

BEYOND "I": CRITICAL LITERACY, SOCIAL EDUCATION, AND THE "I-SEARCH"

Beth C. Rubin

If I hadn't done the I-Search, like, [on] this topic [acquaintance rape], I guess I would still be kind of wondering about it. Like how do you deal with it after, am I doing the right thing...stuff like that. The I-Search was kind of a door I could go through and read all these things and realize that I wasn't the only one.

- Teresa , tenth grade student

*...if knowledge is to be used by students to give meaning to their existence, educators will have to use the students' values, beliefs, and knowledge as an important part of the learning process before, as Maxine Greene points out, a "leap to the theoretical" can be attempted (H. Giroux, *Teachers As Intellectuals*, 1988, p. 65).*

Paulo Freire and Donald Macedo (1987) write, "the act of learning to read and write...is a creative act involving a critical comprehension of reality. The knowledge of earlier knowledge, gained by the learners as a result of analyzing praxis in its social context, opens to them the possibility of new knowledge" (p. 157). Yet school-based learning often does not reach this ideal. Indeed, many educational theorists argue the contrary, asserting that schools, through institutional, pedagogical, and curricular practices, are deeply implicated in the reproduction of inequalities along class, race, and gender lines (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Morrow & Torres, 1995). Whether or not schools can be empowering for students and can develop people as "citizens who think critically and act democratically" (Shor, 1992, p. 15), remains an open question.

The social studies, with its focus on the doings of people throughout time and place and its charge to instill democratic values, seem a natural location for fostering critically conscious citizens. Although the National Council for Social Studies asserts that social studies teaching and learning should "develop new understanding through a process of active construction of knowledge" (NCSS Curriculum Standards, 1994), and social studies scholars have advocated such teaching for decades (e.g. Dewey, Taba, Beyer), social studies classrooms are often dominated by passive activities such as rote memorization, listening to lectures, test and quiz taking, and worksheet completion (Engle, 1996; Adler, 1991; Goodlad, 1983). Topics holding a great degree of interest for students are often overlooked, and personal experience is not often used as a starting point for the exploration of larger societal issues.

In this article, I would like to add to the discussion an example of a course - Social Issues - and a writing assignment - the "I-Search" - that for six ninth grade girls sparked a "critical comprehension of reality." The "I-Search" is a research project in which students investigate a question, issue or problem of personal interest to them. Students pose questions, conduct library and electronic investigations, gather data through interviews and observations, and document their research process in a journal. The final product is a paper that includes both analytical and reflective writing.

In 1996, Teresa, Sara, Jill, Rachel, Dana, and Karen, all students in my Social Issues class at a suburban California high school, conducted critical inquiries on topics of great interest to them, and, in so doing, began to develop the conceptual, analytical and practical tools for broader analysis of pressing social issues. Not incidentally, however, they also began to redefine pivotal events and experiences from their own lives, connecting what they had thought of as personal and individual to larger societal themes - Greene's "leap to the theoretical" - and, in some cases, building a critical analysis of those past episodes. The importance of taking students' experiences and perspectives on schooling and school reform into consideration is beginning to achieve notice (Cook-Sather, 2002; Rubin & Silva, in press; Ericson & Ellet, 2002; Oldfather, 1995). In this article, the experiences of six students form the basis of an argument for a place within the social studies curriculum for the critical study of social issues of relevance for students, and a place within such a course for the rigorous exploration of self and society fostered by the I-Search assignment.

Background and Method

The social issues context

The I-Search project took place within a course called "Social Issues," a required class for ninth graders at Mountain High

School. A one-semester course, it covered issues deemed of critical importance to adolescents: sexuality, drug use, health and wellness, communication skills, and relationship issues. My colleagues and I, a team of ninth grade English and social studies teachers who collaborated on curriculum and pedagogy, added a "Race and Gender" unit to the curriculum as well, within which we explored issues related to sexual identity, race and racism, and gender roles.

Social Issues in the Mountain School District became a required course in an unusual way. In 1994, students around the district joined together to demand a curriculum more relevant to their interests and concerns. The student school board member proposed two changes to the rest of the school board governing Mountain High and the other three high schools in the district: the implementation of a school-based distribution system of free condoms and the creation of a course which would allow students to explore the issues which most concerned them, principally sexuality. Both demands were met, and Social Issues as a required one-semester social studies course was born.

Social studies researchers have frequently advocated for courses in the Social Issues mold. Evans and Saxe (1996) call for an issues centered social studies education in order for students "to develop well-reasoned responses based on disciplined inquiry, on thoughtful, in-depth study" (p. 2). It is an approach, they argue, that "ultimately...aims at empowering the learner." Crocco (2001) and Perlstein (1998) write that such topics as gender, sexuality, misogyny, and homophobia should be addressed within a newly conceived social studies curriculum, not in the least as a means of reducing teenage violence. The Social Issues class that was the context for this study, created through student demand, provides one example of the utility and relevance of such a course.

