**Building on Student Knowledge: A new frame for gender equity in education
that transcends the sameness/difference dichotomy**

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Introduction

> *Anyone who spends an hour or so at my high school will find plenty of evidence substantiating the need for making gender awareness a significant part of the academic curriculum. (Male history teacher at a large urban high school)*

Having spent at least an hour at this particular school, it is hard to disagree with this statement. It is also hard to ignore the bars on the doors and windows and other "prison-like" conditions of the building which speak so boldly of what life is like for African American and Latino students attending under-funded, urban public schools in poor "troubled" neighborhoods. Yet as teachers and administrators, all participating in a special three-year professional development program called GATE (Gender Awareness Through Education), gathered together to tell story after story of how girls are being "shortchanged" and how boys are "failing," it became clear that the term "gender awareness" is an ambiguous one. As a group, they considered the questions: What is generic and what is socially constructed? How do race, class, and gender issues intersect? How do we avoid reinforcing stereotypes when teaching awareness? When we say it is harder to work with girls, aren't we saying something about ourselves? Do students espouse tolerance and then behave in ways that indicate intolerance?

It is the premise of this paper that many times the answers to these complex questions are often reduced to discussions of whether boys and girls should be treated exactly the same, or whether we should teach to their (perceived) differences. For example, professional development around gender equity often focuses on simplistic techniques such as counting how often one calls on girls and boys; just as curriculum development is frequently reduced to the "add women and stir" variety. Similarly, those who argue that "boys and girls learn differently" (Gurian, 2001) fail to consider the very real implications of race, ethnicity, class and other differences on students' identities, learning styles, and experiences in school. This paper considers the wide variety of approaches these teachers, and other participants in the GATE program, used to explore and address gender issues at their respective schools. In this paper, I share some of the ways in which teachers and administrators in urban schools are starting to move beyond the sameness/difference dichotomy, primarily through building a curriculum in which student knowledge is central, and student agency is essential.

Opening the GATE
In the early 1990's, The Pennsylvania Humanities Council (PHC) began GATE, a three-year program to address gender inequities in the School District of Philadelphia. As a Program Officer at the PHC, I was the director of this program. GATE was developed in conjunction with an advisory board of educational experts, women's studies scholars, and community leaders. Piloted in the School District of Philadelphia--a large urban

school district with over 250 schools and 200,000 students--participating schools were selected through a competitive application process. This process began with a mailing to all teachers in the District which included the (rather broad-based) questions:

- Are you interested in the differences between the ways boys and girls learn in the classroom setting?
- Do you desire a more inclusive, multicultural curriculum?
- Do you want to create a more cooperative and interactive learning environment?

Although the goals of the program were likewise all over the place, in essence the program promised that it would help participants integrate women's studies and feminist pedagogy into the K-12 curriculum.

Schools interested in participating were asked to assemble a team of approximately ten individuals, which was to include teachers of different subject areas, administrators, and parents. GATE was noteworthy in that, in addition to the "team" concept, it integrated many other current ideas about successful school reform. For example, schools were selected at each grade level, and schools in feeder patterns (e.g., community clusters) were given selection priority. Eventually the chosen schools included: an elementary school with a significant population of special education children (35% of who were blind or visually impaired); a large middle school and two large high schools, each located in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, comprised of students that were over 80% African American and primarily from low-income families. It was hoped that more schools would be phased into the program as additional funds became available.

All combined, approximately 40 practitioners and parents signed-up to participate in the program, although attendance at the monthly seminar meetings was rarely more than 50% due to a wide variety of factors largely related to scheduling conflicts. In addition, , over the course of the three year program many teachers dropped out and were replaced due to retirements, transfers, etc. On average, the participants were 50% Caucasian and 50% African American; 18% of the participants were male. Of those who were teachers: 12% had been teaching for less than five years; 50% had been teaching for over 10 years; and 38% had been teaching for over 20 years. GATE participants represented all grade levels and disciplines including physical education, art, gifted education and special education, as well as a variety of administrative positions ranging from Principal to department chairs, to school disciplinarians and secretaries. The few parents that signed-up were not particularly active over the course of the program, as a three-year commitment from parents to what was essentially a professional development program is difficult to sustain (see, for example, Shapiro, Ginsberg, & Brown, 2002).

