Exploring Feminist Pedagogy to Create an Inclusive Learning Environment: Selected Cases at the Secondary Level

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ABSTRACT. This study explores the application of feminist pedagogy to create an inclusive learning environment. The teaching methodology has no standardized set of characteristics, aiming to address societal issues present inside the classroom. The objectives include describing the profile of the research participants, identifying their teaching practices, examining their experienced challenges, and gathering their recommended strategies. It follows a thematic case analysis design and uses Snowball sampling to identify four teachers handling different subject areas at the secondary level. After ensuring consent, they were interviewed online using Eaton's (2017) interview guide. Ten themes under categories of practices, challenges, and recommendations were formed. The data analysis using Creswell's (2007) spiral design revealed that all participants are self-identified feminists and use a student-centered approach. Moreover, results have shown that they empower learners through reflection and collaboration activities. The challenges revolve around learners' responses and attitudes. Maximizing technology is a primary strategy they suggested. This article illustrates how feminist pedagogy is a new option for teachers to provide learners with a safe space to learn, free from discrimination.

1.0. Introduction

One of the most identified yet often taken-for-granted issues in human development is exclusion, especially in the academe. Even in a country considered "open and tolerant," the Philippines still face exclusivity. LGBTQA+ learners still experience discrimination. Based on Bilon (2019), only 21% of Filipinos reside in areas with Anti-Discrimination Ordinances. There are insufficient schools to accommodate persons with disabilities and special needs. According to the Department of Education (DepEd), the number of SPED centers nationwide is 643,471 for the elementary and 177 for the secondary levels (Senate of the Philippines, 2020). The number of indigenous people is unknown but ranges from 10% to 20% of the country's total population. However, they are denied enjoying their culture and using their autochthonous language (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, n.d.). There are also limited learning modalities available that can support the variety of learning styles of 21st-century learners. Hence a possibility of a number increase in out-of-school youths and drop-outs.

Indeed, dealing with oppression has a long history and continues despite numerous attempts to end it. Frizell and Woodger (2019) emphasized that marginalized learners have been experiencing exclusion even before entering school. It happens due to discrepancies in the curriculum design, limited resources, and the need for more awareness. It resulted in learners having low confidence levels and feeling abandoned since they had difficulty finding their place in the system. A study by Suan and Magallanes (2020) stated that belongingness and self-esteem are a person's fundamental rights. It is concluded that since the education system plays an important role in building and assessing these rights for community members, it is a must that an educational institution would also establish an environment that has *"a sense of security, care, and affection."* Having such empowering place not only values the well-being of learners but also results in positive productivity and competence since they can freely and holistically develop.

Because of these situations, the Philippine government has tried to eliminate the barriers that limit Filipino learners' participation and affect their learning environment. An Inclusive

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Education approach was adopted at the center of the country's educational system as mandated by the 1987 Philippine Constitution and related policies supported by international organizations and human rights treaties. It is considered one of the core principles of the K 12 Basic Education Program. Hence, various strategies are continuously explored to administer inclusivity in line with this. As presented at the International Summit and Seminar on Inclusive Education, DepEd envisions that:

> "By 2022, we will have a nation-loving and competent lifelong learner able to respond to challenges and opportunities through the delivery of quality, accessible, relevant, and liberating K to 12 programs by a modern, professional, pro-active, nimble, trusted, and nurturing DepEd" (Dino, 2017).

Similarly, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 ensures everyone has access to inclusive and equitable quality education. Inclusion in education is viewed as "a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2005). Hance (2020) highlighted that creating an inclusive learning environment requires building relationships, providing rigorous activities and opportunities for collaborative learning, and allowing support and mistakes to support learners' individual needs. Thus, a well-defined set of principles and methodologies are required to achieve it successfully. Choosing a suitable teaching method is crucial to improving learners' experiences.

More than a strategy, feminist pedagogy is a way of thinking about teaching and learning (Lawrence, 2016). Its difference from other pedagogies lies in its integration of feminine ways of teaching and learning while addressing societal issues inside the classroom. Feminist pedagogy deals with social identity; it aims to eliminate bias, not differences. Shrewsbury (1993) stated that:

> "Feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching/learning – engaged with self in a continuing reflective process; engaged actively with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get

beyond our sexism and racism and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge; engaged with the community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change" (p.167).