The pedagogical context

At Mountain High School, Social Issues was taught as part of a detracked, integrated English-Social Studies core program. In this program, two groups of 25 students shared the same English and social studies teachers. These classes were scheduled one after the other so that it was possible to put both classes together for films, speakers, student presentations, or large group activities. The English-Social Studies teaching pair supported each other's assignments through supplemental activities and dedicating class time to working with students on large projects. In addition, all eight of the school's ninth grade English and social studies teachers functioned as a team, planning and reflecting collaboratively. This was the second year the program's teachers had attempted the I-Search assignment, and many refinements and revisions had been made from the previous year. This was a personalized environment with substantial academic support for students.

Social Issues teachers felt strongly that ninth grade students in these detracked classes needed a great deal of coaching to successfully accomplish the I-Search project. This was accomplished in two ways. First, the I-Search process was "broken down" into its component parts: problem posing, question refining, library research, interviewing, drafting, and revision. Teachers gave direct instruction on the skills needed for each part of the project, time to practice those skills, and feedback on each project segment as it was handed in. (The documents in the appendix describe how this was carried out.) Secondly, the research process was "sheltered" for the students by the teachers, support personnel and librarian working with the class. Students spent time in the library with their teachers and the librarian doing hands-on research. Special needs students worked on the project with support staff during a special study period. By navigating the complexities of the research process hand-in-hand with experienced adults, students found this first research experience gratifying rather than frustrating.

The I-Search was embedded in a curricular framework that emphasized building critical understandings of self and society. During units on race, gender, and sexuality, students were encouraged to analyze media, reflect upon personal beliefs, and listen carefully to the experiences of others. In one assignment, for example, the two classes were divided by gender, with boys and girls working separately. Each group then brainstormed a list of things they thought were advantages for the other gender. The groups then reunited and reviewed each other's lists in a "fishbowl" format, each group taking turns as the other group discussed the list they had been given. Students were surprised by both the assumptions made by the other group and how that group responded to their own assumptions, emerging with a deeper understanding of how gender shapes and constrains our daily lives. Such assignments formed a context within which it was appropriate and comfortable to raise delicate issues and challenge taken-for-granted understandings.

Site and participants

Mountain High School. Mountain High School was located in Pine Valley, a middle class suburban town in northern California. The school had 900 students and served a diverse mix of suburban, rural, and urban communities. In 1996, at the time of the study, the student body was 77% European American, 8% African American, 7% Asian American, 6% Latino, and 2% other. Race and socio-economics were linked at Mountain, with the majority of Mountain's European American and Asian American students coming from middle-to-upper middle class Pine Valley (suburban) and Alpaca (rural), and most of the school's African American and Latino students coming from poor and working class Cedar City (urban).

Participants. The ways in which gender is implicated in both interpersonal and institutional power relations can make adolescence a particularly difficult time for young women (Thorne, 1995). Crocco (2001) writes, "Gender and sexuality may be abstract concepts, but they are not merely 'issues.' Instead, they are embodied in the daily, often difficult lives of our nation's young people" (p. 20). For the six girls who participated in this study, their daily lives as young women in our society seemed to provide them with ample material for critical inquiry. Issues of gender are under-researched in the social studies literature and, perhaps as a consequence, social studies curriculum and pedagogy have been only superficially affected by recent feminist challenges to the standard curriculum (Bernard-Powers, 2001; Noddings, 2001). Focusing this research on the experiences of young women in a social studies classroom is one small step toward filling in that gap.

The six focal students were in ninth grade at the time of the project, and in tenth grade when this research was conducted. Table 1 identifies the six focal students by name, ethnicity, and community of origin. It also describes each student's I-Search topic.

Table 1: Focal Students

Student	Ethnicity	Community	I-Search Topic
Teresa	Latina	Alpaca	Acquaintance rape
Sarah	Latina/white	Alpaca	Depression and suicide
Rachel	Asian American/white	Pine Valley	Body image
Dana	white	Alpaca	Body image
Karen	white	Pine Valley	Bipolar disorder
Jill	white	Pine Valley	Women and sports

These students were selected both because their teachers identified them as having been particularly engaged and affected by their I-Search experience and because they identified themselves as benefiting personally and academically from the project.

Study limitations. This mode of participant selection allowed us to see how the I-Search affected those students most engaged in the process. The study does not, however, offer insight into how the project was experienced by a larger variety of students - in particular by boys and students less interested in the assignment. Thus while we learn of the potential of the I-Search to build critical awareness and literacy in those students who had a positive experience with the project, we do not hear from those students who did not find the assignment to be relevant or instructive. This is a limitation of the study.

Research and analysis

Qualitative, student-centered research. The study was grounded in the five features of qualitative research, as defined by Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p.29-32): 1) the "natural" setting was the data source, and the researcher was the key "instrument" of data collection; 2) the research was descriptive in nature; 3) I was concerned with process rather than outcome; 4) I analyzed the data inductively; 5) "meaning" was my central concern. Additionally, in this research I attempted to "authorize student voice" (Cook-Sather, 2002) by putting student experience, from data collection to analysis to write-up, at the center of the project.

Researcher role. My role as researcher was simultaneously facilitated and made more complex by the fact that the focal students had conducted their I-Search projects under my guidance the previous year. Although I was no longer employed by Mountain High School and had no ability to influence the grades or school experience of the participants, my previous relationship with them no doubt colored our interactions with each other during the data collection process. On the positive side of this equation was the fact that students knew and trusted me at the outset of the study. I did not need to spend time getting to know the study participants or building their trust, and my prior familiarity with the students, the school, and the I-Search assignment greatly facilitated the initial stages of the data collection process. On the other hand, the participants, as my former students, might have wished to please me with their responses, and this may have colored their representations of their experiences during our interviews. A teacher-student power imbalance may have added to the unavoidable adult-teenager power imbalance, also affecting the students' responses to my questions. Finally, my own role as teacher while the I-Search project was underway may have predisposed me to regard the outcomes of the project in a more favorable light than would have been the case for a less involved investigator.

