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Women's Studies in the High Schools

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The high school years are critical for the future of females and males alike, not only for what they enable students to understand about human relations between women and men and among members of families, but also for what they enable students to envision of the world of work. For many students, these are the last years of required schooling, the years preceding important choices: marriage, vocation or college. Half don't or can't choose college; and a larger proportion of the talented who don't go on are women. Who controls these choices? What influence could or should the high school curriculum have on those students?

The development of courses in high school women's studies can be attributed to a number of complex factors, the most important of which is the women's movement. Like most social movements, it has been a teaching movement, aimed to tell masses of people about significant discoveries, that, acknowledged and acted upon, will change lives. It has taught us the dynamics of "sexual politics"; to define "patriarchy," "sex object," "sexism"; and to consider the connections between those social practices and the educational system through which we all pass. By the end of the sixties, the women's movement had begun to reach faculty and graduate students on college campuses and in professional associations. Studies of the status of women faculty led to charges of widespread discrimination, all of which have been, since that time, upheld in the courts and through the passage of federal legislation. Such studies led to other kinds of queries. Why, many feminists asked, since men and women sit side by side in the same classrooms much of the time, receiving "equal" education, should the results be so different for each sex?

With such questions in mind, researchers turned to the curriculum, in elementary and secondary schools as well as colleges. In junior high, when boys were sent to shop and girls to cooking, they were receiving distinct messages about their futures. Obviously discriminatory, such practices have now been dealt with by the law. But far more subtle are the messages propounded in most other classrooms. There, as study after study indicates, women are depicted consistently as different from and inferior to men. In early readers, for example, mothers are not bright enough to get a balloon out of a tree, but suggest that their children wait until Daddy comes home—to use the kitchen ladder to solve the problem. Women are left out of history texts entirely and are present only in demeaning, minor portraits in literature offered to the high school student. Most significantly, women are mothers and housewives in all texts, not working people, not social or political leaders, not writers, inventors, artists, factory workers, bus drivers—despite the reality of the twentieth century world.

The response to this male-centered and male-biased curriculum was women's studies—or feminist studies as it has also been called. No one knows when the first high school feminist course was given, or where. No one knows how many such courses have been given, or how many are being given today. But one of the 23 courses in High School Feminist Studies (Feminist Press, 1975) was taught as early as 1970, two others beginning in 1971, nine beginning in 1972 and six in 1973.

During these years, we have heard from hundreds of high school teachers interested in its contents. The 23 contributions come from twelve states, six of them away from the east coast: Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Colorado, California, Oregon. While most are from senior rather than junior high schools and most from public rather than private schools, from middle class suburban rather than urban schools, the range includes an alternative school for working class students (The Group School in Cambridge, Massachusetts) and at least two high schools with large black and/or Puerto Rican populations (Englewood High School in New Jersey and Adlai Stevenson High School in New York City).

High school women's studies courses divide into three categories: history, literature and "interdisciplinary." Interdisciplinary courses resemble either college courses such as The Sociology of Women or those introductory courses often required of the women's studies major. These are the least traditional courses, the most free-wheeling, the most difficult to describe or pigeon-hole. Though they are taught usually by members of social studies departments, they are organized topically rather than chronologically. These courses focus on the lives of contemporary women, on the issue of sex-role stereotyping in all aspects of life, including the media, the classroom and work. One of the most exceptional of these courses, developed by The Group School, focuses entirely on Women and Work, and is comparable to college courses that draw materials from economics, history, sociology and literature into a single course.

It is only fair to add that all women's studies courses are, by their very nature, interdisciplinary, since they must begin by convincing students of their raison d'être. Thus, history and literature courses may open with a consciousness-raising unit on women's "roles" or "status," or a week's work on prejudice or an analysis of a textbook's bias. But the general thrust of the course will move students quickly into either the study of literary works or the study of a chronological sequence of events.

The history courses illustrate new directions among scholars in women's history: the need to reperiodize history (beyond wars and revolutions); the use of autobiography as an important source, especially for the lives of women; and the inclusion of class and race as additional key factors in describing the history of women. Similarly, the literature courses include a variety of women writers not ordinarily to be found on high school reading lists: Zora Neale Hurston, Edith Wharton, Alice Childress, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Walker, Kate Chopin, Agnes Smedley, Susan Glaspell, Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing, just to name a few.

Not unlike those at the college level, high school feminist studies courses are demanding, reading assignments are typically heavy and writing or action projects emphasize independent and thoughtful investigation and analysis, whether students report their own family's history or analyze the portraits of women and men offered in a group of TV situation comedies. The teacher's job is to provide the opportunities for students to seek answers to questions and to report their findings. Thus, these women's studies courses also follow in the rich tradition of innovative teaching at the high school level.

