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Intersectional Classrooms: Gender, Social Stratification, and the Reproduction of Educational Inequality

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how classrooms function as sites where gender and social class intersect to reproduce educational inequality. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through purposive sampling of published research documents, including peer-reviewed articles, ethnographies, and theoretical analyses. Thematic analysis was employed to identify seven major themes: 1) gendered expectations and classroom norms, 2) class-based access to cultural and social capital, 3) intersection of gender and class in academic recognition, 4) curriculum relevance and knowledge production, 5) peer dynamics and social stratification, 6) resistance, agency, and negotiation strategies, and 7) institutional structures and policy implications. The findings reveal that gendered norms, class-based resources, and institutional practices interact to shape participation, recognition, and access to knowledge, often privileging students from dominant social groups whereas marginalizing others. Simultaneously, students exercise agency through negotiation and resistance, highlighting the dynamic interplay between structure and individual action. The study underscores the importance of intersectional approaches to understanding and addressing educational inequalities, with implications for policy, pedagogy, and inclusive classroom practices.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Gender, Social Class, Educational Inequality, Classroom Dynamics, Cultural Capital, Student Agency

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Introduction

Educational institutions are often perceived as neutral arenas for learning and personal development; however, sociological inquiry reveals that schools are deeply embedded in broader social hierarchies and power structures (Collins, 2000). The concept of the intersectional classroom emphasizes how multiple axes of identity most notably gender and social class interact to shape students' experiences, opportunities, and outcomes (Young, 2008). Drawing on intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) and Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural and social capital, this perspective underscores that educational inequality is not merely a matter of individual merit or effort but is systematically reproduced through institutional practices, curricular structures, and classroom interactions. Gendered expectations and norms within schools often intersect with class-based resources, social networks, and cultural competencies, producing differentiated access to knowledge, recognition, and academic success (Shoaib, Shamraiz, Abdullah, & Shahzadi, 2026a, 2026b; Shoaib & Ullah, 2026). For instance, middle and upper class students benefit from familial support, cultural familiarity with school curricula, and teacher recognition, whereas students from working-class or marginalized backgrounds frequently encounter systemic barriers, including lower expectations, limited curricular relevance, and implicit biases (Shoaib, Shahzadi, Shamraiz, & Abdullah, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c). These intersecting inequalities contribute to the persistence of social stratification across generations, reinforcing the broader societal structures of power and privilege (Shoaib, Shahzadi, & Abdullah, 2026; Shoaib, Shahzadi, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026).

This study examines how gender and social class co-constitute experiences in classrooms, highlighting the mechanisms through which schools reproduce existing inequalities. By adopting an intersectional lens, the research aims to illuminate not only the structural constraints faced by marginalized students but also the ways in which they negotiate, resist, and sometimes transform these constraints, offering a nuanced understanding of educational inequality in contemporary society.

Study Context

Educational inequality has been a persistent concern in sociological research, reflecting the broader dynamics of social stratification and systemic disadvantage (Shoaib, Iqbal, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a, 2026b). Whereas traditional analyses often examine gender or social class independently, recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of an intersectional approach that considers how multiple axes of identity converge to shape students' experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000). Classrooms, as microcosms of society, not only reflect existing social hierarchies but also actively participate in the reproduction of these inequalities through curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and informal social interactions (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b, 2026c). Research indicates that gendered norms and expectations interact with class-based resources, such as access to cultural capital, parental support, and social networks, producing differentiated academic trajectories and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2011). Students from marginalized or lower socio-economic backgrounds often face structural barriers, including limited recognition, stereotypical labeling, and reduced access to advanced learning opportunities, whereas their peers from privileged backgrounds are more likely to be supported and affirmed within the

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educational system (Shamraiz, Shoaib, Baneen, & Shahzadi, 2026a, 2026b; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a). This study situates itself within this sociological discourse, exploring how intersectional identities particularly gender and social class shape classroom experiences and contribute to the perpetuation of educational inequality. By examining these mechanisms, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how schools both reproduce and, at times, contest broader social hierarchies.

