

**Challenging Gender Bias Through A "Transformative"  
High School Social Studies Curriculum**

**Abstract**

This article reports on an effort to use a transformative high school social studies curriculum in eleventh grade United States history classes to promote student examination of bias in contemporary American society and to encourage student reflection on and reconsideration of their own personal views about gender. As part of a unit on the struggle for equality in the post-World War 2 United States, students created and then discussed "cartoon dialogues" between two teenage young women. An analysis of these "cartoon dialogues" illustrates some of the problems that teachers face when they assume that students are making the intellectual connections they would like them to make, underscores the social "positionality" of student understanding and suggests some possibilities for helping students connect academic knowledge with their understanding of the world in which they live.

**Introduction: Gender Bias**

During the summer of 1993, New York City public swimming pools were plagued by a phenomenon known as "the whirlpool". Large groups of teenage young men surrounded, sexually harassed and then abused teenage young women. When questioned, many of the male participants claimed that the young women wanted this kind of sexual attention (New York Times, 1993).

We live in a society where anti-female gender biases, reinforced by popular youth culture and school practice (Nicholson, 1980), are used to justify, or to justify ignoring, sexual harassment and gender violence by male secondary school students. For the purposes of this study, anti-female gender bias is defined as accepting and/or acting based on stereotypes that a) define sex roles as universal and essentially biologically determined and b) characterize women and girls as inherently inferior to men or boys (Schau and Tittle, 1989). Sexual harassment includes behavior ranging from jokes

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designed to embarrass and silence women to overt physical intimidation, exploitation and violence (Stein, 1989).

The relationship between gender bias and sexual harassment is discussed by Stephanie Riger (1993) in a study of grievance procedures intended to deal with sexual harassment in the work place. According to Riger, most grievance procedures are inadequate for addressing sexual harassment because they operate on the assumption of the "normative" nature of what should be seen as unacceptable male attitudes and behavior. Riger argues that effective programs to eliminate sexual harassment in the work place require an organizational commitment to address the structural roots of institutional gender inequalities and biases.

Two studies sponsored by the American Association of University Women document the prevalence of both gender bias and sexual harassment in American secondary schools. The AAUW's 1992 publication, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, "challenges the common assumption that girls and boys are treated equally in our public schools" (1992, p. v). The report exposes the impact of peer, pedagogical and curriculum bias on teenage women and the ways that these limit both their personal choices and our society's development. According to *Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America's Schools*, 31% of teenage young women and 18% of teenage young men report that they have repeatedly been the targets of sexual harassment while in school. But perhaps even more astonishing, two-thirds of the male students and 52% of the female students admitted that they had participated in sexually harassing other students. Their most frequent explanations were: "It's just a part of school life", "a lot of people do it", "it's no big deal", and "I thought the person liked it" (1993, p. 12). This study concluded that "sexual harassment is creating a hostile environment that compromises the education of America's children" with "repercussions (that) echo throughout our society" (p. 21).

Other studies have documented the pervasive influence of gender bias on our school culture and how difficult it is to change entrenched institutional patterns and student and teacher attitudes. Lockheed and Klein (1989) explore

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many of the subtle factors starting in early childhood education that perpetuate sexual inequities, including verbal and nonverbal messages from teachers and classmates. Sadker and Sadker (1994) charge that either through omission or because of continued and conscious gender stereotyping, schools continually cheat female students out of a constitutionally guaranteed equal education. Grant and Sleeter (1986), in their ethnographic study of a junior high school, concluded that while students were frequently able to question traditional stereotypes about gender and sometimes able to reject them, their ability to do these things was impeded by "cultural knowledge" acquired from their experiences in the broader community where they lived and in school. They found that gender biases were reinforced in schools by institutional acceptance of social segregation among students, gender-influenced elective choices, curriculum biases, and sex-based staffing patterns.

For more than two decades, Selma Greenberg has interviewed teenagers, documenting the existence of and exploring the nature and sources of adolescent anti-female gender biases. Greenberg (1973 and 1994) found that while male and female teenagers most often identified family members, especially their fathers, as the primary source of their exposure to sexist attitudes, a majority of students also reported sexist attitudes among their peers in school. One young woman complained to Greenberg: "Guys constantly degrade women, talking about how at the beginning of time it was men with all the power and that's the way it should be" (1994, np.).

In addition to its impact on students, Nel Noddings argues that gender bias has artificially limited the scope of the social studies curriculum, focusing its attention on the public, political and competitive aspects of society while ignoring "private" life, peace studies and values that promote caring. Noddings believes that challenges to gender bias in the curriculum and exploration of contemporary feminist thought have the potential to promote a broad reexamination of and perhaps even "a revolution in social studies education" (1992, p. 240).

Together, these studies underscore the pressing need for secondary school teachers to take a stand against gender bias and sexual harassment in our

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classrooms and in our schools. They point to the importance of social studies units and projects that enable students to reflect on and reconsider their own ideas and values related to gender and the ideas and values reflected in our society's institutions.

### **Transformative Curriculum**

The project reported on in this study, "Challenging Gender Bias Through A 'Transformative' High School Social Studies Curriculum," grew out of a unit in an 11th grade "United States History Since World War II" classes in the spring of 1993. A major goal of this unit was to get high school students to apply understandings acquired during study of the Civil Rights movement to struggles for gender equity and to express and examine their own attitudes about gender differences as an introduction to the problem of gender bias in contemporary American society.