Mitigating these concerns was the fact that I was no longer the focal students' teacher, no longer an employee of the school or district, and hence had no ability to affect students' grades or school experiences. Additionally, students were guaranteed complete confidentiality as part of the consent form signed by them and their parents to participate in the study. Finally, I involved graduate school colleagues and teacher colleagues in reading and discussing the data set in order to both challenge and confirm my research findings.

Data collection. The study was conducted through interviews with the six focal students, focus groups with several of them, and examination of their I-Search papers and accompanying materials. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in private places on the school campus - outdoor locales during class time and empty classrooms - and averaged an hour in duration. All data collection took place approximately a full year after the I-Search project itself.

Data analysis. Data analysis, as in most qualitative studies, was iterative, moving back and forth between different parts of the data set as assertions emerged. I moved reflexively between reading and rereading the data set, developing and applying coding schemes, and building assertions. It became clear early on that empowerment, engagement, and the development of critical literacy skills were strong themes in the data, emerging in interview data, students' written work, and teacher and researcher reflections. As data analysis proceeded these themes were refined into the findings presented in this article: that students connected strongly with the topics of their research, that they experienced some degree of personal and intellectual insight - even transformation - as a result of their I-Search investigations, and that the focal students deepened their critical literacy skills through the process.

Transforming experience/experiencing transformation: Findings from the field

The topics for investigation chosen by the six focal students read like a textbook description of the low points of adolescence for girls: inequalities in sports, depression, suicide, sexual assault, and negative body image. That these particular topics were meaningful to these female ninth grade students is not surprising. In their early teenage years, girls "have higher rates of depression, lower self-esteem, more negative images of their own bodies, and declining academic performance in areas like math and science"(Thorne, 1995, p. 156). Athletics becomes highly dominated by boys, and "sexual harassment and rape are persistent dangers" (ibid.).

Yet rather than the "loss of voice" which many feminist educational psychologists argue characterizes female adolescence (Gilligan, 1982, 1990; Rogers, 1991; Tolman, 1991; Galatzer-Levy, 1993), in this study girls wrote and told me of their passionate involvement in researching some of the very issues which the experts pinpoint as causing their "abandonment of a sense of voice" (Galatzer-Levy, 1993, p. 181). In other words, they "gained voice" through their head-on encounters with supposedly disempowering topics. How did this come about? First, by starting with experience, students were able to connect deeply with their research questions, leading them to become more invested in this project than they had been in previous school assignments. Second, through their research they were able to transform their understanding of those experiences, putting them into social and historical context, connecting with others in similar situations, and drawing a theoretical link between their individual experiences and broader social issues. Finally, through the project these students developed academic skills of inquiry and analysis rarely tackled at the ninth grade level, building competencies and analytical frames that would help them "to define rather than simply serve in the modern world" (Giroux 1988, p. 135). These findings are described below.

Starting with experience

The focal students in this study developed research questions which were personally important to them, and which were, in effect quests for self-knowledge. Dana, when asked to reflect on how she felt about her finished I-Search paper, told me "I feel like I did a good job on this. Because it was more like, it was so much more personal than something I'd write for a science project...It came out more from the heart, I guess, than other things." Starting with experience seemed to be a key element of the I-Search experience for these students, affecting their choice of topic, distinguishing the assignment from previous school assignments, and validating their own experiences as the subject of research.

*Choice of topic.*² Students' I-Search topics, as noted earlier, emerged from personal experiences. Teresa and Sarah's topics emerged from traumatic life events of which they were struggling to make sense. Teresa's I-Search, titled "Have you been raped by a friend?" emerged from a sexual assault on her by three boys halfway through her freshman year. "Choosing this subject was very easy" she wrote in the opening lines of her paper. "When my teacher told me we were doing a project on Social Issues, I knew what I wanted to do, because of a personal experience. Hopefully I will answer the question 'What should everyone know about date and acquaintance rape?'" Acquaintance rape is an intimate topic that you might expect (and, indeed, the school administration did expect) a student to hide. In the context of the Social Issues class, however, this topic was legitimated and seemed appropriate as a object of study. "Well, with Social Issues class it was kind of like an open, like we talked about everything," Teresa reflected in an interview. "And I felt that it was right for me to choose it [the I-Search question] because Social Issues is about you, about who you are, about what interests you." The context of the Social Issues course legitimized acquaintance rape as a topic of study for Teresa.

Sarah's bout with depression, including two suicide attempts, was the catalyst for her choice of topic. "Mine was about depression," she told me, "and if it was curable and also how people reacted to it, and how...kind of just an overview on depression. I really wanted to learn about it. It was extremely easy for me to pick this topic because of my experience at the

beginning of the school year. And then also my experience during the school year." This topic was, at times, draining for her to deal with. She found that "It was hard researching it...because a lot of times I would hear all these horror stories while reading these things, I'd read about all these different famous people who had died from suicide. And it got me sometimes thinking, going, and getting me more upset." "Critical learning...is emotional as well as rational" (1992, p. 23), writes Ira Shor. The emotion involved with this research, although at times difficult to bear, was testimony to Sarah's sense of engagement with the topic.