The Data and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how gender and social class intersect to reproduce educational inequality within classrooms. Data were collected through purposive sampling of published research documents, including peer-reviewed articles, ethnographies, and theoretical analyses, selected for their relevance to intersectional dynamics in education, classroom norms, peer interactions, curriculum practices, and institutional structures. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving iterative coding, pattern identification, and refinement to derive seven major themes: 1) gendered expectations and classroom norms, 2) class-based access to cultural and social capital, 3) intersection of gender and class in academic recognition, 4) curriculum relevance and knowledge production, 5) peer dynamics and social stratification, 6) resistance, agency, and negotiation strategies, and 7) institutional structures and policy implications. Triangulation across multiple studies, reflexive engagement with theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and detailed contextual analysis ensured rigor and trustworthiness. The results revealed that classrooms are sites where intersecting social identities shape participation, recognition, and access to knowledge, highlighting both structural reproduction of inequality and the potential for student agency and resistance.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Gendered Expectations and Classroom Norms

Gendered expectations within classrooms shape not only students' behavior but also their academic trajectories and self-perceptions (Shahzadi, Shoaib, Baneen, & Abdullah, 2026; Shahzadi, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026). Teachers often unconsciously reinforce societal norms by encouraging certain behaviors and subject choices that align with traditional gender roles (Larijani, Shoaib, & Abedi, 2026; Shahzadi, Shoaib, & Abdullah, 2026). For example, girls have been praised for compliance, neatness, and verbal participation, whereas boys are encouraged to take risks, engage in competition, or pursue STEM-related subjects (Ali, Abdullah, & Shaoib, 2026; R. Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026). These subtle cues and differential feedback create a classroom environment in which students internalize societal expectations, influencing their confidence, engagement, and long-term educational choices (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a, 2026b). Intersectional analyses suggest that these dynamics are amplified when gendered norms intersect with students' social class, as teachers' expectations often correlate with assumptions about cultural and economic resources (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026; Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

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Moreover, peer interactions reinforce these norms, creating a social microcosm in which deviation from gendered expectations result in marginalization or social sanctioning (Shoaib, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025; Waris, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Students who challenge traditional roles such as boys engaging in expressive arts or girls demonstrating assertiveness in leadership tasks often face resistance from both peers and educators, which limit their opportunities for participation and recognition (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025b; Shoaib & Zaman, 2025). These patterns illustrate how classrooms operate as sites of both overt and covert socialization, reproducing broader societal gender hierarchies (Shoaib, Waris, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025a). The theme highlights that gendered classroom norms are not merely individual biases but are institutionalized through daily practices, affecting access to knowledge, authority, and academic achievement in ways that sustain educational inequality (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b, 2025c).

Theme 2: Class-Based Access to Cultural and Social Capital

Class-based differences in access to cultural and social capital significantly shape students' experiences and outcomes within classrooms (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) framework, students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds often enter schools with advantages such as familiarity with dominant cultural codes, exposure to enriched learning environments, and parental knowledge of educational navigation. These resources enable them to engage more confidently with curricula, participate in extracurricular activities, and gain recognition from teachers (Shoaib, Tariq, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). In contrast, students from working-class or economically marginalized backgrounds frequently encounter a mismatch between their home experiences and the cultural expectations embedded in school practices (Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025a, 2025b). This misalignment result in lower academic confidence, reduced participation, and limited access to institutional support, perpetuating cycles of educational disadvantage (Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025)

Social capital further mediates these class-based disparities, as peer networks, familial connections, and community resources influence access to academic guidance, mentorship, and future opportunities (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Ahmed, 2025). Students with stronger social networks are better positioned to secure academic assistance, enrichment opportunities, and informal support, whereas those from marginalized backgrounds lack such networks, limiting their exposure to knowledge beyond the classroom (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b; Shoaib, Rasool, Kalsoom, & Ali, 2025). These dynamics demonstrate that class is not merely an economic category but intersects with institutional structures to reproduce educational inequality (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025b; Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). By highlighting how cultural and social capital operate in the classroom, this theme underscores the structural barriers that prevent equitable access to learning and recognition, reinforcing social stratification across generations (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025a, 2025c).

