that spoke directly to their daily experiences as an academic student at the school.

Homework/SSR

Ella spoke about the amount of homework that she gets assigned and expressed that the workload can be a lot. When asked, "What would you change at the school if you could change anything?" (Interview, 3/2025). She presented this idea by saying, "Um I think I would also

change probably how much homework you get in each class, because sometimes we get a lot of homework…" (Interview, 3/2025). Ella's choice to share her daily experience as a student during this moment showed what was affecting Ella the most in her daily life. She shared that she would change the amount of homework connecting to her identity as a student. She furthered her statement by sharing, "it'll like especially because people have sports to do and, like, extracurriculars. I think they should only be able to assign like a little bit of homework because I know, personally, myself and few other people don't finish homework until like late late." (Interview, 3/2025). Ella recognized the complexities between the relationship of homework and extracurriculars. In other words, Ella saw that the homework amount was affecting her ability to participate in sports. I think that Ella positioned doing homework as a part of her daily life as a student, making it apparent that daily struggles of being a middle-school student were in the forefront of her mind when responding to the question. Her attention to homework illustrated the ways that academics were the part of school that impacted her daily life.

When I spoke to Jenna, we spoke a lot about the hours spent at school. Jenna shared that she feels that school can be hard sometimes. She spoke directly about the homework load and said, "and I have homework at the end of every day. So it's really hard coming in, like, with the positive attitude in the beginning." (Interview, 3/2025). As a student, Jenna seemed to see homework load affecting her daily experience. By using phrases like, "it's hard coming in…with a positive attitude in the beginning," Jenna shared how she felt as a student at the school, not revealing any other identities of hers. Jenna's emphasis on having a positive attitude may have shown the way that the school structure required a positive attitude. Jenna chose to share this challenge she faced, which highlighted her identity as a hard-working student.

When asked what they would change about the school, many of the girls answered with comments about SSR. For context, SSR stands for silent sustained reading. This block is for 45 minutes after lunch where every student is asked to read silently.

Challenge versus opportunity

Another moment that demonstrated the girls speaking from the perspective of a student was within the interview when Jenna spoke about her day-to-day experience at the school.

Within my conversation with Jenna, she shared, "Well, it's so hard. I don't like coming to school because I feel like it's really draining to me. I come to school for about like 8 hours a day, 40 hours a week, and I have homework at the end of every day. So it's really hard coming in, like, with the positive attitude in the beginning." (Interview, 3/2025). As mentioned in the previous section, Jenna was able to list out the amount of hours spent in school for the week. From her statement, it seemed like she was expressing the feeling of being tired. Jenna recognized that her schedule as a student at the school is related to the attitude she brings during the day. This choice of language directly revealed the challenge that the school presents for its students. Although it may not be intended, the school hours coupled with the amount of hours spent on homework have had a negative impact on Jenna's attitude towards school. I would like to validate Jenna's experience and recognize her feelings towards the amount of time spent in school and on homework. She viewed herself as a student that struggles with the time necessary to attend the school and recognized the connection between her feelings and the school itself. This moment showed me how the school may be unintentionally causing stressful moments for students through the amount of work. However, it is important to note that this may not be in connection with an all-girls school and could be the case of co-ed institutions as well. Additionally, I would like to recognize that there are positives in challenging students and

providing room for growth. This moment made me think further into questions like, how can the challenge of the school work against or with women empowerment? Are there ways for the school to balance the challenge while also empowering the students to speak about their struggles? This particular moment definitely complicated the ways in which the students experience both women empowerment and are pushed academically. Through this moment, I formed questions of how can the school provide both empowering moments through feminist teaching while also striving for academic excellence? Furthering this question, is it possible to do both in an encouraging