For Jill and Karen, their research questions arose from quests to understand puzzling and troubling aspects of their own lives. For Karen, her mother's bipolar disorder was a lifelong point of mystery and confusion. "My mother is bi-polar and I really wanted to know what was going on with her and what her condition was," Karen told me. The I-Search was, "my chance to take the time and research that disorder...Generally when you're in school you don't have time to do that." The I-Search gave Karen the opportunity to explore a topic that had long concerned her.

Jill, long involved in athletics, was also triggered by the desire to understand something that puzzled her in her own life. In her idea piece,³ Jill wrote that "...my friend was talking about how the boys' volleyball team got new volleyballs, and I was on the girls' team and we didn't get new balls." This perceived inequality caused her to ask in her I-Search "Are boys' and girls' resources equal in high school? This is mainly sports resources, but it also includes are bathrooms nicer? Are the resources of equal quality? Is there equal ability to get resources?" "I was *really* interested in this topic," she told me. "I knew it would be something that I would be curious about and that I would be interested to learn about." Her I-Search journey took her to interviews with the school's athletic director and a coach, as well as putting her in touch through books with the stories of women who, as Jill put it, "couldn't play sports when they were younger."

Dana and Rachel's topics arose from their yearning to understand how the world around them, the media in particular, affected the daily lives of themselves and their friends as young women. "It rules girls' lives. I see it all the time," Dana told me, speaking of thinness and fashion, "a lot of my friends are just constantly worried about that kind of stuff." This general observation of herself and her peers led her to pose the question in her paper "How does the media affect adolescent girls' identities? Is it just with skinny models and actresses, or is there more to it? Those questions seemed important to ask." Dana's research involved the interrogation of the very media images she felt so affected her peers.

Rachel told me that she "noticed, like in ads and TV and stuff, its always the women who are thin, and the guys are, whatever, I guess they're kind of masculine, but its not nearly as much pressure, I guess, is put on the guys." This observation led her to wonder "if that was reflected in how people felt," writing in her final I-Search paper that, "I was curious about the difference in self-image between boys and girls up through high school, and I wanted to know what causes kids to feel good or bad about themselves. I also wanted to find out about the problems kids have to face, how much a part the media plays in the way kids feel about themselves, and how large the differences between boys and girls are." Rachel's desire to understand the experiences of her peers led her to create and conduct a survey about self-image carried out with over 150 ninth grade students.

Choosing personally significant topics seemed to make a difference for these students as they saw the project through to its completion. Students noted that their research and writing processes were facilitated by their engagement with their topics. Karen told me that contrary to her usual experiences with research,

The easiest part of the process was basically doing the research. I mean, with that particular subject. I loved, I loved the idea of the I-Search. Because, you know, you got to choose what you wanted to research. And doing research for me is just really difficult. But it was a lot easier when, you know, I was doing it on something that I wanted to know about. So basically doing the research was the easiest part.

Although research was normally difficult for Karen, her strong desire to understand bi-polar disorder greatly eased this process for her. Teresa found that her connection to the topic facilitated her writing process, telling me that "...writing the paper, I guess it was really easy for me because I had the information and I wanted to get it down on paper, I wanted other people to read it." The goal of sharing what she had learned with others spurred Teresa through a complex writing process in which she was required to weave together data from books, magazines, and interviews.

Contrast with other assignments. For students, their engagement with their I-Search topics contrasted with their usual feelings about school assignments. For some students, such as Karen, a lack of interest resulted in failing a particular assignment. Karen recounted a research experience in her tenth grade year, telling me, "Um, I didn't really get through that project though because I wasn't really interested in what I had to research. I was completely bored by it, and when I tried to do research on it it just didn't work for me." Her disconnection from her work was so complete that she never finished the assignment.

Other students suffered through uninspiring projects for the sake of their academic record, but felt that the quality of their work was affected. When I asked Dana, a student with a near-perfect academic record, if she more often did assignments because she felt they were important or because she "just had to get through them," she quietly replied: "Have to get through them." She added that, "There's so many things I do just to do them. That don't interest me at all...its just so much more important when you like the topic." Rachel, a student who consistently earned a place on the school's high honor role, told me that,

Actually I was just reading it [the I-Search paper], and its better than most of the stuff I've written this year...just the quality of writing. I cared about it. I spent a lot of time working on it and some stuff, I just get through it. Like this year, the essays and projects, I've gotten through them, because they aren't really something that necessarily interests me as much.

Karen also drew a connection between engagement with a topic and quality of written work, telling me that she enjoyed writing when she was not "just trying to bullshit, to bullshit through the paper."

These students wanted more from their academic experience than assignments they felt they had to "just get through." They themselves believed they worked harder, with better results, when they were personally invested in their endeavors.