Although feminist pedagogy has no standardized characteristics or is bound to limited application areas, it has practices that do not discriminate and respect differences. This is because the said pedagogy never assumes that each learning environment is uniform.

A study by Koseoglu (2020) shows the application of feminist pedagogy to comprehend the teaching of Open and Distance Learning (ODL). She viewed the pedagogy as an ethical position to look into forming educational services and procedures that create an inclusive learning environment for all disadvantaged people in the academe. She focused on gender issues — highlighting the importance of intersectional gender analysis in ODL. Meanwhile, a study by Roberts (2021) shows that feminist pedagogy benefits educators. Thus, she suggests that teacher education programs should include feminist theory, pedagogy, and practice in their curriculum because she considers it the best transformative tool. She presented four steppingstones in achieving this: preparing teachers to establish an authentic voice, training teachers to develop transformative pedagogy, establishing teachers as a gateway to community, and intentionally inserting praxis and introducing paradigm shifts into teacher education. This way, teachers would find a pedagogy that transforms the system for them and the learners.

With these in mind, the application of feminist pedagogy was explored and analyzed for the possibilities of creating an inclusive learning environment. Specifically, the following objectives were aimed to be achieved: describe the profile of the research participants, discuss the practice of feminist pedagogy, examine the challenges in creating an inclusive learning environment with feminist pedagogy, and recommend strategies on how feminist pedagogy can be used to create an inclusive learning environment.

2.0. Methodology

The topic of feminist pedagogy is relatively under-researched. Thematic case analysis was applied in this study to help the researcher obtain rich data. Snowball sampling was used to

select the research participants who had already incorporated feminist pedagogy practices in their teaching before. The researcher already knows two teachers who are self-identified feminists and initially fit the criteria needed. Through a referral system, two more teachers were discovered. A Feminist Survey by Duncan and Stacio (2001) was first utilized to check whether the usage of the intended participants of feminist pedagogy is appropriate for the objectives of this study. This survey is a 15-item scale, where item 7 in the questionnaire is reverse scored. It was derived from different instructors' usage of feminist pedagogy. The final participants are four teachers handling different subject areas at the secondary level in the school year 2021-2022. They are teaching in the public and private sectors.

The researcher followed ethical practices in doing a qualitative study, as Creswell (2007) detailed. Before conducting the interview, the researcher thoroughly explained the study's overview and objectives through e-mail. A request letter was given to determine the willingness and availability of the intended participants to become part of the study. It contains their rights to withdraw anytime they feel uncomfortable and answer questions they were not restricted to disclosing. Once a mutual agreement was reached, the participants signed the consent form to allow the researcher to use the data to be collected legally.

An in-depth interview guide used by Eaton (2017) in her research entitled, *It's Just* *Good Teaching: Creating Inclusive Elementary Classrooms Through Feminist Pedagogy* was adopted in this study. The guide is a semi-structured interview that measures the same objective as this study intends to measure. However, some questions were revised and added to fit the analysis even more. The questions were also reorganized and encoded in an online form, the primary tool used in the interview process. The participants requested the setup in the interest of time and to avoid any physical contact adhering to the health protocols mandated by the local government due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to identify them while protecting their identity throughout the development of this study.

After the interview, the researcher ensured that the research context was described thoroughly to achieve transferability. There was no reduction of words, phrases, or ideas to ensure the authenticity of the information gathered. The transcribed data was also shown to the participants for validation to ensure their experiences and perspectives were reflected correctly. Any personal attachment or possible bias from the researcher that might emerge was eradicated, making the whole research process credible and accurate.

The data was then analyzed following a spiral model by Creswell (2007). A spiral image was used to show the process of moving in circles rather than being fixed linearly. The model includes organizing data; reading and memoing;

Procedures

Representing, Visualizing

Describing, Classifying, Interpreting

Reading, Memoing

Data Managing

Data Collection (text, images)