During the 1992-93 school year, I returned to the high school classroom after a two year leave of absence as a pre-service teacher-educator at a local university. In my high school classes, I tried to systematically incorporate the ideas and teaching methods we had discussed in teacher education classes. This unit was designed to employ aspects of the critical pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire, particularly his the notion of "conscientization", where collective student analysis of their prior experiences becomes the basis for academic understanding, and his ideas on problem-posing and classroom dialogue (Freire, 1970; Shor and Freire, 1987; Shor, 1987). In addition, I wanted my teaching to reflect ideas learned from Maxine Greene, who calls for a "curriculum for human beings" (1993, p. 211) that challenges marginalization, celebrates student voices and cultural diversity, and perceives human identities as "always in the making" (p. 213).

Other educational theorists and practitioners also contributed to the notion of transformative curriculum that informs my teaching. James Banks (1993) argues that, unlike a mainstream academic curriculum, a transformative curriculum is based on the assumption that "knowledge is not neutral, ...and that an important purpose of knowledge construction is to help people

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improve society" (p. 9). Banks (1991) has proposed a nine step values inquiry model that helps students explore the reasons, sources and possible consequences of their value choices and assists them in developing "consistent, clarified values that can guide purposeful and reflective personal or civic action" (p. 134).

Banks and other transformative educators believe that the ability of teachers to create transformative classrooms depends on their willingness to examine their own personal and cultural values and identities, to change the ways that they organize classrooms and relate to students, and to actively commit themselves to social change. In *Border Crossings, Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*, Henry Giroux, discusses how teachers can use their classroom authority to allow students to explore their lived experiences, locate themselves culturally, dissect their personal ideologies and the dominant ideology of their society, and confront established power relationships. Giroux urges teachers "to establish classroom conditions in which different views about race can be aired but not treated as simply an expression of individual views or feelings" (1992, p. 138). Peggy McIntosh's model of interactive phases of curricular revision calls on teachers to involve students in creating curricula that include everyone while at the same time critiquing earlier forms of instruction and the social theories that lay behind them (McIntosh, 1983).

A problem that I faced as a high school teacher with a commitment to transformative education is that critical commentary tends to focus on social and curricular theory and not actual classroom practice; I found few secondary school models that I could use to inform my own teaching. One of the best examples of experimentation with transformative ideas and methodologies by secondary school educators is the work of William Bigelow and Linda Christensen (Bigelow, 1988; Bigelow, 1990; Christensen, 1994), who team teach at a high school in Portland, Oregon. Bigelow and Christensen describe their classroom "as a center of equality and democracy" where students are engaged in "an ongoing, if small, critique of the repressive social relations of the larger society" (Bigelow, 1990, p. 437). Christensen and

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Bigelow use literature and history "as points of departure to explore themes in students' lives and then, in turn, use students' lives to explore history and our society today" (p. 438). Their goal is to have students become "social researchers, investigating their own lives" (p. 440). One of the most impressive things about their work is their ability to discuss the difficulties they have as secondary school teachers who are struggling along with students to build supportive and democratic learning communities that engage students intellectually, emotionally and as social activists (Christensen, 1994).

My experience as a classroom teacher supports Christensen and Bigelow's emphasis on the importance of building secondary school classroom communities where students are able to express and explore ideas and feelings and do not feel silenced or under attack. As part of my commitment to transformative education, I discuss with students how we can create an atmosphere where students feel respected even though their ideas may be challenged. Out of these discussions, we arrive at some variation of the following three community guidelines.

1) The teacher and students will respect the right of people in our class community to hold opinions that differ from theirs.

2) Speakers are expected to present evidence to support their opinions.

3) Speakers will not use "words that hurt", i.e., words, phrases or tones that other members of the classroom community find insulting or intimidating.

Other useful classroom models were studies by Ira Shor, Nancy Schniedewind, and Janice Koch, educators who employ feminist and Freirian principles in their college classrooms. Shor (1992) uses problem-posing dialogues to explore student resistance in remedial writing courses and to encourage his students to change the reality that they find oppressive. Schniedewind (1987) organizes Women's Studies classes as cooperative communities and integrates cognitive and affective learning so that "feminism is taught through the process as well as through the formal content"(p. 179). Koch (1994) has pre-service teachers systematically reexamine their own schooling experiences as they critically investigate gender bias in schools, classroom practice and curriculum.

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### The Project Site

The site of this project was a magnet (educational option) high school specializing in communication arts that is open to residents of one on New York City's five boroughs. Of its more than 3,500 students, approximately 16% read below grade level, 16% read above grade level, and 68% read on grade level (New York City Board of Education, 1991).

The school is ethnically diverse; forty-nine percent of its students are white, twenty-one percent are African American, fifteen percent are Asian and fourteen percent are Latino/Latina (New York Newsday, 1994). Many of its students are either immigrants or the sons and daughters of immigrants. The school has no interscholastic sports teams and as a result, it tends to attract significantly more female than male students.

Among the 96 students who participated in the project, 64% (61 students) were female and 36% (35 students) were male; 20 students identified as African American or Black, 5 as Asian or Asian American, 56 as white, 13 as Latino, Hispanic or Puerto Rican, and 1 as mixed; 51 students were born in the United States while 45 students identified themselves as immigrants; 27 students identified as Roman Catholic, 11 as Protestants, 34 as Jews, 7 as members of other religious groups and 17 either identified as Atheist/None or did not answer the question.