Self as subject of research. The students' personal connection to their research topics sometimes resulted in a blurring of the line between self and subject of inquiry. Because of this sense that they themselves were the subjects of their own research, the knowledge gained during the research process often intertwined with the students' own identities in significant ways. Karen's research, for example, raised questions for her about her own mental health. She told me that "...one of the things that scared me that I learned from doing research on that was that it can be genetic and that it could be passed on to a son or daughter. You know that really scared me because it kind of made me wonder if I could, I could eventually be diagnosed as bipolar." Through research she learned of the symptoms of bi-polar disorder, the details of the illness, and the treatment possibilities, knowledge which was immediately relevant to her own life.

Dana's own encounters with advertising targeted toward the teen market was completely interwoven with her research process. As she examined magazine ads she analyzed her own reactions to them. For her, her own responses were data, revealing the effects of magazine images on young women. As Dana explained to me,

I just looked at them [the magazines] and thought what I thought, and I asked people what they thought, too. When you look at this, what do you see? 'Cause I know that when I look through magazines and I see really pretty girls and really nice outfits it just looks so nice, and I just think I wish I could look like that.

By taking a critical stance toward her own gut reactions to advertising, Dana moved from being a passive target of advertising to a more analytical stance. Additionally, Dana's research into adolescent female psychology through such texts as *Reviving Ophelia* and *School Girls* was, in effect, research into her own experience as a teenage girl.

Sometimes students were so deeply connected to their subjects that the investigation could be difficult and painful. Sarah told me that

...it was kind of like I had a firsthand experience with depression while I was researching it. And it was interesting...at some points it was kind of like, hmm, you know, this *sucks*, you know? Why do I have to live with this, you know? And I just got mad at myself and everything about it.

Karen felt a similar intensity, which she handled by refraining from including much first-person narrative in her paper, maintaining a more distanced voice. This was a conscious decision which she felt may have made her paper less powerful, but was necessary for her own emotional well-being. As she told me,

The most difficult part of the project was probably separating myself from it. And I think maybe that hurt my paper more. Because I kind of, I didn't put as much personal things in it as I should have. Um, but, you know, I'm not exactly sad that I did that. Because if I had I probably would have had a lot harder time dealing with it. Yeah... Basically I put in the interview with my father, or bits of the interview with my father, mostly because he kind of experienced the same type of thing I did with my mother. You know I guess that was kind of a way for me to possibly say what I was feeling about it and you know, say, talk about my personal experience about it. But I still, I think it would have been better if I had put more personal information about it.

Although painful at times, by allowing students to investigate topics of deep concern to them the I-Search bridged personal experience and academic life for these students.

Transforming experience/experiencing transformation

The process of conducting research on topics of intense personal interest had powerful results for the six girls. The research experience often cast a new light on previous occurrences, validating the girls' experiences, revealing previously unseen aspects, and connecting them to wider social concerns.

Validation: "I wasn't the only one." Some students, through their research, realized that experiences that they felt were shameful and unique to themselves were actually relatively common, and not their fault. This "validation" through the research process directly combated the sense of isolation and shame felt by Sarah and Teresa after the trials of sexual assault and severe depression.

As part of the required research, students had to interview two people who were either experts on their topics or who had personal experiences in these areas. Teresa immediately brought up these interviews when I asked her what had been the most significant part of the research for her. She told me,

The interviews. I did an interview with a lady from Alpaca. We went for a walk on the beach, kind of like, you know. And we sat down and I started asking her some questions that I had prepared. And she was, well first she told me the story. What happened. It was an acquaintance rape for her. It was comforting...actually talking to somebody who went through a similar experience made me realize that I wasn't the only one. And obviously I can get through it...I can go on with my life.

For Teresa the interview was pivotal in helping her to understand that sexual assault was not something which happened only to her, and that she could go on to have a normal life.

Students also had validating experiences through their library research. Sarah found magazine articles that helped her to realize that she was not the only person suffering from depression. She told me,

I think personally the magazine articles were what helped me because they weren't just straight facts, it was actually, you had to be influenced by something to write that article...the most influenced [influential] one I read was the one, Kurt Cobain shot himself. That was probably the most, influenced my research...I guess its because it was somebody who, not necessarily I could relate, I mean I could relate to him, I was like, I knew I liked his music. I was into his music. And it was like it was just, when it happened, and when I read the article it was like "Wow, this actually does happen to other people."

Reading popular teen magazines as part of her I-Search investigation, helped Sarah to break through the sense of isolation that enveloped her following her depression and suicide attempt.

In Jill's research into gender equity in athletics she found that what she had thought was an issue that troubled only her, actually had been noticed and investigated by others. She told me that,

I was happy, because I didn't know that they had published something in the Mountain News about it. That really helped me out because they compared boys and girls baseball and softball. And it was interesting because it sort of fed off my original assumption that it really wasn't equal. They just compared the resources. The girls' field wasn't maintained, and the boys' was well-maintained, and they had a changing house and the girls had to change in the bathroom, you know what I mean. So it was just like, just I realized I wasn't the only one thinking about that.

In this way, the research process validated students concerns and interests, joining them to a community of people with similar issues.