The monthly GATE team meetings were co-facilitated by K-12 teachers and university professors, and were structured so that participants had a significant voice in the focus and process of the meetings. The meetings varied in content but generally included self-reflection, discussion of relevant literature (fiction as well as non-fiction), classroom observation, and curriculum development. In addition, the city itself was used as a resource, and participants took trips to a wide variety of museums and cultural sites, and were treated to special workshops with local and national feminist scholars.
 Finally, like the GATE program itself, the evaluation process was multifaceted and ambitious. Under the leadership of Dr. Joan Shapiro, Professor of Educational

Administration and Policy Studies at Temple University and former Co-Administrator of the Women's Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, data was collected over a six-year period. Dr. Shapiro, in close cooperation with myself and with the assistance of the seminar facilitators, used a participatory evaluation approach which Dr. Shapiro explains as follows: "With sensitivity to context, this form of evaluation considers it important that the evaluator's report and recommendations are credible and of value to those who have been involved in the project. Participatory evaluation allows diverse voices to be heard" (Pennsylvania Humanities Council, 1997). As such, data collection included monthly reaction sheets completed by participants after each seminar meeting; interviews and focus groups conducted with participants, school team leaders, and seminar facilitators, over the course of the project and beyond; reflective essays and formal evaluations written by participants and seminar facilitators; teacher/action research studies; and ongoing participation and observation at monthly GATE meetings and in participants' classrooms. Student voices were documented primarily through action research data and anecdotal evidence from GATE participants, but were not, however, part of the formal evaluation process.

Competing Discourses of Gender
In many ways, the timing for such a program was perfect. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) had just released its seminal report: *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (Baily et al., 1992), to be quickly followed by the popular book *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Gender equity in education was suddenly a topic for talk shows. Likewise, the School District of Philadelphia was about to undergo a process of wide-scale reorganization by hiring a new nationally recognized Superintendent and implementing an ambitious district-wide reform plan called "Children Achieving." Children Achieving was to include, among other things, the creation of new curriculum standards and community clusters, strengthened partnerships between schools and communities, and increased accountability at all levels (primarily through standardized testing).

One might easily conclude that GATE, though a very small and disconnected part of this larger undertaking, was ultimately a successful program (depending, of course, on the criteria one uses to define "success"). Rather than debating the success or failure of the GATE program, however, in this paper I consider some of the different ways that participants framed the issue of gender "awareness" in education, and the corresponding implications for policy and practice. Although student voices are included herein, the primary focus is on teachers and administrators. As the paper's title suggests, I ultimately seek to challenge the dominant ideology surrounding gender work in education, e.g., that girls and boys are either inherently the same or inherently different.

These competing discourses--debated over and over in books such as *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldenberger, & Tarule, 1986), *Failing at Fairness* (Sadker & Sadker, 1994), *Girls and Boys Learn Differently!* (Gurian, 2001), and *Gender Gaps: Where Schools Still Fail Our Children* (American Institute of Research, 1999), among many others--were especially prominent in GATE. This was particularly the case at the beginning of the program, before teachers and administrators had a chance to engage in systematic classroom observation and to open-up questions about the relationship of gender to race, class, and other cultural differences. Indeed, as will be explored in

greater detail throughout the paper, one could go as far as to say that GATE suffered from an "identity crisis," as participants struggled to understand what it meant to identify and single-out gender as an issue to be addressed within the larger framework of students' lives, and the larger culture of school reform.

There are many different facets of gender bias in education, including: teacher and administrator bias (both conscious and unconscious); under-representation of girls and women in the curriculum; differential tracking and career counseling; sexual harassment and bullying; and inequitable or at least differential distribution of resources and support. Addressing any of these issues further requires delving into more complicated areas of girls' self-esteem, biological differences between males and females, the cultural construction of gender, teachers' own experiences and values, and community and cultural expectations and traditions. Furthermore, *all* of these concerns are greatly complicated by related issues of how race and class impact students' achievement.