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**Table 1- Responses to Student Demographic Survey**

Gender-	Female (64%); Male (36%).
Race/Ethnicity-	White (58%); African American/Black (20%); Latino/a (14%); Asian (6%); Mixed/Other (1%).
Immigrant Status-	Native-born U.S. (53%); Immigrant (47%).
Religion-	Roman Catholic (28%); Protestant (11%); Jew (35%); Other (4%); None/Blank (18%).

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There is no mandatory tracking in this school, but students can opt to register for advanced placement classes. Most students are programmed for

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New York State regents-level academic classes. Ten percent of the students in the school are in the special education program and many of these students are mainstreamed into regular regents-level classes.

At the school, classes meet four times a week; twice a week for 60 minutes and twice a week for 45 minutes. The school operates on a 4-cycles a year programming system. Students and teachers receive new class schedules in September, mid-November, February and mid-April. Because of the 4-cycle system, the unit that included the gender bias project started right after classes had been reorganized in mid-April, 1993.

### **Problem-Posing**

The major problem posed at the start of the fourth cycle of the academic year (April-June) was whether the United States in the post-World War 2 era could finally live up to the "promise" of the Declaration of Independence and become a more democratic and inclusive society. Within this unit of study, students spent eight lessons exploring the struggles of the African American Civil Rights movement, four lessons discussing the struggle of women for social, economic and political equality and two lessons on problems confronting recent immigrants to the United States.

While the classes were studying the African American Civil Rights movement, students kept current events logs where they collected newspaper articles and wrote about contemporary civil rights issues. Classroom discussions frequently began with student comments on the newspaper stories, especially the second round of police trials related to the Rodney King case, or their own personal experiences with racial or ethnic bias and discrimination. In an effort to promote open and critical discussion, I also shared some of my experiences during this period and my family's and neighbor's attitudes about race, ethnicity, class and gender (I am white, male, a Jew, and I grew up in the United States while the historical events of the 1950's and 1960's were taking place).

Important goals of the "transformative" social studies curriculum used in these United States history classes were promoting student examination of

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racial, ethnic, religious and gender biases in contemporary American society and encouraging student reflection on and reconsideration of their own personal views. The attitudes of young men towards young women and of young women about themselves and towards each other, continually emerged in classroom discussions and activities. The difficulties encountered in addressing these attitudes illustrate some of the limitations of a content-based curriculum and some of the pedagogical problems that teachers must be willing to address in heterogeneous classrooms.

## **Cartoon Dialogues**

Miles Horton argues that educational research should be collaborative and that educators need to "experiment with people not on people....They're in on the experiment. They're in on the process" (Horton and Freire, 1990, p. 148). When high school students first enter my classes, I explain that I would like to involve them in exploring the impact of the materials they will be studying and our classroom discussions on their ideas and values and that this will include having the class analyze some of the assignments they will be completing. While students frequently raise questions about what I mean and how we will do it, there has never been any objection. Generally students are excited about the idea of being involved in experiments and consider what they will be doing as important.

After the Civil Rights movement, as part of the introduction to the role of women in the contemporary United States, students were asked to create "cartoon dialogues" between two female high school students who are having, based on the look on their faces, what appears to be a serious discussion. The assignment was presented to students outside the context of previous discussions of racial and ethnic bias and was intended to see whether the students drew connections between issues related to race and gender and whether discussions of racial bias had influenced student attitudes about the interests, concerns and ideas of teenage young women.

The use of cartoon dialogues as a way for students to express their ideas and clarify their values was developed by Wayne Paulson (1974 and 1976) of the

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Foundation for Health Care Evaluation during the 1970s. This particular "cartoon dialogue" activity was based on an exercise in adolescent "peer" AIDS education workshops. It contained six panels where two female high school students are having a discussion. Students in the class are asked to imagine the dialogue and then fill in blank conversation bubbles.

Students were told that they could imagine any dialogue they chose and they were given approximately ten minutes to complete the blank dialogue boxes. Several students asked if they could decide the sequence of who was speaking. It was agreed that they could design the dialogues any way that they wanted to, as long as they made it clear who was speaking and where it fit into the conversation. The assignment was collected after students completed the panels.

Initially, the plan was to have students analyze the "cartoon dialogues" in the next class meeting as a way of promoting student discussion of what constituted gender bias and of their own attitudes about the differences between men and women. While I expected some expression of gender stereotypes in student dialogues, I also anticipated that as a result of our study of the struggle against racial discrimination in United States society, many students would create dialogues that challenged discrimination against women and gender bias.

When I examined the dialogues at the end of the school day, I found that most of them were about teenage life and problems, ie. pregnancy, school, jobs and dating (dialogue 1) . Only a few of the "cartoon dialogues" dialogues reflected the political or civil rights issues we had discussed in class (dialogue 2).

### **Dialogue 1: A representative dialogue about teenage life.**

Student A= "Did you see Ryan today?"

Student B= "Boy did I see Ryan. He looked so hot."

Student B= "I really like him."

Student B= "Do you think he likes me as much as I like him?"

Student A= "I'll set you two up."

Student B= "Do you want me to help?"

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Student A= "Now you'll have a boyfriend you deserve."

Student B= "You are beautiful."

### **Dialogue 2: A dialogue reflecting a political or civil rights issue**

Student A= "Did you hear about the talk of the town trying to ban abortions again?"

Student B= "I heard about it and it makes me sick to think that in this country and in these days they can't allow a woman to make up her own mind."

Student B= I just wish we can have the right to make our own judgment.

Student B= "If men were having abortions they wouldn't think twice about who should make up their own mind."