Revelation: "It wasn't all me." For some students, the knowledge they gained through the research process helped them to reframe their past experiences, leading them to revise previous understandings of pivotal events. This was particularly powerful in the case of Teresa, whose understanding of her own experience with sexual assault was first shaped by the responses of two powerful and older male authority figures: one of the school's vice principals, Mr. Vega, and her father. Teresa was called out of

class and into the vice-principal's office a few days after she had been seen intoxicated and in a sexually compromising position with three boys. Mr. Vega's reaction when he heard her response to his question "Was it forced?" caused her to change her affirmative answer to a negative. Teresa recounted that,

Well Mr. Vega asked me, he was like "Was this, was it forced?" and I said "Yeah, it was." My first answer was "Yes it was." And then he's like "Whaat!" And then I felt that that would uncover something like totally like more, and I'm like "No, no no no" so I just totally like suppressed it and I decided not to deal with it. And after all that my dad just went crazy. And that was the hardest part to deal with was family and how they would treat me differently. And how my dad treated me differently and stuff.

Mr. Vega's reaction was compounded by that of Teresa's father, who was so angry and shamed that he withdrew her from the school for several months and sent her to live with an aunt for a time. This contributed to her sense of guilt over the sexual assault. As Teresa told me,

During this whole thing I thought it was just totally my fault because of the way my dad reacted to it, I thought it was totally my fault, I thought "how could I be such a bad daughter, how could I be such a bad kid," you know, it was my fault, all of it was my fault, how could I do it. I was like totally putting it on me and not realizing like, you know, it wasn't all my fault.

Teresa's inquiry process, as mentioned earlier, included readings, an interview with a woman who had been raped by an acquaintance when she herself was a teenager, and a talk with a counselor at a rape crisis center. These experiences led Teresa to redefine (again) her own experience, this time from a base of knowledge rather than out of fear. Teresa explained that,

I realized that its, it happens. I wasn't like the bad kid in the school. Because I thought that it was my fault. I thought that it was me the one who did everything, and I'm the one that got them... that I was probably with them and I was flirting or whatever, and I thought that it was like me, you know? But then I realized that it wasn't. I even called like a rape crisis center [laughs] and I'm like "Yeah, my friend..."and all this stuff, and I explained my situation. Because all along I thought it was date rape or acquaintance rape because I knew these guys. But then I called the rape crisis center and they were like "No, that's rape." So I mean I came to all these, to a new understanding of things along the way, I guess. Not just me, but about rape in general... I still kind of take blame for it because I'm the one who got myself drunk. [But]... I realize that it wasn't all my fault. It wasn't all me.

The counselors at the rape crisis center, called as part of her I-Search research, changed Teresa's previous understanding of acquaintance rape as less "real" than stranger rape. Her interview with a survivor of acquaintance rape, described earlier, also helped her to redefine herself from "bad kid" to someone, though partially responsible by virtue of her drinking, ultimately not at fault for being the victim of an all too common crime.

Less dramatic, perhaps, but also significant, was the part that this inquiry process played in helping Karen to make sense of previous experiences with her mother, incidents which had long been confusing to her. She interviewed her father and her sister about events in her own life that she could not remember, learning things about her mother's illness from which she, as the youngest child, had been shielded. As she told me,

One of the things [symptoms of her mother's bipolar disorder] was excessive use of money, and that was, it was kind of scary for me because all of the sudden I realized that, I mean I heard from my dad that she has problems with money... But, you know, I really realized it when I started doing this research because I read about how you kind of lose touch with reality and spend, spend money. And, I realized that that was my mother, that she did that. And actually when she was living in Radson, she bought me a stereo, a little clock radio with like a tape player and everything. And, you know, she really couldn't have afforded that.

In interviews with her father, Karen learned things about her own childhood that she felt that she had repressed. "I realized at that time that I had repressed most of what had happened in my younger years because of my mother. I heard stories from my father when I was interviewing him, basically about what she did. I mean, it was kind of scary," she told me. Through her research, however, Karen felt more equipped to handle new situations with her mother. "I think," she said at the end of our interview "that now that I have more information about it now I know basically what to expect. And I don't have to be surprised by anything."

The "leap to the theoretical." bell hooks (1994) writes that starting with the experiences of students, especially those students from marginalized groups, is a "pedagogical strategy rooted in the assumption that we all bring to the classroom experiential knowledge, that this knowledge can indeed enhance our learning experience" (p. 84). Experience, however, if it ends with the re-telling, can serve to reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate the "naturalness" of difference. An important element of this student project is how this "telling of experience" (p. 86) provided a springboard to a critical analysis of self and society.

We have already heard how Teresa's research led her to contextualize and redefine her traumatic experiences. Rather than a random event brought on solely by her own "bad" actions, Teresa's research showed her that "it was like such a common thing. Although it shouldn't be, but it is." She learned that the fact that she knew her assailants did not mean that the assault could not be termed a rape, and that, as she told me, "stranger rape is less common than acquaintance rape...That didn't click until I read it." In this way, Teresa's inquiry was a bridge connecting her experience to an analysis of rape as a societal issue.

Jill realized that the inequality in resources for boys and girls sports teams at her school, as well as the position of women's teams in professional sports, were linked to more complex issues of gender expectations. She told me that

...as I worked on the project I realized there were so many layers to an issue like this. There's all the coaches and the players and how the audience thinks about it too...I think it goes back to men and women equality. And then the roles of what we're supposed to be doing.

For Jill, what began as a seemingly simple look at resource differentials at her high school became an exploration of societal gender expectations.