To complicate this further, Jenna also shared ideas of opportunity and empowerment. These moments offered a new perspective of looking at the way that students may view the opportunity culture of the school. Speaking from my own experience as an alumna, I was given many opportunities that I knew would benefit me in the present, but also looking forward to higher education. By looking at the perspective students have on opportunity, I saw a relationship between students working hard and obtaining opportunities. I asked Jenna, "what advice would you give to a student looking to come to [school name]?". In response to my question, Jenna responded with, "Um, I would tell them that even though it's really hard, there's a lot of positive things that come out of it when it comes to like, like looking back at friends you made, and you get a lot of opportunities here. So I wouldn't like, I wouldn't take it for granted." (Interview, 3/2025). This specific moment illustrated the way that Jenna views herself as a student at the school. During this question, I left it open-ended with no specific words to describe what type of advice they would be giving. Instead, I decided to ask an open-ended question that allowed students to answer the question with any type of advice they would give. Nevertheless, Jenna chose to share advice that pertained to her identity as a student instead of her identity as a

woman. Furthermore, Jenna started her advice with the phrase "even though" which creates the sentence structure of starting with negative leading to positive. This negative start stressed the idea of challenge, which became complicated when Jenna shifted to positive. Although Jenna recognized the challenge of attending the school, Jenna also recognized the positive. In other words, in Jenna's experience the opportunity outweighs the challenge. This directly related to the idea of being a student first. Jenna saw herself as a student who was challenged during school, but gained opportunity through the school at the same time. Instead of sharing how the school works towards empowering women through structured lessons, school culture, and opportunities, Jenna chose to establish her identity as a hardworking student.

Intersectionality

Gender and Class

This finding came about from very specific moments within my conversation with Ella. I asked Ella the question, "where have you seen gender equality, like in your own life, or like at [school name]?" (Interview, 3/2025). Ella used an example from her own experience outside of school and structured class. Ella said, " Um, I think both men and women have the same job. Like, they'll put things on the in the aisles, yeah, be cashier, register, whatever." (Interview, 3/2025). This quotation is particularly interesting because Ella used an example that alludes to a class status, which compares to her response of inequality further on in the conversation. When looking at a job like working at a grocery store, Ella used a particular example where a minimum wage job is presented. Because of this, Ella may have positioned a lower wage job as a place where gender equality can exist. She described that both genders have the same job. When listing, she included jobs that do not involve working in a corporate office of the grocery store for example. Her choice to include the list of "put things on in the aisles, cashier, register…"

highlight the way that she viewed gender equality in a place where low wages are earned. This response differed from when Ella was asked about any jobs where gender inequality would be present. In my exact words, I asked, " Are there any jobs that you can think of where, like there's gender inequality, so like men are above women that you've seen in your own life?" (Interview, 3/2025) From the wording of my own question, I made sure to define again what inequality was based on the definition that Ella gave earlier in the interview. Her definition was, "...when both genders are treated as equals." (Interview, 3/2025). When defining gender inequality, I positioned men above women within my question to be clear. Ella responded by using a new setting different from the grocery store example she gave earlier. Ella said, " Yeah, I think probably like big those, like, big work offices is usually a man CEO." (Interview, 3/2025). I found this example intriguing for many reasons. Firstly, Ella used the word "usually" showing how likely it is for a man to be a CEO compared to a woman. This revealed her own cultural model of what an office typically looks like. She used phrasing like big to show the stereotypical office space where a man runs the company, or is the CEO. This differed significantly from her example of gender equality where she used a grocery store as the setting. This made me think of the way that Ella positions gender equality within different wages or class statuses. When Ella used the example of the grocery store, it was being used as a place where gender equality can exist, and both genders are given the same position. However, when gender inequality was used, Ella brought an example from a higher wage job in a typical office building, as described through words like, "big". Ella's comparison of gender equality versus inequality was very intriguing to me. I also began to think about the way that Ella described one of the images that I presented in the beginning of the interview. When I showed Ella the second image below:

She described the image as, "She looks like she's pitching an idea to maybe like other people

from other work offices, or like her team. She's probably telling them ideas for something."

(Interview, 3/2025). This was a particularly interesting dynamic to be looking at because of the

way that Ella described the image in relation to her examples of gender inequality/equality.

Although her description of the image versus her example are not directly related, I found a

cultural model within the way she used intersectionality in her examples versus the description of

the image. Although we had just spoken about the image, Ella did not use an example of equality

within an office and instead used an example of inequality. This sparked the idea that Ella

positioned equality within lower wage jobs despite seeing a woman "telling them ideas" about

one minute before. When she described the image, she used phrases like "her team" implying

that the woman in the photograph was in a leadership position. I found it very interesting that she

chose an example where the man is the CEO as her example of gender inequality right after this

image. From the difference between the image description and the gender inequality example, I

looked at the way that the unfamiliarity with the image may have caused Ella to use the example

of what she usually sees in the front of an office or a business meeting. Because of my

introduction of the interview with this photo, Ella may have seen this photo as something

unusual, inspiring her to use the opposite example: a man in the office. The intersectionality of

class and gender is a concept that I wrote about earlier in my theoretical and conceptual

framework. Ella represented the concrete idea that gender equality looks different with class

status. Her examples of gender equality positioned class as a difference with how women are treated in a workplace setting.

