In the High Schools

Carol Ahlum

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Ahlum, Carol, "In the High Schools" (1972). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/70

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
IN THE HIGH SCHOOLS

Some 50 high school teachers have been teaching feminist courses, a good majority of which are either social studies or English courses. The others include a family living course; a course called “Prejudice,” a seminar entitled “Our Bodies, Our Selves” taught at a private girls’ school; a summer program for third world high school women in Springfield, Massachusetts; and a discussion for women students at an urban street school.

Most courses are meant for male and female students although in many there are few males. Some have been designed specifically for women students and we know of one called “Male Experience,” taught by a group of male teachers at the Experimental High School in Baltimore, Maryland.

Like college feminist courses, the high school ones are interdisciplinary, problem-oriented, and personal. For example, in “Women and Society,” taught by June Slavin at Newton High School in Massachusetts, four questions focus students’ study: 1) are women born or made? 2) are women oppressed? by whom or what? 3) do women have a history and culture of their own? 4) what alternatives do women have?

Homework assignments in this class include interviewing female relatives about their childhood and adolescence; reading fiction and autobiography about growing up (Memoirs of A Catholic Girlhood by M. McCarthy, “Down With Childhood” by Shulamith Firestone in The Dialectic of Sex, a story by Marge Piercy in The Bold New Women, ed. by Barbara Wasserman); and studying psychological, physiological, and anthropological information about adolescence (Our Bodies, Our Selves, New England Free Press, 791 Tremont St., Boston 02118; How to Take the Worry Out of Being Close by M. and R. Gray, P.O. Box 822, Oakland, Calif. 94612; Sex and Temperament by Margaret Mead).

In the best feminist curriculum, the consideration of race and class are interwoven with the analysis of sex stereotyping. Peggy Brick, in her units on sex role socialization in behavioral science classes at an urban New Jersey high school, plans assignments which raise these issues; a comparative content analysis of the stereotyped images of women and men in the advertisements of Life and Ebony leads a class of black and white students to question why they hold differing images of women and men.

At The School Within A School in Massachusetts’ Brookline High School, a course taught last spring called “Women in Literature” created the opportunity for a small group of women students to talk about their experiences as women in relation to the images of women in literature. Judy Small, an intern/teacher, organized the course around three questions: 1) how would you describe the women in the book? 2) do you know anyone like them or have you had experiences like theirs? 3) what alternatives did they have? do we have? This fall, Judy Small and a male colleague have designed a subsequent course called “Masculine/Feminine,” again a literature course, but this time for both male and female students.

The excitement of exploring untraveled ground characterized the “History of Women” course taught last spring by Sydney Spiegel at East High School in Cheyenne, Wyoming. This teacher came to feminist curriculum through his interest in incorporating current issues into his history courses. By reading a book a week, as he had for the school’s black history curriculum, he came up with a respectable first-time course. Using E. Flexner’s Century of Struggle as the text, he supplemented students’ reading with brief, primary source excerpts about the anthropological roots of sex role differences and the status of women in earlier times.

Obviously, there are many problems for teachers who want to devise high school feminist courses. Where to find materials is one of them. When The Feminist Press wrote of its interest in S. Spiegel’s ideas for publishable materials relevant to high school courses, he structured assignments around a project of compiling and editing a high school reader for women. We know of no such reader to be accepted for publication. Any ideas?

What follows for students who have gained an initial awareness of sexism? “One big question I have,” writes Linda Snopes (one of the teachers of the “Female Experience” course at the Baltimore Experimental H.S.) “is how to make the experience... a real catalyst for social change in more than individual terms? Is this also your concern?”

We are interested in your responses to these questions and in others you may want to raise. We’re looking especially for detailed reports of high school feminist courses for the next Newsletter.

Carol Ahlum