Account

Examples

Matrix, Trees, Propositions

Context, Categories, Comparisons

Reflecting, Writing Notes Across Questions
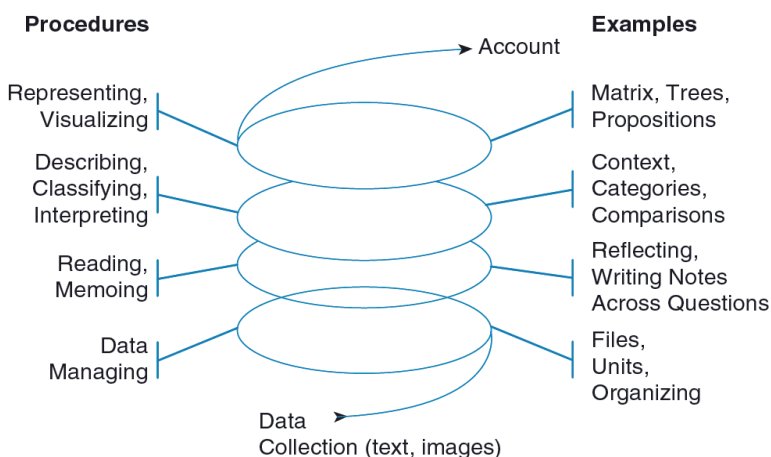
Files, Units, Organizing

Figure 1. The data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2007)

describing, classifying, and interpreting data into codes and themes; interpreting data; representing and visualizing the data, as seen in Figure 1.

3.0. Results and Discussion

Profile of the Research Participants

The participants are two female and two male teachers ranging from 24 to 28 years old. Although in their twenties, these teachers have been in the academe for five years. Their experiences are focused on the secondary level. Furthermore, most of them have master's degrees. All were from different provinces but within the same region in the Philippines. Two of them teach under the Language cluster, one under Mathematics, and one under Humanities and Arts. Some teaching philosophies are essentialism and student-centered, while others are anchored on democracy.

> "I have a strong belief in democracy, so I strive to make my classroom a safe space for everyone and promote social equality. I also believe in the concept of intersectionality, where every individual is unique." (Participant 1, personal communication, 01 May 2022)

The participants all identified themselves as feminists. They defined feminism as having equal rights and opportunities, while feminist pedagogy was a socially constructed approach. It is also found that all of them have experience using the pedagogy for more than a year. Most of them discovered the said pedagogy in the academe and graduate school. Other than feminist pedagogy, they have also used collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning, constructivist approach, and student-centered approach.

> "I will define feminist pedagogy as an approach to teaching where the classroom is constructed to reflect an ideal society where socially constructed male-learning beliefs are eliminated." (Participant 1, personal communication, 01 May 2022)

The participants have described inclusion as a student-centered and socially constructed approach that accepts and understands learners. The researcher has also asked about their views on inclusion at the secondary level since they have been teaching more at this level. For them, understanding intersectionality among the learners and developing sound curricula that will voice their perspectives, realities, and needs is a must. Thus, a classroom is envisioned to be a place where social equality is promoted.

> "I can define it by letting everyone be part of the class, and by accepting students who are at least qualified to be part of the secondary level education regardless of race, gender, and preferences." (Participant 4, personal communication, 04 May 2022)

Thematic Insights

The following themes on the teaching practices of feminist pedagogy are identified as a result of the thematic analysis. These themes arose from the participants' textural accounts and are organized with respect to their classroom practices.

Involve learners in preparing lesson contents

This theme shows the common practice of feminist teachers in involving learners in preparing the lesson contents to create an inclusive learning environment. The cross-case analysis has found that most participants plan lessons and activities with their students at the beginning of the term or quarter. Participant 2 shared that she allows her students to express which competencies they would like to focus on and which they think should be less emphasized. Hence, this action equips teachers to understand various perspectives better. It allows them to plan the materials well and decide on their corresponding assessments.

> "Before the school year starts, *pinag-uusapan namin yung* about *sa mga mas ifofocus na* learning competencies and to lessen the topics that we are going to discuss *kasi alam naman natin na kulang ang* time." [Before school starts, we talk about which learning competencies to focus on and try to lessen the topics to discuss because of time constraints.] (Participant 2, personal communication, 02 May 2022)

As discussed earlier, under the teaching profile of the participants, the majority of them have associated inclusion with a student-centered approach. Based on McCarthy (2018), involving

learners allows them to understand their needs, interests, and learning preferences. Considering these, they are empowered because they learn on their terms. It develops their accountability and promotes self-assessment. It was also stated by Shrewsburry (1993) that feminist pedagogy believes that every classroom is unique because there are also different kinds of learners. Even when considered the best, a one-size-fits-all instructional plan would not be left unchanged in today's educational setup. Teachers empower their learners to choose meaningful and purposeful activities through consultation prior to the designing of the lesson contents. It shows learners' power from the production process and their responsibility for its usage.