Gender and Sexuality

Ella uniquely positioned allyship closely with feminism in the interview. I asked Ella, "Can you think of any lessons or like moments that you think [school name] was like teaching something about feminism to you?" (Interview, 3/2025). Firstly, I am going to dissect my question phrasing. When asking Ella, I used the language of "something about" to present Ella with the broader idea of feminism. I used this wording to open up the idea of feminism being multifaceted and involved in other disciplines. That being said, when Ella responded she first used a direct example and then added further language to speak about a subject within the class. In response to my question, Ella said, " probably in health class, because they teach us a lot about, like, yeah, feminism and being an ally towards the LGBTQ community." (Interview, 3/2025). At first glance during the actual interview, I saw this moment as noteworthy and an interesting find to delve into. Ella really sparked a great connection between feminism and being an ally. Ella expanded the way I was looking at feminism within her individual interview by using allyship as something she learned. By diving deeper into the discourse analysis of this moment, I noticed that the word "and" was used to connect both feminism and being an ally. The word choice showed a connection between both feminism and allyship instead of showing the differences between the two words. This made me think directly about the intersectional relationship between feminism and the LGBTQ community. While completing my data circle with my class, I presented this exact moment as I found it puzzling and intriguing. As I presented, themes such as the grouping together of LGBTQ and feminism, the conceptualization of sexuality and feminism, allyship as a skill, and queerness. These themes came up through a

group discourse analysis during my CYES praxis course. This circle allowed me to listen to how others viewed the cultural models and identities within this singular moment. That being said, I was able to take the conversation we had during class and apply the concepts to how I viewed this moment. From there, I really saw the intersectionality that both the school and Ella are using between the LGBTQ community and feminism.

Within this moment, there is complexity with how Ella viewed the lessons surrounding allyship. Ella shared that she does not like health class. She directly said when asked, "Not really" (Interview, 3/2035). From an educator standpoint, I value the importance of health class, specifically a holistic health education. I was happy to hear that the school spoke about allyship within their health course. However, her response gave me a moment to reflect deeper with her on the reasons why health class is not something that Ella likes and seeing if this is related to the intersectionality she mentioned. When asked, " Why don't you like it?" Ella responded with, "Just because it's like, I think it's, not a waste of time, but I think most of the stuff we were learning in fifth and sixth grade was how to be an ally in LGBTQ. And I have nothing against the LGBTQ community, but I think it was kind of pointless for us to learn how to be like an ally. Like, it's a good skill to know, but like, I don't think it relates to health class." (Interview, 3/2025). There are a lot of interesting segments within this moment so I am going to start with the idea of allyship. As Ella used allyship in her response about feminism, it can be concluded that there is some sort of relationship between allyship and feminism that Ella saw. This relationship can be shown with her direct reference to both concepts being used directly in her health class. With the wording that Ella used, "how to be like an ally", it seems that Ella is receiving this lesson as a conceptual one instead of something that she is practicing. When I use the word receiving, I am using it in a way that it is neither the way the teacher is teaching or the

way that she is understanding. Instead, I am using receiving to represent the possibility of both here. Because of this, there seems to be a difference in how Ella may be taking in the information versus how it may be taught. This could be for a plethora of reasons whether it be the time of health class, the frequency, or even Ella's interest in the topic.