Student B= "What do you think?"

Student A= "I don't favor abortions. I see them as killing a baby."

Student B= "But if you had to make a choice, you would want it to come from your own head."

Student A= "I just hope it will never come to that."

My first reaction to the dialogues was disappointment, not in my students, but in my own teaching. I felt that I had failed to make it possible for them to draw connections between what we were studying in class and their personal lives and views. Instead of returning the "cartoon dialogues" for classroom evaluation, I decided to hold on to them while we discussed the history and impact of the women's rights movement after World War 2. During these lessons we examined passages written by Betty Friedan and Ashley Montagu, Doonesbury cartoon strips about male chauvinism, statistics comparing the gender gap in earnings and employment possibilities and changes in federal laws that affected the legal and reproductive rights of women.

After these lessons, I asked students to complete the "cartoon dialogues" a second time. I wanted to see if students changed their dialogues as a result of more direct class discussion of the struggle for women's rights. Students were told that they could complete the dialogue the same way they did the first time or they were free to create new dialogues. I also asked students to write their reason for selecting the topic of the dialogue on the back of the cartoon.

After students had completed the second set of "cartoon dialogues", I reminded them of the idea of exploring the impact of the things we were studying on their ideas and values and raised the possibility of examining the

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dialogues for evidence of possible gender bias. After the classes responded affirmatively, both sets of "cartoon dialogues" were examined in class by students working in previously established heterogeneous cooperative learning teams of between 3 and 5 students. Each team had a minimum of two female students and most had female majorities.

I asked the student teams to sort dialogues by topic and according to student explanations for why they created their dialogues. Teams created their own "Topic" and "Reason" categories, which were presented to the class as a whole, were standardized within each class and later, between the classes. The final "Topic" categories were Pregnancy; Family Conflicts; School Problems; Teen Problems (including dating, drugs, decisions about becoming sexually active, after school jobs and relationships with friends); Using Condoms/AIDS; Discussions about Politics or Current Events; Discrimination Against Women and Gender Bias; the Future (work and college); Other. The final "Reason" categories were Personal Experiences; Friend's Experience; Teenager talk about these things; Teenage girls talk about these things; Things that are Important; Things We Learned About in Class; Other.

After all the classes had done a preliminary analysis, a team of four student volunteers meet during their common lunch period to compare the topics and explanations made by male and female students and created charts to show these initial findings.

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**Table 2- Cartoon Dialogue Categories**

<b>Topics</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
Pregnancy	14%	18%
Family Conflict	3%	11%
School Problems	23%	11%
Teen Problems	34%	30%
Condoms/AIDS	0%	3%
Politics/Current Events	3%	2%
Discrimination/Bias	11%	16%
Future	6%	7%

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Other	6%	2%
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<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
Personal Experience	4%	7%
Friend's Experience	14%	7%
Teen Talk	4%	7%
Teenage Girl Talk	18%	12%
Important	43%	40%
Studied in Class	0%	10%
Other	18%	17%
None	20%	31%

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After the charts were presented and discussed in the classes, the "cartoon dialogues" were returned to students and the cooperative learning teams met to discuss:

- a) what students were trying to show in their dialogues;
- b) why they chose particular topics;
- c) why some students changed their topics and others didn't;
- d) why people felt that these female students were discussing these particular topics;
- e) if gender stereotypes or biases influenced topic choices.

In all three classes, discussion was heated in the cooperative learning teams and later in the class as a whole. Many students argued that some of the "cartoon dialogues", either by choice of subject or because of the content of the dialogue, expressed stereotypes about teenage women. However, the teams and the classes were divided over which dialogues and which explanations constituted gender biases. For example, a male student who identified himself as Puerto Rican and Roman Catholic, created the following dialogue (dialogue 3).

### **Dialogue 3:**

Student A= "Hey, did you do the math homework?"

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Student B= "Yeah, but I didn't get all of it because there were a few that I didn't get, so I left them out."

Student B= "I probably won't hand it in."

Student B= "Pretty stupid huh? I should have went for some help."

Student A= "I can help you and you can hand it in on time."

Student B= "Gee thanks. I could use the help."

Student B= "I'm glad you are my friend."

Student A= "Don't worry about it pal."

This "cartoon dialogue" was placed in the category of "School Problems". Students in the cooperative learning team that discussed the dialogue had a mixed reaction to it. Some students felt that it was an example of a stereotype about women because it shows a young woman having trouble in math. Others felt that it wasn't an example of a stereotype because the student who helps her with her homework is also a young woman.

The "teen problem" category included a number of "cartoon dialogues" created by male and female students where the young women were discussing their relationships with boys or other girls. These "cartoon dialogues" evoked the sharpest disagreement about gender bias and stereotyping. In one class discussion, a young woman raised, "It's okay to say that there are topics that girls talk about, but some of the boys have it [topic subjects] all wrong." Another young woman challenged the dialogues developed by some of the male students. She demanded to know: "How can you say those things [about teenage girls] after all the stuff we have talked about in class." Two examples of dialogues (dialogues 4 and 5) created by a male student that elicited this kind of response follow. The first student identified himself as male, white, and an immigrant. He said that "I chose this topic because I know girls mostly talk about guys when they are alone." The second student identified himself as male, white and Italian-American. He said that "I recently experienced something like this with my friends" and that "I included the profanity that they (girls) usually use."

### Dialogue 4:

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Student A= "Did you see him in school today? He is so hot!"

Student B= "I know I want that kid so bad, but he never even looks at me."