Establish healthy connections by sharing

This theme illustrates the power of sharing in building a healthy connection between the teacher and learners. Throughout the interview, the participants repeatedly emphasized the benefits of allowing students to express their thoughts and share their experiences related to the lesson. Participant 4 shared that one student once shared a personal problem with him, which made him conclude that the pedagogy creates a safe space for his students. However, for learners to open up, teachers should also express their willingness to listen and share relevant experiences that would create a reliable atmosphere.

> "Through sharing of personal experiences, one of my students back in 2020 shared a very personal problem regarding his experience in the past. So, by means of the feminist pedagogy, it welcomes the student's perspective, and it aids the learners who are having grounded mindset." (Participant 4, personal communication, 04 May 2022)

> "I do open myself too to my learners. I do share my experiences that can help establishing and building connection with my learners." (Participant 4, personal communication, 04 May 2022)

All participants are millennials, giving them an advantage in relating to their junior and senior high school learners. O'Shanassy (2017) explains that young teachers are good at reaching kids because they are transparent, outspoken, and collaborative, far from the traditional characteristics of teachers. Their qualities set them as good role models for being true to themselves.

> "Yes, in fairness to my teaching experiences so far, I haven't encountered any inclusivity-related challenges. I believe one of the factors in this is that I, a queer teacher myself, act as a role model in promoting inclusivity inside the classroom. As a queer teacher, I tend to create activities that could encourage self-expression among my students, and so far, I haven't encountered any form of resistance." (Participant 1, personal communication, 01 May 2022)

Feminist pedagogy appreciates narratives and treats emotion as a core in meaning-making (Warren, 1989 cited by Almanssori, 2020). In support of this claim, Solar (1995) also characterizes feminist pedagogy as an act that values intuition and emotion rather than rationality. Note that this should be a give-and-take relationship. Hence, learners feel validated and included in the discussion, whereas teachers can reach out more comfortably when needed. The theme deems learners perform best when affective forms of knowledge are accentuated and valued. It shows how learners respect their peers and teachers.

Provide engaging individual and group activities

This theme discusses another practice of feminist teachers of having class individual and group activities that fit their learning level. According to Svitak (2012), learners' most common complaints revolve around their perception that the lessons do not apply to the real world. Through these activities, learners can connect their learnings with real-life experiences. They can practice what they have learned. Making these connections can be done individually or through the help of peers. Some participants explained that aside from allowing their students to suggest activities, they also let them choose their partners or groupmates.

> "May freedom *sila* to choose their partners *kapag* think-pair-share kami." [They have the freedom to choose their partners in think-pair-share activities.] (Participant 2, personal communication, 02 May 2022)

The pedagogies that participants have used aside from feminist pedagogy are collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning, constructivist, and student-centered. Moreover, all of them identified themselves as feminists. Solar (1995) explained that this kind of teacher refers more to consciousness-raising activities because one characteristic of the said pedagogy is transmitting appropriate intellectual tools to build up critiques. Therefore, it is essential to find out what interests the learners and use that to relate concepts. These activities should be engaging because they empower learners, as all participants expressed.

> "Giving engaging activities where they will speak out their minds will empower each student." (Participant 1, personal communication, 01 May 2022)

The theme positions the learners where they appreciate everyone's differences in the learning environment and not just merely have connections to them. The positioning and their characteristics affect how the learner and the teacher view the lesson content. It also shows the impact of the discussion flows and the level of participation.

Give feedbacks for reflection
This theme states that giving feedback help assess a learner's level of understanding. The participants highlighted their regular feedback to their students in verbal and non-verbal cues. Feedback explains what learners have done right and what should be improved (Mugambi, 2017). Thus, it leads to reflection in their learning activities. As traditional reflection activities are primarily required in class discussions, as unveiled by Participant 2, the participants also give appraisal feedback to their students rather than simply receiving it.

> "To value and develop their sense of belongingness, I usually give feedback in every group work by asking about their contribution to the group, so every effort is acknowledged and appreciated." (Participant 1, personal communication, 01 May 2022)

> "Telling them *MAHUSAY, MAGALING* after answering my question. Again, feedback is the key." [I tell them they did a great job after answering my question. Again, feedback is the key.] (Participant 3, personal communication, 03 May 2022)

Feminist pedagogy considers experience as a source of knowledge. Thus, learners are positioned in a learning environment where they can voice out and relate the knowledge they learned to their real-life experiences, withstanding any perceived dominant culture. Through feedback, they will be able to form those connections.