The name GATE was broad enough to appeal to a wide variety of educators and to encourage work across these different areas. However, the ambiguity of its title further contributed to GATE's identity crisis. Included in the program were teachers and administrators who already considered themselves to be feminists, highly aware of gender issues, and actively working to promote feminist pedagogy in their schools. Others were just beginning to acknowledge and explore these issues--trying to remain open minded, but still somewhat skeptical. Some participants were primarily concerned with helping African-American *boys*--a group they deemed to be most "at-risk"--while others saw gender simply as a synonym for *girls*. As one seminar facilitator summed it up: "The opinions [in our group] ranged from that of the 'reality checker' to the 'extremist' who saw phallic symbols and [menstrual] bleeding as factors that influence the perceptions of everyone human." In looking at their applications almost a decade later, it is easy to see several competing, and often contradictory discourses about gender in education that framed practitioners support and understanding of the program. Such discourses are still prevalent today.

One such discourse might be called the sameness discourse, where teachers actively strove to be "gender-blind" e.g., not to treat boys and girls differentially in any way. For example, a large number of teachers noted on their applications that they were primarily concerned with giving boys and girls equal amounts of attention and resources:
• "I am very aware of my own tendency to pay more attention to boys than to girls in the classroom."
• "Why are girls' sports not given as much attention and money as boys' sports in the schools…?"
• "Females and minorities are currently underrepresented in the areas of math and science."

Another discourse reflected exactly the opposite perspective, focusing on (perceived) *differences* between genders--regardless of whether or not these differences were thought to be *innate* (biological) or socially constructed:
• "I would like to further address the need for revised curriculum based on the knowledge that girls and boys do have different learning needs."
• "[I am interested in addressing] teaching differences in boys and in girls re: attention

span, classroom structure and discipline."
- "The behaviors of male teenagers as opposed to female teenagers, as well as the attitudes which each group brings to the educational environment need to be examined."

Still others were more interested in investigating *gender stereotypes* and the construction of gendered identities, such as those who noted:
- "How many girls during shop class have been told not to handle the saws, let the boys do that or keep to the sanding and let the boys cut the wood?"
- "Girls are still taught that their primary role in life is to learn to cook, clean and keep house for their future husbands."
- "Parents have different expectations for boys and girls."

Within this particular discourse, teachers and administrators were more or less aware of the larger political, social, and cultural implications of these stereotypes, and the ways in which schools were only one of *many* institutions in which they were perpetuated:
- "Sex education in our health classes need to do more than teach students facts about the male and female reproductive systems…Part of our discussions also need to focus on other differences between males and females, including the 'male superiority,' and the 'right' many men feel they have to dominate and control women."
- "Many of our male students seem to be able to relate to females in sexual relationships but have difficulty accepting females as equals, either in or out of the classroom."

While some teachers and administrators felt that girls should receive special attention and extra resources to compensate for past inequities, a discourse similar to affirmative action, others were hesitant to focus on girls at all, underscoring the need to focus on supporting urban, minority and "at-risk" boys instead:
- "Like many of my colleagues, I am reluctant to withhold any of my attention from the boys because many of them seem to be so 'at risk.' I am very interested in exploring and trying to deal with this conflict."
- "Minority and female teachers need to begin to appreciate the obstacles that many urban males face."
- "Why are there classes for pregnant girls in order to keep them in school but not for males who are struggling with no support systems?"
- "How can females help and support men to be more nurturing--more emotional and accepted?"

Likewise, many participants were reluctant to focus too heavily on *gender at all*, recognizing that race and class were hugely significant issues for students in urban schools--perhaps even more so than gender:
- "I am interested in learning strategies that help students investigate their racial stereotyping, particularly as it relates to African-American and Asian communities. Too often each accuses each other of receiving preferential treatment in school and in government agencies."
- "I am interested in learning more about the values that Asians hold. I expect that through participation in the program I will be better prepared to help our Asian students discuss and share their needs, fears, and modes of thinking."

- "In the past couple of years I've seen a rise in racism among my students. Both physical and verbal abuse is escalating."
- "As an African American woman, I am particularly interested in helping teachers become sensitized to the pressures that African-American youth face."

And one lone teacher went as far as to write that her primary interest was in addressing "issues that transcend all groups." In other words, in an application to a program called *Gender Awareness Through Education*, this teacher was reluctant to single-out any specific group of students as needing special attention, assistance, or remediation.