Student B= "I saw him at the 'rave' (party) last week."

Student B= "He was being 'sweated' (admired) by all the girls."

Student A= "How come you didn't tell me about the 'rave'?"

Student B= "I wanted to get to be alone with him. You don't go for 'raves' anyway."

Student A= "You know I always liked him."

Student B= "Well, that's too bad because he don't like you."

### **Dialogue 5:**

Student A= "You know, I heard something at school today."

Student B= "No. What did you hear?"

Student B= "Did it involve me?"

Student B= "Well, is it bad? Just tell me."

Student A= "You. You stole my boyfriend!"

Student B= "What? I don't know what your talking about."

Student A= "You Ho! How dare you! We've been seeing each other for a year! Bitch!"

Student B= "I don't know what to say?"

Interestingly, despite this male student's belief that teenage girls talk this way to one another, not one of the female students who participated in the project created "cartoon dialogues" where the young women referred to each other using this language. While some of the female students had the young women in their dialogues curse, only four male students used the words "ho (whore)", "slut" or "bitch".

Some of the "cartoon dialogues" about pregnancy included disparaging comments about female sexuality, the female discussants or their acquaintances. Many female students objected to these "cartoon dialogues". Female students in each of the three classes raised that there was a wide difference in the seriousness that students, particularly males and females, brought to these "cartoon dialogues". As one young women described it, "a dialogue between girls when one of them is pregnant means one thing to a boy, but it is a very serious issue to a girl." There was a consensus in the

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classes that there had to be some way of measuring how "serious" the dialogues were.

The following "cartoon dialogues" were all on the topic of pregnancy. The first dialogue (Dialogues 6) was created by a female student who identified herself as Hispanic and Roman Catholic. Thus young woman said that she selected this topic because it is an important topic today.

### **Dialogue 6:**

Student A= "So how did things go at the clinic?"

Student B= "Terrible. It was just terrible. I can't believe what he told me...He told me I'm pregnant."

Student B= "I don't know what to do. Should I tell my parents? Should I keep it?"

Student B= "How is my future going to turn out? Listen to me. My future, I don't have a future now."

Student B= "I'm going to have a kid now."

Student A= "Well maybe there's a way to solve this. Maybe you can get an abortion."

Student B= "You think so. I don't know. I'm kind of scared. How am I going to get the money?"

Student A= "Well, that's what friends are for. I'll help you out. I'm always here for you."

Some students in the classes felt that "cartoon dialogues" that discussed pregnancy contained an element of gender bias. Most of the young women in the classes felt that this was a very real problem that they faced and that the key to evaluating the "carton dialogue" was how it handled the topic. This cartoon was considered to be "serious" because it showed the difficult choices that young women have to make and the importance of friends for support.

The next dialogue (dialogue 7) was created by a female student who identified as Haitian and Catholic. She did not give her reason for selecting this topic.

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### Dialogue 7:

Student A= "Monique, I'm pregnant."

Student B= "What! I can't believe it. How could you. Who's the father?"

Student B= "What's wrong with you? I thought you were a virgin."

Student B= "When did you start having sex? How can you just come and surprise me?"

Student A= "Monique, I'm really sorry. I need your help."

Student B= "We'll I'm sorry too. I'm really disappointed in you Jessica."

Student A= "I don't even know who's the father. I was really messed up. But I know better now."

Student B= Some people never listen.

Students felt that this dialogue was "different" and less "serious" than the previous dialogue because it focused on the issue of being sexually active rather than the problem of what to do now that the young woman was pregnant.

A male student created another dialogue (dialogue 8) on pregnancy. He said that he selected this topic because by the looks on the young woman's faces, they were talking about something serious.

### Dialogue 8:

Student A= "Did you tell your parents?"

Student B= ""No. I'm afraid that they'll say I should have thought of the consequences before we did it."

Student B= "I don't know what to do or say to them."

Student B= "I'm also scared of what John will say. He doesn't know about it yet."

Student B= "I hope he can take it?"

Student A= "Don't worry about John, I know how he is and he'll get over it soon."

Student B= "What do you mean by that?"

Student A= "We had sex before."

This is the kind of cartoon dialogue that disturbed many female students. While it discussed a serious topic, they felt that the insensitive way the friend spoke with the girl who is pregnant and the way they are portrayed as having sexual relations with the same guy were both examples of anti-female stereotypes. One female student offered her own "cartoon dialogue" as a more

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realistic example of the way two female friends would discuss this situation. In her dialogue, the friend says, "Don't worry about it. I will go with you to the doctor if you want."

Eventually, the discussions of the "cartoon dialogues" expanded into broad discussions of continuing gender bias in American society and modern American youth culture. In general, among the more vocal students, female students reacted most strongly to the impact of stereotyping, citing ideas raised in previous lessons and their own personal experiences with male students in school.

While male students, with a few exceptions, were much less vocal than female students during the discussions, what was more striking was the absence of flippant (ie., "Hey, that's just the way things are.") and derogatory ("Feminists say those things because they can't get guys.") remarks which had been made in some earlier class discussions.

After discussing the experience in my classes with a group of colleagues in the Social Studies Department, one of the other teachers, who was using a more traditional social studies curriculum, decided to have two of her classes (forty-five students) create dialogues using the same cartoons. While there were some interesting differences in the responses, in the second group a much larger percentage of students created cartoon dialogues where the young women discussed "Teen Problems" and a much smaller percentage had them discussing discrimination or gender bias, the topics selected by the two groups of students, and the relative frequency generally corresponded.