Based on the thematic analysis of teaching practices, the challenges the participants experienced in creating an inclusive learning environment with feminist pedagogy are specified below in the following themes.

Creating differentiated activities
This theme indicates the challenge of creating activities that measure different learning levels of students. Participants 2 and 3 expressed that although these goals are great for the students, they are difficult to attain, especially if done frequently. It is because of the wide range of uniqueness of the learners. Each learner has various and distinct problems, as Petre et al. (2019) claim. It would be difficult for teachers to identify these problems because some learners are not professionally diagnosed. Producing and facilitating these activities is also time-consuming for the teachers, considering the number of students in the current education system. In addition, materials and resources are limited. Therefore, the goal is not sustainable.

> "*Hati yung isip mo kung paano kasi iba-iba din* ang level *ng* students *kaya dapat* balance *lang ang* learning activities *ng lahat*." [Your mind is torn about how to create learning activities since students have different levels. That is why there should be a balance between the activities of the whole class.] (Participant 2, personal communication, 02 May 2022)

Facilitating large class size
This theme shows the limitation of applying feminist pedagogy to a classroom with a large number of learners. It was Participant 1 who claimed that to maximize feminist pedagogy inside a classroom, the ideal number is not any less than 20 is ideal. It is based on his experience because he could not reach out to his students because there were too many to accommodate.

> "I struggle to teach large classes. I believe that in maximizing feminist pedagogy inside the classroom,

a small number of students is prioritized; any less than 20 is ideal." (Participant 1, personal communication, 01 May 2022)

This concern is also indicated in the exploration of Petre et al. (2019) in determining the challenges in inclusive education. Likewise, Gulzar (2021) also chose the teacher-student ratio as a barrier because many learners in one classroom are complex for teachers to manage. Learners are also affected as some have difficulty adjusting to many peers, which may make them feel alienated.

Dealing with learner's closed mindset

This theme discusses one of the most prominent challenges participants have encountered - the unwillingness of some of their students to participate. The participants have difficulty assessing students' understanding because some do not react, voice their opinions, or raise questions for clarification. Aside from being narrow-minded, some learners also are not ready to share and open up. For Participant 3, it may simply be related to their readiness to participate. It may also be because of limited resources. Participant 1 stated that some of his students do not participate, especially in online activities, because they do not have the necessary materials to utilize.

> "Sometimes students are shy in sharing their answer." (Participant 3, personal communication, 03 May 2022)

> "Not every student participated, especially in online learning, where students sometimes don't have the necessary hardware to interact with the class." (Participant 1, personal communication, 01 May 2022)

Jackson (2015) claimed that resistance is a psychological issue. A barrier Gulzar (2021) identified in inclusive education is peer pressure. There is no doubt that peers play an essential role in the learning experience of a learner. Some learners, especially those with physical and mental disabilities, are common targets of bullying. This would result in learners invalidating and limiting themselves from participating in class discussions. Another factor contributing to this concern is the family culture the children grew up in because they most likely adopt those characteristics.

Dealing with learner's high level of belongingness

This theme illustrates the negative impact of learners' high level of belongingness as it leads to a chaotic class. The participants aim to make their students feel they are part of the class without discrimination by providing a safe space to voice out. However, challenges would arise when learners feel overly comfortable and reach an extreme level of belongingness. These learners may feel dominant among their peers, especially in large-sized classes.

> "May time din na nakapaghandle ako ng section na sumobra ung sense of belongingness nila, magulo" [There were times I handled sections with an excessive sense of belongingness. It is chaotic.] (Participant 2, personal communication, 02 May 2022)

Almanssori (2020) presented the tenets of feminist pedagogy, where among these are the power dynamics between the teacher and learner. Under the pedagogy, intentionally constructing an unauthoritative learning environment is expected. However, Jackson (2015) believes that changes in authority structure are challenging in inclusive education because it causes role confusion.