Part of the discourse analysis process that I used is firstly looking at how each girl identifies themself through their language and word choice. I would like to emphasize that this is interpretative and is not to take away from any meaning that Ella may have intended versus how I interpreted it. Ella's use of the pronoun "us" positions the teacher versus the class. When Ella shares, " I think it is kind of pointless for us to learn how to be like an ally." (Interview, 3/2025). If it is assumed that Ella is using the word "us" to mean the other students in health class, it seems that there may be a disconnect of the relevance of allyship to the course and the students. Although Ella states, "...it's a good skill to know, but like, I don't think it relates to health class." (Interview, 3/2025), she directly looks at how it does not relate to health class. Her use of the phrase "I don't think" showed a sense of possible doubt that it does relate or even could relate. The uncertainty within the phrase "I don't think" instead of an affirmative statement like, " It does not relate" made me think about the ways in which Ella may be seeing the intersection between feminism and allyship, but not of allyship and health. Although she recognized the connection between feminism and being an ally, she did not see the relevancy of this being taught in a health course. It is important to note that these lessons were taught in 5th and 6th grade and Ella is currently in the 7th grade. Ella shared that she learned these in the 5th and 6th grade, which may contribute to her feelings of it being repetitive and unrelated to health. Learning how to be an ally within the context of health is an important concept. Ella recognized the importance as she said, "it's a good skill to know…" (Interview, 3/2025). The word choice of

"skill" made me think deeper about how Ella may have been viewing allyship within the context of health class. This complicated the way that Ella positioned feminism and allyship. I began to wonder if there was a connection between the way that allyship is viewed as a skill and the potential that feminism could be viewed in a similar manner.

Absence of Race and Gender

It is important to note the absence of the intersectionality of race and gender mentioned within the interviews. To unpack this further, I will be looking at potential reasons why students did not mention or allude to race and gender as an intersection. As my framework specifically looks at race and gender as a main example of intersectionality, I feel it is important to note this difference within my data. Looking back at my theoretical framework of intersectionality within feminism, I would like to further elaborate on the ways that my framework informed the following theme.

The framework I established within my theoretical framework focuses on the intersectionality of race and gender. However, within my data analysis, the intersections that I found were: gender and class, and gender and sexuality. Race was not a prevalent factor in the data that students mentioned. Within the data, students did not allude to or explicitly state anything about race. To delve further into this complication, I have reflected on potential reasons why race was not mentioned during the interviews.

One of the reasons why race may have not been mentioned within the interview in regards to gender is due to the way that race may have not been prominently on their minds during the interview. It is unclear whether or not the questions I used would allow space for students to bring up topics surrounding race. I believe that the lack of mention of race could possibly be due to the way my questions were phrased. Furthermore, when students mentioned

other identities such as sexuality, it was due to the clear connection between feminism and

sexuality within their health class. Students did not use examples of race possibly due to the

absence of race and feminism being spoken about together within structured class time. This

inference is based on the information that the students did give when asked about where

feminism is within their school. The absence of race could be connected to the way that race is

spoken about within the school in non-explicit ways.

Discussion

In this section, I will be diving deeper into particular findings that sparked questions and

more thoughts. Within this section, I will be referencing my findings and broadening the scope to

delve further into overarching themes of explicit feminism and women's empowerment. These

two themes were present throughout my findings and caused deeper reflection. I chose to include

this section to pose questions and complicate my findings further.

Should feminism be taught loudly?

Throughout my data, I saw recurring ideas that challenged my initial assumptions about

feminism within schools. As students identified clear structural lessons of feminism through the

interviews, I reflected on the idea of explicit feminism or implicit feminism. In other words, I

found myself looking at the benefits of both teaching feminist directly and leaving room for

students to define feminism through their lived experiences. This is based on the explicit

examples within my data. For example, students referencing a health class where the term

feminism was taught in relationship with allyship, or in humanities class through looking at

current events on social media. These examples differed from the prior knowledge I had going

into the interviews from talking to students informally. Through these conversations, I learned

that students are creating their own businesses where they are looking into unit price, creating the

product, and selling the product. Based on my data, I found that students were not using these activities to describe lessons that connect to feminism. This disconnect led me to looking at explicit feminism and implicit feminism deeper.

Implicit Feminism

The integration of feminism without stating it within every lesson can have benefits. In one aspect, feminism being taught explicitly can give students the language and understanding to break down barriers and structures. However, it may be true that over-explaining and defining has an impact on the acceptivenes of these concepts for students. Recalling from my personal experience at the school, I remember moments of repetition of feminism that caused me to push away from the idea of identifying as a feminist. While this is simply the case of myself, I wonder how this could play out for other students attending the school. Some questions that arose from this moment was how can the school balance not overusing the word "feminism" within the school? Is it a good thing to drive home the idea of feminism as a concept or give students the space to define their own feminism? How can not defining feminism potentially lead to White feminism?