Moreover, teachers, administrators and parents from different schools and in different seminar groups attempted to address these questions and dilemmas in radically different ways. One group of elementary school teachers, for example, consistently tried to minimize any differences or inequities between children in their school--noting that the "problems" began at the middle and high school levels, and that their concern was preparing children for this transition. The schools team leader, for example, noted on several occasions that: "At the elementary level girls shine. I am concerned when they get to a larger school…" and "Our kids do fine….Our girls are much brighter than the boys. They get into high school and we get reports that they are not doing so well. How do you get a kid to realize it could happen to them?"

The high school participants with whom they met monthly, on the other hand, were quick to acknowledge a wide range of gender issues of ongoing concern to them. (Indeed, gender was hard to ignore in a school of 3,000 students where an average of 350 female students became pregnant and gave birth every year.) Yet many of these teachers and administrators seemed to want to address gender issues primarily in terms of equity of *numbers* and *representation*. For example, the teachers became increasingly aware that there were no female inductees on the school's "Hall of Fame." According to one teacher: "[GATE] made us think. Now hold it!" The teachers made a concentrated effort to include girls the following year. In a similar example--but this one regarding discrimination against boys--one teacher noted that only male students swept the floor (e.g., in labs, etc.), even though "everyone had been responsible for the dirt." According to the seminar facilitator, "The group concluded that tasks should not be determined by gender. The teacher said that she would make a genuine attempt to correct the problem."

The participants were likewise interested in making sure that they gave girls and boys equal amounts of attention. One high school teacher for example, noted that she asked her students to keep track of how many times she called on boys or girls during math class, and began making a conscious effort to be fairer. The teachers also looked to incorporate more literature by and about women into English and history classes. GATE was very instrumental in this regard, as much of what the participants did during the monthly seminar meetings was read and discuss such literature themselves. Seminar readings included Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Cisneos' *House on Mango Street*, Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, and Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*, among many others. As these teachers and administrators often noted, they wanted activities that could be directly translated into the classroom, that were "content" and "focus" based.

By contrast, another group of middle and high school teachers and administrators

participating in the program opted for what might be called a critical pedagogy approach. In other words, they were less interested in "fixing" the problems than they were in understanding them; they were less interested in telling students how to behave and what was "fair," than they were in helping students to frame their own questions and consider the answers from multiple perspectives. Perhaps most importantly, they engaged in on-going classroom observation, which, in many cases, progressed into action research projects and the development of an inquiry community for analyzing and comparing data. This data ultimately helped them to challenge some prevalent assumptions about gender which enabled them to move beyond the sameness/difference debate.

Challenging Assumptions
While all of the GATE participants accomplished a great deal in terms of becoming more "aware" of gender issues in their schools, and, to whatever degree possible, addressing and mediating those issues, in the remainder of this paper I argue that those that used a critical pedagogy approach ultimately engaged their students more deeply, were more self-reflective about their own biases and perpetuation of gender stereotypes, and created more sustained changes in their school culture. I illustrate this by exploring a number of examples and case studies of teachers who used innovative and unique approaches to challenge prevalent assumptions about gender with their students, enabling them to see their own lives, cultures, communities and education itself in radically new ways. I will address in more depth a few of the most compelling questions that were raised through this process, describe some of the accompanying action research projects and data collected, consider how this data was analyzed, as well as the resulting ideas, reforms, insights and questions were raised by educators and students alike as a result.

The questions raised by GATE participants that I wish to focus most directly on--all interrelated--include: How does discussion of gender issues naturally move from "school" issues to "home" issues? How can we know students personally without invading their privacy? Do we adjust academic standards to meet reality? How does being "powerless" cut across all lines? Do I point out how girls differ from boys, or just encourage them without making a big deal about my perceived differences?

These questions were particularly powerful in GATE because the schools involved were in poor, minority, urban neighborhoods, with a great deficit of resources, and where students' home and school experiences often resulted in clashing realities and expectations. These were students that could greatly benefit from what is often termed an "ethic of care" which, in this context, means: increased access to role models, mentors, psychological and physiological support services; efforts to reach out to families and communities and to involve them more meaningfully in their children's education; and school staff who better understand and respect students' diverse cultures and values.

As Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) further describe it, the ethic of care suggests that: "students are at the center of the educational process and need to be nurtured and encouraged, a concept that likely goes against the grain of those attempting to make 'achievement' the top priority" (pp.16-17). This does not mean that achievement is irrelevant, a discourse that is prevalent in attacks that urban schools should focus more

heavily on teaching students "the basics" rather than bolstering self-esteem. It does mean, however, as Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) further suggest, that all educational stakeholders need to continually ask themselves: "Who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by my actions? What are the long-term effects of a decision I make today?" (p. 17)

Unfortunately, in many cases, just the reverse occurs. Students (and their families) in such communities are often deemed trouble-makers, not intelligent, lazy, not committed to school, etc. Boys are often thought to be headed for unemployment or prison, while girls are written-off as "sure to get pregnant" at an early age and likely end up on welfare. While statistics may show that these concerns are not ridiculous, the point is to understand and address the larger social and political systems that rob students of choices and create these often depressed realities. While no one is arguing against personal responsibility, the tactic of "blaming" students needs to be challenged within a broader framework of "care" and building on student knowledge.

Building on Student Knowledge
 GATE participants did indeed challenge these assumptions of student laziness, lack of intelligence, etc., but they did so by listening closely to students' voices, and giving students increased opportunities to engage in self-reflection, critical exploration, and problems solving. One middle school teacher, for example, read and discussed Sonia Sanchez's short story "Norma" with her class. In the autobiographical story, Sanchez describes a girl she went to school with who was very gifted in math, while Sanchez herself seriously struggled with it. This girl, however, was defiant and outspoken, and often got into trouble. She eventually dropped out of school. Years later, Sanchez encounters this girl on the street; she had become a teenage mother of many children and was now a drug addict. When the GATE teacher asked her students what they thought of the story, and in particular what it said about the issue of student achievement, one outspoken fourteen-year old African American female student responded: "When a girl has an attitude, life makes it hard for her if she doesn't get rid of it when she grows up." Another student added:

> You teachers look at girls, and if a girl seems dumb, you say, "Oh, she's probably going to drop out and get pregnant." If a girl seems smart you say, "Oh, you're going to be a doctor or a lawyer." Well this story proves you shouldn't judge yet.

These two comments, along with many others, provided the teachers with a number of important insights. The first was, in the teachers' own words: "how sensitive and perceptive students are to teachers' unconscious and conscious expectations for them based on one-dimensional factors." In addition, the first student raised the issue of whether girls who do not conform to rigid gender and racial norms (e.g., "have an attitude" rather than are compliant and passive) are unfairly penalized. Race and class are unstated but prominent factors here as well, as many gender norms surrounding "good behavior" are often created within white, middle class culture values and norms. The second student quoted above raised the issue of whether intelligence is really the marker of future success, as education rhetoric certainly perpetuates, or whether students' future success is achieved through a more multifaceted combination of encouragement, support, caring, positive expectations, and patience from teachers and

other adults.

 A high school history teacher addressed a similar set of concerns about post-school "success," through a class-wide examination of the play, *Raisin in the Sun*. While this work is frequently included in school curriculums to represent "The African American Experience," this teacher decided to broaden the discussion of the play, by having students work in small groups to explore a variety of issues both within the play itself, *as well as in their own homes and communities*. He began by asking students to chart the stresses, rewards, responsibilities, challenges, compromises, and sacrifices implicit in the work lives of the female characters. Students then developed a series of questions and conducted interviews with family and community members to learn more about how they viewed "women's work." As one student reflected at the end of the project, "I've seen how hard my mother works day after day, and I've been told of her struggles often, but I don't think I've fully appreciated her hard work, or any mother's hard work, until now."

What is noteworthy here is not only that students gained a greater appreciation of women's work, and a deeper understanding of some of the social and political systems that restrict and marginalize women's opportunities and contributions, but also that students were at the center of the learning process. As the teacher noted, he was able to "make gender central," without making it like he was teaching his students "appropriate gender roles, or appropriate ways of talking about gender." He further noted that what made the project work was that it was "building on student knowledge." In other words, students were exploring issues that were important to them, through a series of questions which they developed and that were posed to people that they care about. And, finally, the project was important because the information they collected was reflective of and relevant to their own lives and experiences.