All participants agreed that their application of feminist pedagogy has contributed to inclusivity in their classroom. It shows excellent benefits as it shows significance in their student's learning process, making them excited to learn since they feel appreciated. These positive reactions made the participants come up with the following recommendations for using feminist pedagogy to create an inclusive learning environment. These themes were the results of the thematic analysis.

> "It leads us to a successful learning process." (Participant 3, personal communication, 03 May 2022)

> "I encourage you to be open with the opinions of others, for it's gonna be the greatest foundation of the so-called inclusivity." (Participant 4, personal communication, 04 May 2022)

Maximize the use of technology

This theme is based on the participants' suggestion to appeal to their students through

technology. The participants use multimedia content sometimes in discussion but more often in reflection activities.

> "I do usually use videos related to our discussion, that could help them move. The videos that I use are the personal experiences of different individuals." (Participant 4, personal communication, 04 May 2022)

Jacobson (n.d.) mentioned that technology radically transformed the teaching-learning process. Because of this, the interaction between the teacher and learners became easier. They also make use of the Internet as one of their sources. Materials created and discovered on the Internet are widely popular in the education system. However, they should be well-reviewed, as false information is a common problem. Through maximizing technology, teachers are aided with exciting and infinite ways to produce activities for all types of learners at all levels.

According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2014), there should be appropriate teaching aids and equipment to achieve improvement for all. Similarly, providing instructional resources that consider diversity is also necessary to create an inclusive learning environment, as Mugambi (2017) discussed.

Develop teacher's positive attitudes

This theme presents the effect of teachers' attitudes in suppressing the challenges they have encountered in creating an inclusive learning environment with feminist pedagogy. With the analysis results, it is concluded that most participants welcome their students' thoughts to help them develop new perspectives on the matter.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO (2005) believes teachers' attitudes toward inclusion depend on their encounters with these 'challenging' ones. Thus, having more patience for teachers is what Participant 2 advised. Forcing learners to participate or change their views will most likely strengthen their narrow minds. Moreover, United Nations Children's Fund (2014) declares that to have an inclusive education, the setting should be changed, not the learners. Positive teacher attitudes are part of the needed factors the organization presented to achieve improvement for all.

> "Some students feel that they are not ready to speak, and I think we should refrain from coercing students to talk, especially regarding personal experiences if they are not prepared to speak." (Participant 1, personal communication, 01 May 2022)

4.0. Conclusion

This case study analyzed the experiences of teachers in practicing feminist pedagogy at the secondary level during School Year 2021-2022. These teachers aim to create an inclusive learning environment in their respective subject areas using the said pedagogy. Thus, the results were purely based on the answers given by the selected participants to the researcher during the online interview process. The sample is not representative of the population. Therefore, this study should not be interpreted other than the objectives stated and cannot be generalized other than the cases studied.

Altogether, the ten themes emphasize the importance of building connections and relationships while being careful of factors that affect the learning process, like gender, sex, race, and the like. Feminist Pedagogy is not among the usual strategies when teachers aim for inclusive education, mainly because there is an insufficient introduction. However, this paper shows how feminist pedagogy has positively affected inclusive education. The practices show teachers' sensitivity in treating learners as partners by including them before, during, and after the learning process. Moreover, they present these actions that promote independence to learners through accountability, healthy relationships, and reflection. The challenges experienced to revolve around learners' attitudes. The solutions involve teachers' attitudes toward change and proper usage of materials from the Internet. Thus, feminist pedagogy is a new option that provides learners with a safe space to learn, free from discrimination.

Feminist pedagogy does not prescribe specific, step-by-step ways to create an inclusive learning environment. However, it presents the issues that need to be addressed to achieve so. To help with these issues, the researcher recommends creating more relevant inclusivity policies for learners in the marginalized group like ethnic and indigenous groups; exploring pedagogies that aim to eliminate discrimination and prejudice against learners; improving existing curricula; and developing new frameworks supporting inclusive learning environment with

feminist pedagogy as its guiding principle.

As stated, there is a limited body of knowledge on feminist pedagogy, especially local resources. To improve this study and to contribute to the scarcity of resources, the researcher suggests applying quantitative or mixed-method design to similar research. These research designs allow having a broader scope by analyzing a larger population. Having more respondents from different subject areas would help provide richer data. Moreover, research that incorporates feminist pedagogy with other pedagogies to see their impact on inclusive education will also be beneficial for the country's educational goals.

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6.0. Declaration of Conflicting Interest

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