The idea of implicit feminism derived from the data showing different ways of feminist pedagogy. Through looking at the data in a different lens, I found it important to note the difference between feminist pedagogy and feminism as structured content. Within the design of the project, I kept in mind the idea of feminist content. I kept an eye out for when students used the word feminism or referenced a class that taught the word feminism. This viewpoint limited my ability to see the differences between feminist pedagogy and feminist content. Through my data analysis and personal reflection, it has become clear that there is feminist pedagogy within the school. There is also reference of feminist content within the school. The difference of these two areas is crucial to note as my research looked mainly at content, which revealed a limitation

of my research. Within my data analysis, I found that feminist pedagogy may be an area of

research that would expand the way feminism is present within the school. Because my project

was designed for feminist content, the questions I asked lacked focus on feminist pedagogy

creating different themes from the data analysis.

Is Empowerment the answer?

A theme of women empowerment consistently emerged throughout the data and my

analysis. To look further into this theme, I deepened my research by looking at the way that

women empowerment is defined in literature resources. The data led me to thinking more about

whether empowerment is important to feminism or whether empowerment is feminism itself.

The data complicated the way that empowerment is involved with feminism directly. As the girls

repeated messages of empowerment, I believe that there is significance in empowering young

women to be confident and voice their opinions. Hearing them talk to me about empowering

messages they are receiving made me happy on the receiving end. I would also like to hold space

to complicate the idea of women empowerment. Through both the data and the literature, I feel

that empowerment is important to feminism, but may not be feminism itself. Empowering

women to deconstruct the systems that are built to hold us back is very important to the

trajectory of feminism. To take down these systems, it is important that the girls feel like they

have a voice and power to stand up for what they believe in and fight against the structures of the

patriarch.

<div align="center">

Action/Implications

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After reflecting on my findings, I wrestled with the questions and ideas that arose.

Through journaling and reflecting on myself as the researcher, I would like to start this section

with acknowledgement of the research process. I started this project with viewing an action as a tangible, structural change. Through speaking with the girls, I realized the importance of being heard. Although I have seen this as my theory of change, seeing this in practice took a huge shift on my thinking of research and an action step. My action for this research involved listening, validating, and sharing experiences. While working within my themes, I have established a few recommendations for the school that refer back to the stories and ideas shared by the girls and my own experience as an alumni. I hope that these recommendations serve as sparks for change and conversation.

Power in Naming

From my findings, the students shared examples of feminism and gender equality that did not come directly from the school's lessons or culture. As discussed in my findings, many students used outside perspectives that informed their definition of feminism. One recommendation that I believe would help students see the connection between activities, like creating a business, and feminism is by explicitly stating the reasoning behind certain activities. This can also be known as a "why care?". Showing students the direct reason behind certain lessons or even structures at the school can help students connect what they are learning to bigger picture ideas, such as feminism.

Furthermore, there is power in naming the reasoning behind activities or lessons. Students will be able to identify larger themes through the lessons that are being taught or the activities they are doing. For example, sparking a conversation about the power of women starting businesses, the structural barriers that may be present for women-owned businesses, the pros/cons of women-owned businesses, etc. Opening up free dialogue allowing students to dive

deep into the importance of the lessons the teachers are giving could help students see the connection between feminism and the curriculum.

Mission Statement

Through my analysis of the mission statement coupled with conversations with the school, it is evident that the mission statement does not currently align with what the school is practicing or teaching. I feel that a good action step would be to revisit the mission statement and workshop with the students. By involving student voices in the process, there will be room for reflection from both the staff but also the students. This collective process could allow for team thinking and discussion in regards to what the students want the school to look like and how the mission statement can represent their ideas as well.

Conclusion

Summary

This paper explored the ways that feminism can appear from the perspective of students attending an all-girls middle school. Through data analysis, this research raised questions about what feminism looks like within the classroom. The main findings of this research included: Intentionality of Feminism, Daily Experiences, Intersectionality, and Divergent Interpretations of Feminism. The paper revealed the many perspectives surrounding the ways that feminism can be present within a school classroom and a school culture.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of this project look at the ways that women empowerment, choice, and community cultural wealth can fit into the realm of intersectional feminism. Through the analysis of the interview data, students were bringing up different aspects of intersectional

feminism through these three lenses. This research expands on prior work done in regards to women empowerment. The data present both challenges notions of empowerment within a structure while also showing evidence of ways empowerment can be successful. The theoretical implications of this research truly questions the way that empowerment and choice appear within all-girls communities or schools by building on ways that these concepts can be effective or not.