This process of "building on student knowledge" was repeated by teachers from many different grade-levels and disciplines. A middle school art teacher, for example, explored "gendered conversations" that took place among students in her classroom about the depiction of women's bodies (both naked and clothed); appropriate expressions of masculinity such as whether there are such things as "sissy colors"; the negative portrayal of women in rap videos; and whether white teachers could be "trusted" to teach black history. While some of these conversations were seemingly unrelated to the formal art curriculum, this teacher concluded that they were, in fact, deeply reflected in students' art work, as well as the ways that they talked about the issues and images raised in their classroom assignments. This is clearly exemplified in one assignment, where students were asked to create their own mythical creatures, and one girl wrote:

> *My story is about a Mermaid name Shereise. She has her hair in a Bun. A green fish tale.*
> *She also has Blue eyes and lives in the Meditterane sea. She died. She was killed by a*
> *fisherman because she didn't let him touch her.*
> *HORRIBLE!*
> *Isn't it!*

The symbol of the fisherman in this story suggests both a male in power and a being

from another culture (e.g., land vs. water). It is thus highly significant that she was killed because she didn't let him touch her--which could be read *literally* as sexual abuse, or *metaphorically* as refusing to be captured (e.g., subsumed by another culture; assimilated). In other words, despite the depiction of the mermaid's storybook blue eyes, this is clearly no Disney story.

A science teacher asked her students to study and write reports about male and female scientists only to be told that her students could not find many female scientists in their textbooks. When she asked why that might be the case, male students responded with comments such as: "I think we probably didn't find more women because women are lazy," "It's too dirty for women and they're not strong enough anyway," and "Girls have to spend so much time looking pretty they can't spend the long hours it takes to be a scientist." To her surprise, some female students supported such comments (whether seriously or with irony it is not easy to tell), noting that girls needed to concentrate on being homemakers because "Men don't want to take care of themselves," and "Boys bring home the bacon and girls cook it." Thus, rather than ignoring the disparity between the number of boys versus the number of girls taking higher level science courses and entering science careers, or rather than simply telling girls "they can do it," and encouraging them to pursue science despite the obvious psychological obstacles they needed to overcome, this teacher took a notably different approach. She sought to better understand her students underlying assumptions about gender and science--assumptions that could not easily be dismissed--and help students to begin to become more conscious of such assumptions as well.

Following an ordinary classroom assignment on "current events," a high school history teacher found herself and her students deeply immersed in a project which involved on-going correspondence with men and women at local prisons. This project was, as the teacher describes: "student initiated and had the interests of students…The incarceration level for many members of the African American community is high. Many students knew someone who was locked up or knew someone who knew someone in jail." The point of this project was not to overtly "warn students" against the consequences of committing crimes, but rather for students to collect their own data comparing "what they knew or had heard about prison" with stories and advice from actual prisoners.

Through this process students not only learned a great deal about the criminal justice system, but, according to the teacher:

> They were encouraged to think about alternatives to violence in conflict situations….We were able to take negative experiences and make them into positive learning experiences. Students appreciated the advice and influence of parents, family, and other adults with regard to attempting to keep them out of jail. Students began to understand such concepts as prison industrial complex, rehabilitation, death penalty, life in prison, etc.

It is also significant to note, with regards to gender, that students considered why female prisoners were less likely to answer their questions, and, as a class, they speculated as to why this might be the case: Were there too many questions? Should they have written women in letter format as opposed to questions format? Are women more ashamed of

imprisonment than men? These questions formed the basis for ongoing exploration, which eventually led one young woman to go to work in a prison after graduation.

A high school special education teacher, who also wondered about the relative "silence" of females, convened a group of girls from one of her classes whom she found to be unusually quiet in class. She wanted to better understand why they did not talk more, and why they let boys make degrading and negative comments about them. Among one another (e.g., "safe space") the girls were very vocal about their experiences in school. What the teacher found as they talked over lunch greatly surprised her. While the girls' explained their silence with comments such as "It ain't my place 'cause I ain't got nothin' to say" and "You mind your business till it's your turn, just shut your mouth and let somebody else talk," the teacher began to wonder whether "what they were saying had a connection to the issue of power." She went on to ask the girls:

> Let me see how this sounds--see if this sounds right to you, it almost sounds as if you've let them run their mouths because you let them think they're in control, but you're not giving them control over you because you are not giving them a chance to argue with you.

The girls all agreed that this sounded correct, lending a very different definition of girls' silence--in this case being a kind of passive-aggressive defiance.