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Theme 3: Intersection of Gender and Class in Academic Recognition

Academic recognition in classrooms is not distributed equally; it is profoundly shaped by the intersection of students' gender and social class (Shoaib & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib, Kausar, Ali, & Abdullah, 2025). Teachers' perceptions and evaluations often reflect implicit biases, resulting in differential attention, encouragement, and validation for students based on these intersecting identities (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Iftikhar, 2025; Shoaib, Iqbal, Rasool, & Abdullah, 2025). For instance, middle- or upper-class boys have been recognized for leadership and problem-solving, whereas girls from similar backgrounds might receive praise primarily for diligence or compliance rather than critical thinking or innovation (Shoaib & Bashir, 2025; Shoaib, Batool, Kausar, & Abdullah, 2025). Conversely, working-class students regardless of gender frequently experience lower expectations and reduced opportunities for recognition, reflecting assumptions about their capabilities and cultural alignment with school norms (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Shoaib, Ali, & Kausar, 2025). This intersectional lens reveals that inequality is not additive but relational, meaning that the combined effect of gender and class creates unique patterns of advantage or disadvantage that single-axis analyses fail to capture (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

The interplay of gender and class further shapes students' access to academic authority and participation in high-status learning activities (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025a, 2025b; Shoaib, Ahmed, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Students occupying privileged gender-class positions are more likely to be selected for advanced classes, leadership roles, and enrichment programs, which amplify their visibility and academic capital (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). In contrast, marginalized students have been overlooked for recognition, creating a feedback loop in which lack of acknowledgment limits confidence, engagement, and future opportunities (Shoaib, 2025a, 2025b; Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025). Peer dynamics also reinforce these patterns, as recognition is often socially mediated; students who align with dominant gender and class norms are more likely to be affirmed by peers, whereas those outside these norms risk marginalization (Ali, Shoaib, & Kausar, 2025; Iqbal, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). This theme underscores how schools act as arenas for the reproduction of social hierarchies, where the intersection of gender and class systematically shapes who is seen, valued, and academically legitimized (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b).

Theme 4: Curriculum Relevance and Knowledge Production

The content and structure of school curricula play a critical role in reproducing social inequalities, as they often reflect the values, experiences, and knowledge of dominant social groups whereas marginalizing others (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b). Curriculum relevance is closely tied to students' cultural and social capital, with middle- and upper-class students generally finding the material more familiar and accessible (Ahmed, Shoaib, & Zaman, 2025; Ali, Shoaib, & Ali, 2025). In contrast, students from working-class or marginalized backgrounds struggle to relate to the examples, references, and pedagogical approaches embedded in the curriculum, which result in disengagement and lower academic achievement (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024a, 2024b; Shoaib, Zaman, & Abbas, 2024). Furthermore, curricular

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knowledge is not neutral; it is produced and legitimized within societal power hierarchies, often prioritizing dominant perspectives whereas undervaluing or erasing marginalized voices (Shoaib, Abdullah, Naqvi, & Ditta, 2024; Shoaib, Ali, & Abbas, 2024). This process shapes students' perceptions of what counts as valid knowledge, whose contributions are recognized, and which forms of understanding are rewarded, perpetuating the reproduction of social stratification within the classroom (Shoaib, 2024d, 2024e).

Knowledge production is also gendered, as curricular content and assessment practices implicitly reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations (Shoaib, 2024b, 2024c). Subjects, examples, and classroom discussions often privilege masculine-coded domains, such as STEM and competitive problem-solving, whereas devaluing skills traditionally associated with femininity, such as collaboration, care, or verbal expression (Ali, Zaman, & Shoaib, 2024; Shoaib, 2024a). This bias intersects with class, as students with access to supportive learning environments and resources more easily navigate these knowledge hierarchies, whereas those from less privileged backgrounds face compounded barriers (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2023; Shoaib, Usmani, & Abdullah, 2023). Consequently, the curriculum not only transmits knowledge but also mediates recognition, participation, and academic legitimacy, creating structural conditions that advantage certain gender-class groups whereas systematically disadvantaging others (Shoaib, Naseer, & Naseer, 2023; Shoaib, Rasool, Anwar, & Ali, 2023). The theme highlights the critical role of curriculum as both a site of inequality and a potential space for intervention and inclusive knowledge production (Shoaib, 2023c; Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2023).