Limitations

A major limitation of my research is the amount of interviews I was able to take part in. My recruitment process was not in person due to travel time issues causing possible hesitancy to sign the consent forms. Although I was only able to complete four interviews, the data analysis was very fruitful and allowed me to reflect on myself as a researcher and an alumna.

Another limitation present within my project was the restrictions of the IRB. My original project included more images and an activity that the IRB did not approve of. Because of this, my project was significantly delayed and required many revisions and edits. The time spent on IRB took away from the time I was able to go into the classrooms and hold interviews. In the future, I would tackle the IRB early on in the process to be able to focus solely on the interviews and talking to the girls.

The limitations of my research topic surround the lack of perspectives I was able to gain from teachers or faculty of the school. My findings were solely based on the perspective of the students making it difficult to see the connections between what the teachers feel they are teaching and what the students are gaining from the teachers. I feel that my research could benefit from expanding who is included in the interviews. By including teachers and faculty, the research could show a larger picture of the school culture and who is a part of it.

Looking forward: In the Classroom

My next step in my educational path is to partake in the Masters in the Arts of Teaching program. Keeping this in mind, I would like to reflect on how my research will inform and affect my student teaching in the next few years. To organize this, I will be applying the three concepts of community cultural wealth, women empowerment, and choice, to my own teaching.

Choice

Within my own teaching, choice is a large component of how I would like to lead a classroom. Through looking at other teachers' recommendations, I feel that choice is a great way for students to practice agency while also learning the importance of choice making. Through making choices, students are allowed to bring their lived experiences in the classroom. Whether it is a hobby they enjoy or a cultural tradition, students will be given the space to bring this into the classroom. Through completing this research, I have seen the ways that the girls viewed moments of choice within their education. Furthermore, as a student myself, I have benefited greatly from the opportunities to share my own lived experiences. In relation to feminism, I feel that choice within a classroom is crucial to leading to a socially just world. I would not only like to give students the chance to make choices, but truly practice the theory of students coming up with their own options. As seen within my conceptual framework, it is crucial for students, especially women, to see the way that they can create their own options. This relates directly to how I feel empowerment can be included within my teaching next year.

Empowerment

In all, the research I completed really challenged my perspective on empowerment, specifically looking at women empowerment. Through both reading the interviews and thinking back on my own experience, the idea of women empowerment has become more complicated.

However, in applying this to my future as a teacher, I hope to bring forth ideas of empowerment that are not empty statements. When I use the phrase "empty statements", I am pointing out the idea of empowerment as statements that do not account for the structures that inherently and strategically harm marginalized folks in multiple ways. In my next year of teaching, I will use phrases that push forth confidence and the importance of one's voice while also acknowledging the harmful structures in place. By acknowledging and speaking about the structures, I hope that my students will feel empowered to take down these structures. I will refrain from using phrases that do not acknowledge the intersectionality within my classroom or their lived experiences. Empowerment is important and can help students feel confident and important. However, it can also do harm if empowerment is not coupled with knowledge of what these structures and barriers are and how they can be torn down.

Community Cultural Wealth

Within my classroom next year, community cultural wealth is a concept that I will be centering. Through centering student voices, I will be keeping in mind the ways that knowledge can be shown in a plethora of ways. Students hold different knowledge from different aspects of their lives. Within my classroom, I hope to bring out these different pockets of knowledge through a welcoming environment that instills care for one another. Community cultural wealth is a concept that should be valued in all classrooms. I hope to show students the importance of their knowledge in any form and push forth the idea that their lived experiences are an asset and are valuable.

Closing

This project allowed me to reflect on my own experiences while also learning about the experiences of the current students. Through talking to the girls, I expanded my view on

feminism and also my view on research. This project has truly allowed me to reflect on how research is important and can be an action within itself. The process of completing research has allowed me to think deeply about my impact on the girls, the school, but also myself. I have grown as a thinker and a learner, but also as a future educator. This project led me to thinking deeply about my experiences alongside my sisters and trying to unpack the way that feminism has appeared within our lives. In conclusion, this project has served as a reflective point for myself and as a turning point in my educational path as an aspiring teacher.

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