It was not only teachers, however, who attempted to use critical pedagogy and action research to better understand students and help them excel. A Dean of Students (e.g., school disciplinarian), for example, explored the relationships between mothers and sons who were brought to her office. She became concerned by the number of mothers who seemed to condone their son's violent behavior, even to the point of allowing them to carry guns. Her systemic, open-minded observation led her to identify a number of "recurring themes" including: mothers' expectations for their male children; issues of physical safety and protection; the way behavior is explained; and the question of who is "in charge."

Over time, The Dean came to understand that, in many cases, these boys were expected to "protect" their families, in what were unquestionably very real and very dangerous situations. Yet rather than conclude that these neighborhoods were "hopeless" or that these young men were innately violent, she began to consider the problem in the larger context of poverty, racism, and the failure of social welfare systems. While the project ultimately created more questions than it did answers, the process was nonetheless a highly rewarding one. Noted the Dean:

> How can parents and teachers work with these young men to help them toward successful relationships with others in their families and in the workplace? Should I acknowledge that our views and goals might be different, that what seems to work on the street does not work at school or even that what seems to work on the street could in reality be putting their children at risk? How would this be received? What are the alternatives? Can the curriculum itself help open up these topics for discussion, so that some student might recognize choices where they previously saw the world as beyond their control, or out of their control?

Here, the Dean recognizes that there are no easy solutions to these problems. Her final point, however, that the curriculum itself could be used to open up discussion of such issues, is an especially important one. Once again, the emphasis is not on teaching student "appropriate" behavior or roles, but rather on engaging students themselves in the process of defining the problems and in seeking answers. In other words, schools should be places where students are not simply given knowledge, but are given agency. This is a critical step in the process of critical pedagogy, for, as Finn (1999) suggests: "If we teach children to critique the world but fail to teach them to act, we instill cynicism and despair" (p.185).

Conclusion

Many more examples of such work can be culled from the GATE program (see for example, Pennsylvania Humanities Council, 1997; Ginsberg, 1999; Ginsberg, Shapiro, & Brown, 2000, forthcoming, 2003; Shapiro, Ginsberg, & Brown, 2002) This is not to say, of course, that GATE was without disappointments and hurdles. As anyone who has ever attempted to implement a reform program of this nature in a large urban school district knows, such programs rarely go "as planned." GATE was hindered by the isolation of the teachers involved who found little support from their non-participating colleagues, and who were faced with multiple, often competing reform mandates at once. Many participants were also reluctant to take a critical pedagogy approach or engage in teacher research because of the great amount of time involved in such activities in a culture where time is an extremely limited commodity, and where high stakes testing was of primary concern.

On the other hand, GATE offered teachers and administrators opportunities to meet regularly, and to build a sustained professional development and inquiry community. In this capacity, they were able to pose and investigate joint questions, bring diverse perspectives and viewpoints to each others' work, and, perhaps most importantly, to find others who supported them in their quest to make gender an internalized critical lens of exploration. The program also emphasized the need to redefine professional development in ways that are less didactic and "packaged," and are more focused on giving teachers, administrators, parents, *and students* a chance to fully engage in curriculum content and construction, as well as to define gender on their own terms. As one high school history teacher noted:

> When GATE began I was thinking in terms of introducing a more balanced approach to women's place in history, whereas now I see the need for helping young women to determine their identities on their own terms.

While gender equity in education has been frequently reduced in public discussion to a discourse of *sameness vs. difference*--a discourse that tends to reduce boys and girls to singular and one-dimensional categories--there are other ways to understand and approach the issue. Using a critical pedagogy approach which challenges first assumptions and privileges student knowledge and experiences, educators can approach gender equity in a way that is both site-specific, respectful of different cultures, and invites ongoing inquiry and action. As one seminar facilitator emphasized in her final report: "If it hadn't stimulated new questions it would not have achieved

anything. Since participants and facilitators left the project with many more questions regarding gender, we can be certain that GATE represented a success professional development program." Most importantly, students, many of whom are continually silenced in school settings, can be given an agency which allows their voices to finally be heard--and *counted*. As one GATE teacher concluded at the end of the program:

From the beginning of my gender-focused activities, one fact emerged--my students have a lot to say. My greatest source of satisfaction is the number of young people who know that I *listened* and *heard their voices* as we attempted to work through this together.

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