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**Table 3- Comparison with Other Classes**

<b>Topics</b>		<b>Author's Classes</b>	<b>Colleague's Classes</b>
Pregnancy		17%	11%
Family Conflict		8%	13%
School Problems		23%	11%
Teen Problems		31%	49%
Condoms/AIDS		2%	6%
Events	2%	2%	
Discrimination/Bias		15%	2%
Future		2%	6%
Other		3%	0%

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### **Reflective Practice**

At the end of the school year, the "cartoon dialogues" were re-analyzed with the assistance of two graduate students in the Hofstra University School of Education pre-service teacher education program and a doctoral candidate from the New York University School of Education. As we looked at the cartoon dialogues and the initial analysis made by the high students, an exercise in reflective practice about teaching methods evolved into an effort to better understand the ideas and values of the students who had taken part in the project.

Following the suggestions made by the high school students during cooperative learning team and full class discussions, the group established a five part scale for comparing the "seriousness" or "complexity" of the dialogues. Among the things looked for was whether the "cartoon dialogue" examined an area that students identified as a major concern and if the dialogue gave a sense of the complexity involved in the topic being discussed. The five categories were:

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1- Most Serious- The cartoon dialogue examined an area that students considered a major concern from multiple viewpoints and recognized that the problem did not have a simple resolution.

2- Serious- The cartoon dialogue examined an area that students considered a major concern from one point of view and suggested a one-dimensional resolution of the problem.

3- Responsible but Not Serious - The cartoon dialogue was completed in a responsible way but:

a- while the topic was identified as a major concern by students, the dialogue treated the subject in a perfunctory manner.

b- students identified the topic as a minor concern.

4- Complete but Superficial - The assignment was completed within the established guidelines but did not suggest any serious thought about the topic.

5- Irresponsible or Incomplete and Not Serious- The assignment was treated jokingly, the dialogue was nonsensical, or it was left partially completed.

## **Findings**

Because of the small size of the sample and the limited number of students in some of the demographic categories, the results of this study, while suggestive, cannot be considered conclusive. However, analysis did find a definite gender, racial, ethnic/national and religious identification related clustering pattern in the topics selected by students for their "cartoon dialogues", in the "seriousness" or "complexity" of their cartoons and in the reasons given by students for choosing particular topics. This type of demographic "clustering" in student responses has also been reported in other studies on the attitudes of high school students (Lunneborg, 1979).

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### A) Gender-related Clustering

The "cartoon dialogues" show gender-related patterns in the topics selected by students, in the "seriousness" or "complexity" of their cartoons and in the reasons given by students for choosing particular topics.

\* 31% (19 of 61) of the "cartoon dialogues" created by female students, but only 3% (1) of the "cartoon dialogues" created by male students, were placed in the "most serious" category.

\* 23% (8 of 35) of the male students, but only 11% (7 of 61) of the female students, developed dialogues about "school problems" .

When given the opportunity, female students were much more likely than male students, to either change their topic or to increase the "seriousness" of their dialogue. All 20 of the students who significantly changed their "cartoon dialogues" were female. This group constituted about a third of the female students.

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**Table 4- Comparison of Dialogues by Gender**

	Male Students	Female Students
"Most Serious Dialogue"	3%	31%
Topic: School Problems	23%	11%
Changed Cartoon Topic or Seriousness	0%	32%

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### B) Racial, Ethnic/National and Religious Identification Clustering

There also appears to be a correspondence between racial, ethnic/national and religious identification and topics selected for "cartoon dialogues", the complexity of "cartoon dialogues" and the reasons given for selecting specific topics. Some examples that support this conclusion are:

\* When compared to topic selection by white students in the class, three times as many African American students and nearly four times as many Latino/a students selected pregnancy or AIDS as a topic.

\* 20% of the white students (8 females and 3 males), created cartoons where the young women discussed "discrimination against women". This was

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significantly higher than the percentage of African American (5%) and Latino/a (8%) students who chose this topic. When other demographic factors were examined, it became apparent that the students who selected "discrimination against women" were also more likely than the rest of the students in the class to identify themselves as Jews and as Russian immigrants. They were also less likely than the total student sample to give a reason for their topic selection.

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**Table 5- Comparison of Dialogues by Race and/or Ethnicity**

	African American	Latino/a	White
Topic: Pregnancy/Condoms/AIDS	20%	39%	11%
Topic: Discrimination/Gender Bias	5%	8%	20%

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### **C) Examining a Specific Cluster: Native-born Roman Catholic Latina Young Women**

The "cartoon dialogues" created by native-born Roman Catholic Latina young women were more similar to each other than the dialogues created by any of the other demographic groupings and they are particularly suggestive.

\* Eleven female students created "cartoon dialogues" that had the young women discussing the possibility that one of them is pregnant. An examination of these students shows that they were atypical of the total sample in a number of significant ways.

91% (10 of 11) of the female students who selected "pregnancy" identified their religion as Roman Catholic. Roman Catholics were 28% of the sample and 34% of the female students. 100% (11 of 11) of the female students who selected "pregnancy" were born in the United States compared to 54% (33 of 61) of the female students.

73% (8 of 11) of the "cartoon dialogues" by female students on the topic of pregnancy rated in the most "serious" category compared to 31% (19 of 61) of all of the "cartoon dialogues" created by female students.