Dana and Rachel's topics were inherently connected to wider issues of media representation of women. For Rachel, this manifested itself in the connections she was able to draw in her research and resulting paper about media and the daily lives of her peers. In her paper, Rachel was able to weave together data from her survey, interviews, books, and magazines to connect the experiences of students at Mountain High School to wider societal issues. As Rachel wrote in her I-Search paper, titled "The Substance of Your Perfect Self,"

Through interviews, reading, circulating polls, and spending time at the library, I discovered that there were many things that affected children's self-images today. Among them are the media, parents, and peers. Girls today feel more pressure than ever before to be thin and beautiful, and boys feel they have to be athletic, macho, and muscular.

Most teenage girls say that the media is the number one cause of their lack of self-esteem (Dwyer, 1995) In a poll that I took of about half of the freshman class at Mountain High School, 36 out of 55 (about 65%) girls said that the media affected whether they were comfortable with their looks. Only 30 out of 63 (about 47%) boys said that the media affected them. Body image, or the way you see yourself and how you feel about the way you look, is the largest factor in self-esteem, and is influenced mostly by the media.

More girls than boys are strongly affected by the images the media puts out. They yearn to have unrealistically and unhealthily thin figures. Many psychiatrists and feminists cite numerous social pressures which cause women to strive to be the "perfect female." (CQ Researcher, 1992) One freshman girl said "There's this image, a way you're supposed to be...if you're not like that, you're not comfortable [with the way you look]." Americans face an everyday onslaught of advertising, magazines, television shows, and movies featuring thin, beautiful women. There are many more overweight and unattractive men than women featured in the media. Children and teenagers, therefore, can more easily accept unattractive males than unattractive females. (Dwyer, 1995)

In her work, in addition to showing unusually sophisticated analytical and research skills for a ninth grade student, Rachel was able to move to a wider social issue from the starting point of personal experience.

Similarly, Dana, in her I-Search titled "Targets of Beauty: How the Media Affects Adolescent Girls' Identities," was able to move, through research and analysis, to a consideration of wider social issues which framed the daily experiences of herself and her peer group. As noted earlier Dana's inquiry was sparked by what she described as her female friends' obsession with weight and image. Dana's interviews, readings, and media analysis led her to an indictment of the media, writing in her final paper that,

Our media sells products using young beautiful women, who usually all possess similar qualities, like thinness, and perfected features. Women who girls view as successful, like actresses, hold these characteristics as well, making the connection between beauty and success. These women are beauty ideals and are found everywhere we look.

Although physical beauty has been recognized mostly as what beauty is, according to the dictionary beauty reaches rather than outside appearance. It is associated with harmony and happiness, health, truthfulness, skills, and almost all other virtues that are valued. Outside appearance is merely a small fraction of the vastness of beauty, yet it is still become one of the most important aspects of daily life

In her conclusion, Dana wove together words from magazines and interviews to shape a suggestion for how the media could reform its negative effect on girls' self-images. In the conclusion of her I-Search paper, Dana wrote,

What can the media do to improve their influences on girls self esteem and personal identities? One interviewee answered, "The media should show different types of people who aren't what the look is supposed to be like, and that not everyone who is successful, is that way". (interview, age 14, 1997) In SEVENTEEN magazine, one girls answered "I think models should look more like normal, everyday people. I think models should come in different shapes and sizes" ("The Weight Debate", December 1996).

If women are portrayed differently with a myriad varieties, girls might begin to more easily understand the importance of difference in appearance, and may focus their attentions on crafts and health, not hair and diets. Our society needs to acknowledge these problems, and stop associating success with beauty and thinness, and start intertwining success with achievements, skill and originality. Young women should be awarded for their accomplishments, not their looks, and maybe that will ameliorate our struggling identities.

The work of these students shows that starting with experience does not limit one to an endless, self-centered focus on personal events, but can instead be a bridge to building an analysis of the larger societal issues which frame students' lives. For Teresa this meant, as Maher writes, "us[ing] relevant personal experiences to shape a narrative of an emerging self" (1994, p. 19). For Dana and Rachel, "the telling of experience link[ed] discussions of facts or more abstract constructs to reality" (hooks, 1994, p. 86). Through the I-Search, these students were able to engage critically with the world around them.

The academic dimension: Building skills of inquiry, analysis and critique

The final component of the I-Search project as a pedagogy for critical literacy is the way in which the students were able to, through the project, build their skills of inquiry, analysis and critique. Students, most for the first time, engaged in "real" research, research with a sense of inquiry and purpose. As Karen told me, "It was more intense than other research projects." This intensity involved actively pursuing a question through the investigation of multiple sources and piecing together a coherent paper in which they triangulated evidence from these multiple sources. Students became selective about materials and sources, and built more sophisticated analyses of their issues than their initial framing of the question. These are all critical literacy skills that enabled students to, as Freire said, "read the world."

"Real research." Sarah described her I-Search research process as an initiation into active research, with a level of engagement beyond what was expected of her in middle school. We discussed her research techniques for the I-Search in the following selection from our interview together,

Sarah: This is like the first project that I actually did research on. All other reports I've done I've just opened up a book and pretty much..."I'll just change around this paragraph, just a little bit" (Sarah and Teresa are laughing)

Beth: The encyclopedia method?