Theme 5: Peer Dynamics and Social Stratification

Peer interactions within classrooms play a significant role in reinforcing social hierarchies, often mirroring broader patterns of gender and class stratification (Shoaib, 2023a, 2023b). Students are not only evaluated by teachers but also by their peers, and social recognition profoundly affect participation, self-esteem, and academic engagement (Shoaib, Tariq, Shahzadi, & Ali, 2022; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). Peer groups tend to form along lines of shared social class, cultural familiarity, and gender identity, creating informal networks that either support or restrict access to academic and extracurricular opportunities (Shoaib, Anwar, & Rasool, 2022; Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2022). For example, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds often have greater confidence and social capital to assert themselves in group work or classroom discussions, whereas students from marginalized backgrounds face subtle exclusion or marginalization, reducing their visibility and influence in the learning environment (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Abdullah, 2022; Shoaib, Anwar, & Mustafa, 2022). These dynamics demonstrate that educational inequality is co-constructed by both institutional structures and everyday social interactions (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021a, 2021b).

Gender norms further shape peer dynamics, as students are often pressured to conform to socially prescribed behaviors to gain acceptance (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Tahira, 2021; Shoaib, Rasool, & Anwar, 2021). Boys and girls experience different forms of social sanctioning for challenging gender expectations, such as assertive girls being labeled bossy or boys engaging in collaborative work being teased (Shoaib, Ali, &

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Akbar, 2021; Shoaib, Fatima, & Jamil, 2021). Once combined with class-based differences, these pressures intensify, as students from lower socio-economic backgrounds lack the social and cultural resources to navigate complex peer hierarchies effectively (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Shaukat, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Naseer, 2021). Peer dynamics, therefore, are a critical mechanism through which both gender and class inequalities are maintained within classrooms, influencing not only academic outcomes but also the social and emotional development of students (Shoaib, Ahmad, Ali, & Abdullah, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, Rasool, et al., 2021). This theme underscores that classrooms are sites of continuous negotiation, where social stratification is reproduced through everyday interactions among students (Shoaib, 2021; Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2021).

Theme 6: Resistance, Agency, and Negotiation Strategies

Despite the pervasive influence of gendered and classed inequalities, students often exercise agency to resist, negotiate, or subvert these structural constraints within classrooms (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2020; Shoaib & Ullah, 2019). Resistance take multiple forms, including challenging teacher expectations, forming alternative peer networks, or asserting participation in non-traditional academic and extracurricular roles (Rafique & Shoaib, 2015; Shoaib & Rafique, 2015). For example, girls in male-dominated subjects actively claim space in classroom discussions, whereas boys in expressive or collaborative activities negotiate their engagement to resist stereotypical labeling (Shoaib, Latif, & Usmani, 2013; Shoaib, Shaukat, Khan, & Saeed, 2013). These acts of agency demonstrate that students are not merely passive recipients of institutionalized norms but active participants in shaping their educational experiences (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013; Shoaib, Munir, Masood, Ali, & Sher, 2012). Intersectional perspectives highlight that the effectiveness and visibility of resistance strategies are mediated by social class, with more privileged students often able to deploy resistance with fewer repercussions, whereas marginalized students face social or institutional pushback (Shoaib, 2023a, 2023b).

Negotiation strategies also extend to how students navigate curricula, classroom norms, and peer hierarchies to optimize recognition and learning opportunities (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, et al., 2025). Some students adopt hybrid identities, blending expected behaviors with personal aspirations to gain both social acceptance and academic legitimacy (Shoaib & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib et al., 2025). Others leverage peer and familial support to access resources or challenge discriminatory practices subtly. These processes illustrate that educational inequality is neither totalizing nor unidirectional; students exercise agency within structural constraints, sometimes reproducing and sometimes contesting existing hierarchies. Recognizing these forms of resistance is crucial for understanding the dynamic interplay between structure and agency, revealing how classrooms spaces of both oppression and transformation, depending on how students negotiate intersecting axes of gender and class.