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55% (6 of 11) of the female students who selected "pregnancy" as a topic also identified as Latina (female Hispanic). They represented 60% (6 of 10) of the Latina students. All of these students identified as Roman Catholics and were born in the United States. 83% (5 of 6) of their "cartoon dialogues" were rated in the most "serious" category. None of them gave "personal experience" or the "experience of a friend" as the reason for selecting this topic. Among Latina students who were born in the United States and identified as Roman Catholics, 86% (6 of 7) selected "pregnancy" as a topic. The three Latina students who were not born in the United States selected other topics.

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**Table 6: An Example of Clustering**

	<b>Total Sample</b>	<b>Total Females</b>	<b>Females who Selected Pregnancy</b>
Number of Students	96	61	11
Identified as Roman Catholic	28%	34%	91%
Native-born	53%	53%	100%
Most Serious Category	21%	31%	73%
Identified as Latina/o	14%	16%	55%

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The "cartoon dialogues" created by these native-born Roman Catholic Latina young women about pregnancy, while individual and personal, reflect the interplay of the specific cultural, religious and generational forces these young women grapple with as members of a distinct social group. I believe the overall clustering pattern that emerged in our analysis of student responses validates the use of the "cartoon dialogues" as a way of allowing students to express some of the underlying and stereotypical assumptions they make about teenage young women.

### Connecting Academic Learning and Personal Experience

Teacher initiated action research projects pose particular problems. While independent researchers have the ability to focus on the demands of the study, a teacher-researcher's primary responsibility is to respond to the needs of students and to the ideas they raise in class. Throughout the unit, I was concerned both with the impact of my teaching methods on students in my high school classes and with my ability to model the transformative pedagogy I was discussing with students in my teacher education classes. In response to these concerns, the focus of the gender bias project shifted from measuring student transference from struggles for racial equality to ideas about gender equity, to making it possible for students to express and analyze their own ideas and values about gender differences.

It is difficult for teachers to get students to express their real opinions on the issues that are important to them, especially when the experience of so many groups of young people is one of being silenced. Even when students speak up in class, much of their effort is aimed at presenting the answers they believe teachers want to hear or that their peers will accept.

Michelle Fine and Nancie Zane (1989) argue that our public schools have created "separate spheres" for the public and private aspects of people's lives. Especially for young women, the issues that they "experience as 'private' and 'personal' - even if they affect large numbers of adolescents across social classes and racial and ethnic groups - are reserved for discussion inside counselors' offices rather than in classrooms" (p. 34). The AAUW report *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992) advocates changing our concept of education to include the "evaded curriculum....matters central to the lives of students and teachers but touched upon only briefly, if at all, in most schools" (p. 75). The personal nature of so many of the "cartoon dialogues" is a reflection of the need teenagers have to discuss the issues that are personally meaningful to them and the absence of opportunity that ordinarily exists in our schools. Until students feel able to present in class what they are actually thinking about, I don't think it is possible to help teenagers reflect on the implications of their ideas and values.

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Other studies report using activities similar to the "cartoon dialogues" to promote student reflection on their own ideas and values and the ideas and values of our society. Mark James (1990) describes a program for chemically dependent teenagers where participants analyze the themes and values in song lyrics as part of the process of clarifying their own values. Berenice Fisher (1993) regularly uses what she describes as "the theater of ideas" to allow her students to act out the meaning of a text, to explore its implications and to examine their emotional reactions to it. Fisher argues that student reflection on these emotional reactions is crucial "in helping us to explore feminist beliefs and values" (p. 77).

What I tried to do in these United States history classes was provide students with:

- a) a vehicle so they could express how they see a particular situation, ie., what appears to be a serious conversation between two teenage young women;
- b) an historical framework (an understanding of the way people struggled to make the United States a more democratic and just society) which they helped develop and which they could use for evaluating the underlying ideas that informed the creation of different student dialogues;
- c) a cooperative learning community where students would feel able to discuss their ideas and the ideas of the other community members;
- d) an opportunity to use their own ideas and values to help them better understand historical events;
- e) an opportunity to use the historical framework developed in class to reconsider their own ideas and values about gender differences and the nature of gender bias.

Important goals of the unit were making it possible for students to think more clearly about what they perceived as personal issues, to see individual problems in a social and historical context, to become more conscious of the ideas and values that influence the choices they make in their lives and to encourage them to become active citizens concerned about gender bias, sexual harassment and social inequality.

### Learning With Our Students

As a teacher educator returning to the high school classroom, I found myself thinking more critically and systematically about my educational practice and more interested in how other teachers were addressing similar issues in their classrooms. However, the reality is that there is little time structured into the school year to read widely, explore classroom issues with students and other teachers or to conduct action research. Much of the theoretical discussion of gender bias in the classroom, of promoting student voice and of transformative curriculum presented in this article was formulated after the completion of the school year when I had more opportunity to read, talk, listen and think.

My initial goal in writing about this project was to help me better understand the impact of what I was teaching on the ideas and values of my students. In retrospect, as a veteran social studies teacher and as a teacher educator interested in transformative pedagogy, I should not have been surprised by how difficult it was to get high school students to connect the academic and the personal and to transfer their understandings about one topic to another. The fact that I was surprised points out a pressing need for more action research and publication by secondary school teachers interested in transformative education.

Despite its methodological and theoretical limitations, I believe that this study supports a series of conclusions about transformative education and about addressing gender bias in the secondary school social studies classroom, which while tentative, are of value to me and to other educators. I am aware that questions have been raised about the reliability of this type of study of student values and ideas. In a review of thirteen values clarification research projects, Alan Lockwood (1978) challenged whether the studies actually measured what they claimed to measure and the significance of reported changes in student values. In *Making Connections, The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls At Emma Willard School*, Carol Gilligan et al (1990) explored the changing ideas, values and relationships of teenage young women, but

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their team utilized in depth interviews conducted over the course of a number of years.