Perhaps the most important questions about high school feminist studies remain to be answered. Will such courses spread in...
history of black people over the last 50 years that they have been discovering with other class members. To start that process, convene the class (as a field trip) to watch "Soul Train" and "The Jeffersons." Then press for answers to the questions they ask all the time, anyway, when watching each other: "Who does that one think she is?" In this setting, help history to prevail over personality.

Or begin with one photograph from a family album. Have each person bring it in and tell a story just about that one picture. Go from there. One eventual outcome of such a project may be to encourage black women to record these stories in writing, still an intimidating idea. Use a tape recorder to ease the transition.

To help increase their powers of observation and their capacity for identification, have each woman sit, in a location of her own choosing, for one hour and record what she sees. It can be anywhere: a shopping mall, a beauty shop, a bar, restaurant, park, window. Whatever they feel most natural with. Ride an unfamiliar bus to the end of the line and be alert to the community it attracts. Spend a week riding with domestic workers on suburban express lines. Record the conversations. Help women learn how to use the streets for investigation instead of exhibition. Have them go out in pairs and compare notes, bringing the results back to the group.

Michele Russell

WOMEN'S STUDIES IN HIGH SCHOOL (continued)

the forms presented here, and in the manner of college courses—from school to school—as supplementary "electives" added to the senior high curriculum? Or will teachers attempt to patch feminist segments onto their standard curriculum? Or is "our real task," as one teacher writes, a much more difficult one—"to incorporate women and black and working people into our entire curriculum"? And what of the other aspects of the high school curriculum not touched on here—foreign languages, economics, science, health, home economics, even mathematics and business?

Regardless of approach, we will need local and national efforts to reeducate high school teachers who do not have the time (or the time off) for the preparation of new courses or for scholarly research that college teachers take for granted. In addition, high school teachers are not expected to be curriculum developers or researchers. But as everyone teaching women's studies knows, to do so requires being both curriculum developer and researcher as well as innovative classroom teacher. High school teachers will need time off and support not only for inservice courses, but for summer institutes and sabbatical study. College women's studies programs ought to plan special offerings for high school teachers, including evening courses, intensive summer programs and year-long internships or assistantships. Only with such cooperation can we look forward to revising educational programs to meet the human needs of students during the years of critical life choices.

Florence Howe

NEWS FROM SPAIN

Jornadas Catalanes de la Dona. More than 2000 women representing 100 organizations in northeastern Spain participated in a four-day women's meeting at the end of May, the first such conference to be held in Barcelona during the 40-year period since the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Topics of discussion during the much-publicized meetings included women in the workforce, women and the family, women and politics, women and education, women and the law, women and sexuality. One point made in the conference was that women had greater legal equality during the period preceding the war than they have had since. Meetings were conducted in catalán, the language of the region, with the service of simultaneous translation to Spanish available.

Vindicación feminista, Spain's first feminist magazine, began publication in July 1976. Established to fill the existing information gap about women in Spain, the journal plans to deal with problems facing women in employment, in the professions, in legal status, in penal codes and in the family. It also intends to discuss the women's movement throughout the world. The initial issue of Vindicación feminista contains articles on abortion in Italy and in Spain, on women in Spanish jails, on the culmination of International Women's Year in Spain, on Spanish women during the Civil War and on various other aspects of the feminist movement. Subscriptions from the United States are 1,155 pesetas ($17.35) for six months and 2,250 pesetas ($33.85) for one year and may be obtained by writing the magazine at Roger de Flor, 96, 2º, 2ª; Barcelona 13, Spain. For further information contact Linda Gould Levine, Spanish-Italian Department, Montclair State College, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043.

Increased media attention being given to role of women in Spain. With the new governmental reforms in Spain, increased attention is being given to the role of women in society and to the women's movement in general. Newsstands in Spain during the summer of 1976 displayed many magazines containing articles on the attitude of the various political parties toward women's rights, the viewpoints of particular feminists like Lidia Falcón, the difficulty women have in obtaining credit and the role of the Women's Bank in Madrid, and particularly on the importance of family planning as a means of improving the status of women. One magazine called Dossier dedicates issues "toward the equality of women" and includes articles on birth control, a subject previously taboo in Spain. The May 1976 issue contains a number of articles relating to different aspects of women's rights. Also of particular interest is the June 10-16 issue of Destino, which includes several pages of articles on the political aspects of the women's movement, abortion and other related issues. On the negative side, the same increased liberalism which has allowed the open discussion of sexuality has also permitted nudity on the Spanish stage for the first time—with its concomitant exploitation of women. An interesting example of the latter was the production of Antonio Gala's ¿Por qué corres, Uliás?. The middle-aged Ulysses has spent several uninterrupted days in bed with a 19-year-old woman when the action of the play begins. She is clad only in bikini bottoms while he is fully clothed!

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