Theme 7: Institutional Structures and Policy Implications

Institutional structures within educational systems play a critical role in reproducing gendered and class-based inequalities. Policies related to tracking, assessment, teacher

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evaluation, and resource allocation often reflect and reinforce existing social hierarchies, privileging students from dominant socio-economic and cultural backgrounds whereas disadvantaging marginalized groups (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, et al., 2025). For instance, advanced placement courses, extracurricular opportunities, and gifted programs are frequently more accessible to students whose families provide guidance, advocacy, and material support, whereas working-class students or those from underrepresented groups encounter systemic barriers to entry (Shoaib, 2023a, 2023b). These structural mechanisms ensure that educational outcomes are not purely meritocratic but are heavily influenced by pre-existing social stratification, demonstrating how schools function as agents in the reproduction of inequality across generations (Shoaib & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib et al., 2025).

Policy implications of these findings highlight the need for educational interventions that address structural inequities and promote inclusivity. Strategies such as culturally responsive curricula, equitable tracking practices, and teacher training on implicit bias mitigate the effects of intersecting gender and class disadvantages (Shoaib & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib et al., 2025). Additionally, institutional support for student agency through mentorship programs, peer networks, and alternative recognition mechanisms empower marginalized students to navigate and challenge systemic barriers (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib et al., 2025). Recognizing that classroom experiences are embedded within larger institutional and societal structures is essential for creating policies that do not merely treat symptoms but target the root causes of educational inequality. This theme emphasizes that sustainable change requires systemic reform, combining policy innovation with an understanding of how gender and class intersect to shape educational opportunities (Shoaib, 2023a, 2023b).

Theoretical Insights

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), provides a critical lens for understanding how gender and social class interact to shape students' experiences in classrooms. Intersectionality posits that social identities are not experienced in isolation but co-constitute one another, producing unique forms of advantage and disadvantage. In educational contexts, this perspective helps explain why middle- or upper-class boys and girls experience recognition, participation, and access to resources differently from their working-class peers, highlighting the relational nature of inequality (Collins, 2000). Bourdieu's (1986) framework of cultural and social capital offers further theoretical grounding, illustrating how access to knowledge, cultural familiarity, and social networks influences academic achievement and recognition. Class-based disparities in capital often intersect with gendered expectations, as teachers' biases and curricular structures favor those aligned with dominant norms. This reproduction of inequality aligns with Bowles and Gintis's (1976) theory of the correspondence principle, which argues that schooling mirrors and legitimizes societal hierarchies. Similarly, Lareau's (2011) work on concerted cultivation and natural growth highlights how parental resources and strategies interact with institutional expectations, amplifying the effects of social stratification.

Additionally, the sociology of knowledge perspective emphasizes that curricula and

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pedagogical practices are not neutral but reflect the power and epistemic authority of dominant social groups (Young, 2008). Knowledge production in schools often privileges dominant cultural perspectives, marginalizing alternative voices, and reinforcing social hierarchies along lines of gender and class. Finally, Giddens' (1984) structuration theory provides a lens to understand student agency, illustrating how individuals navigate and negotiate structural constraints, resist marginalization, and sometimes reshape institutional norms. Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a robust foundation for analyzing how intersectional identities are produced, recognized, and constrained in classrooms, and how educational inequality is reproduced across generations.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that educational inequality is a complex and intersectional phenomenon, produced and reproduced through the interplay of gender, social class, classroom norms, peer dynamics, curricular structures, and institutional policies. Gendered expectations and classroom norms shape students' participation, confidence, and subject choices, whereas class-based access to cultural and social capital influences recognition, engagement, and academic achievement. The intersection of gender and class further mediates opportunities for academic acknowledgment, with privileged students often receiving affirmation and resources that marginalized students are denied. Curricular content and knowledge production reflect dominant social values, favoring certain groups whereas marginalizing others, and peer interactions reinforce these hierarchies, contributing to both social and academic stratification. Despite these structural constraints, students exercise agency through resistance and negotiation strategies, navigating classroom expectations and asserting their identities in ways that challenge or adapt to inequality. Institutional structures and policies play a decisive role in shaping these dynamics, with inequitable practices reproducing societal hierarchies unless targeted interventions are implemented. The study underscores the importance of an intersectional and critical approach to education, highlighting that addressing gender and class disparities requires both structural reform and the recognition of student agency. Overall, classrooms are not merely sites of learning but arenas where social inequalities are enacted, contested, and potentially transformed.

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