In my report on this project, I have tried to take the criticisms raised by Lockwood and the experience of Gilligan and her colleagues into account. While I believe the "cartoon dialogues" created by my students provide important insights into what teenagers are thinking, I recognize that these glimpses are limited.

Student choices on the "cartoon dialogues" show that social studies teachers cannot assume that students are making the intellectual connections that we make or that we would like them to make. Even when students are interested in a topic like the Civil Rights movement and work to master it, they do not automatically connect what they have learned about that topic with other areas that they study or with the issues that are confronting them in their daily lives. When the high school students created their "cartoon dialogues", they generally did not see them as a way of expressing a connection to what they had been studying about racism and/or gender bias. Most of them used the dialogues as an opportunity to comment on much more personal topics and concerns.

If teachers want students to recognize these connections, we must draw their attention to them. Teachers must find ways to make parallels clear and to help students make their understandings explicit. Academic knowledge by itself, even knowledge of social struggles against racial and gender prejudice, did not promote students to reconsider basic ideas and values. Knowledge remained compartmentalized until student cooperative learning teams evaluated the "cartoon dialogues" for potential gender biases.

This study supports the idea that student creation and evaluation are key to transformative learning and are necessary for the development of critical consciousness. Students must be part of the experiment. The creation of the "cartoon dialogues" and the cooperative learning group evaluations that followed, allowed students to bring their lives into the learning process and made it possible for them to utilize their new academic knowledge about United States society to reevaluate their own stereotypes about young women. The

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academic discussions about struggles for social change made these evaluations possible, but in themselves, they did not enable students to examine their own values and ideas about what constituted gender bias.

Transformative educators must search for ways to help students raise their ideas to a conscious level so they can be examined and reconsidered. The quality of the discussion and the evaluation of the "cartoon dialogues" in the cooperative learning teams and classes show the importance of both the teams and of student leadership in the transformative learning process. My experience during this study suggests that cooperative learning should not be seen as just another teaching technique useful for enhancing student interest. Student interaction in their teams is a crucial part of the process that allows students to begin to reconceptualize their world.

Further, teachers need to encourage students leaders who can engage their peers in creating new levels of understanding. All of the classes in this study had significant female majorities. It is worth considering whether these female majority classrooms influenced the results of the project by helping to create mixed gender classrooms where female students felt able to freely state their opinions and take leadership in classroom discussions.

The implicit feminism exhibited by many of the young women in the classes through their upset with gender stereotypes and their stated belief in gender equality and the importance that the young women placed on the issue of pregnancy, support similar findings by Michelle Fine and Pat Macpherson (1993). Fine and Macpherson report that feminism has been a powerful force in shaping the lives of contemporary young women they have talked with and that these young women "are engaged with questions of 'being female'," especially, "who will control, and to what extent can they control, their own bodies?" (p. 131)

My expectancy was that the "cartoon dialogues" would more closely reflect what I had been teaching in class. However, the open-ended nature of the assignment made it possible for students to create dialogues that had meaning for their lives. As a result, the demographic analysis of the "cartoon dialogues" shows distinct racial, ethnic, religious, gender and class-based patterns to

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student work. Dialogue topics, complexity and student explanations for their choices reflected all of the social factors and positionality that shape our understandings of the world around us and our place in it (Code, 1991; Alcott, 1988). The "cartoon dialogues" suggest that because of what students bring with them as human beings who are members of different social groups, they are experiencing classroom lessons in significantly different ways. This conclusion supports research by Rahmina Wade (1994) on knowledge construction and social studies concept formation and change in fourth grade elementary school classrooms and by Marilyn Johnson (1990) on the influence of pre-service teacher education programs on the ideas of new teachers. Johnston found that "the influence of the program was partial and differential because the new ideas were reacting with students' backgrounds, beliefs, and personalities. New ideas came in contact with prior assumptions and experiences, and the latter informed how the former were interpreted" (p. 229).

As an educator with a commitment to the development of multicultural and gender fair curriculum, I learned from both from the activities in class with my high school students and from the post-project analysis I was able to do with colleagues. I became more conscious of my role in the class as a teacher and as a white male, and of my own biases. I also found myself thinking much more about who my students are, what they bring to the classroom and how they create their understandings of gender roles and bias in our society and in their own lives.

This project suggests that classrooms must move beyond the introduction and critical examination of information if multicultural and gender fair curricula are going to promote student reflection on and reconsideration of their own personal views about gender differences. In a transformative classroom, teachers must struggle with students to draw connections between academic knowledge and the world as lived.

The meanings that students created in their "cartoon dialogues" and in the evaluation sessions reflect the multicultural nature of our society and complex nature of human learning. This certainly complicates a teachers task; but if

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teachers recognize and are able to utilize the diversity of student perceptions as a classroom resource, then transformative learning through dynamic student interaction can become a real possibility.

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**Challenging Gender Bias Through A "Transformative"  
High School Social Studies Curriculum**

**Based on a presentation at the 1994 annual meeting of the  
American Educational Research Association**

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**Gender Bias**

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Dr. Jack R. Fraenkel, Editor  
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Dear Jack,

Thank you and the reviewers for all of your help. I hope this is it.

Sincerely,

Alan Singer