Sarah: Yep. Exactly. I mean that's how I got through all of elementary school, doing my reports like that. And this one I actually had to do research and take notes and make photocopies and highlight and actually take time and do it, which was really different than I thought it would be.

The stakes were raised for Sarah, who previously had not been required to go beyond a surface-level investigation in her research projects.

For Rachel, answering her question involved designing, conducting, and analyzing the results of an original survey. Rachel and a friend with a similar topic polled over half of the school's ninth grade class, a process which she told me she felt she learned a lot from "cause it was more than just reading studies and books." Rachel told me that in their survey, they asked students "how they felt about themselves on a scale of 1 to 5. And some of the questions were 'what would you change about yourself,' 'where do you feel pressure to look a certain way, act a certain way' and then you have little boxes, like 'media' and 'magazines,' 'books,' 'TV,' 'movies' and 'advertisements.'" For Rachel, a student already familiar with the research methods utilized in the project, conducting empirical research added a more challenging method and level of inquiry to her work. In this way, the project allowed her to push her analytical skills one step further.

Dana conducted an analysis of images in the media, a process she found difficult, but ultimately worthwhile. "It was hard to have to analyze the advertisements and commercials," she told me, "but it was a lot easier because I was interested in the topic, because it affected my life and my friends' life and because I had read those books [*Reviving Ophelia* and *School Girls*]." Like Rachel, Dana was already familiar with research methods, and the media analysis added a new level of difficulty to her critical inquiry.

Students became selective in their research process, weighting the relative validity of various sources. Karen told me that in her research, "Basically I used everything I could find. Encyclopedias, um, most of my research was done in books, and some off of the Internet. But you tend not to want to research off the Internet because it's not always accurate." This selectivity indicated Karen's growing sophistication as a researcher. Similarly, Jill had thought about the difference between her two interview sources, and concluded that Mr. Saldavar was unwilling to tell her much about gender and sports, while Mr. Marshall, the coach, was a rich source of information. The ability to reflect critically on the relative utility of sources, second nature to experienced researchers, is a new and complex process for ninth grade students, but essential if students are to engage in critical inquiry.

Depth of analysis. Jill's perspective on gender equality in sports evolved during her research process, an example of the deepening of students' analyses over the course of their projects. Reflecting on the process of conducting her investigation, Jill remarked "I started off thinking I was going to see if there was more toilet paper in the boys bathroom or something...Then as I worked on the project I realized there were so many layers to an issue like this." Her final paper "Do boys and girls have equal opportunities, support, and resources in sports?" reflects this development. While at the beginning of the project Jill assumed that, as she told me, "boys and girls don't get equal attention in sports, and no one cares, and all of the guys are totally sexist," her analysis later became more complex as she attempted to grapple with the idea that because of institutional biases and the gendering of interpersonal relations, inequalities can arise even when the people involved have no intention of causing harm. I quote at length from Jill's paper in order to demonstrate the sophistication of her final analysis of her chosen topic, and also to give a sense of the rich and lively writing that resulted from the students' I-Search investigations. The introduction to Jill's paper read,

At Mountain High School, there is a girl's softball team, and a boy's baseball team. Who has better support and resources? For the most part the boys do. When the softball and baseball season started both the boys and the girls were welcomed to different environments. The boys were shown groomed fields, with diamonds of rich red dirt, and they saw well-shaped backstops along with four bases in good condition. They were shown they would have a pitching machine, with catching gear and use of the field house for changing, and as a place to store their equipment.

The girls had a very different welcome-to-the-season experience. They found an uneven field, and a diamond with cracked red dirt. They also found rocks, mud puddles and a warped backstop. They were shown they would have a rubber batting tee, I've-had-better-days catching gear, and use of an empty storage room at the back of the field house. I do not know which team would seem like it had the better resources and opportunities to perform to others, but to me it sounds like the boys are definitely better off (Shafer and Nelson, 1997). Pete Marshall, the athletic director at Mountain, says "We try to do the best we can, to make sure everything is equal here at Mountain" (Shafter and Nelson, 1997). What does this mean? By law, yes, things must be equal, but are they? Does equal mean girls are allowed to participate in sports and have opportunities that look equal, but girls are really discouraged from playing sports? In some places this may or may not hold true. The simple fact of the matter is though, girls are not encouraged early on by anybody (family, friends, society) to develop their bodies for sports as boys are (Carson, 1973).

This passage highlights the best results of the I-Search. To investigate her questions, Jill used both secondary sources on gender and sports and her own original research: interviews with knowledgeable sources. She then reconsidered her initial feelings on the topic, and wrote a final paper that wove together her initial question, the results of her research, and her current conclusions. These are skills of inquiry and analysis that are promoted by social studies professionals (NCSS, 1994; Evans and Saxe, 1996) and critical educators (Shor, 1992; Giroux, 1988).

Beyond "I": A Place for Social Issues and the I-Search in Social Education

Once you have learned how to ask questions - relevant and appropriate and substantial questions - you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know.
-Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969) *Teaching as a subversive act*, p. 23.

In recent years, the term "social studies" has become almost a misnomer, as the teaching of history so dominates the high school subject area. Yet I believe there is still a place in the social studies curriculum for the rigorous study of self and society

that takes place in a course like Social Issues and through a project like the I-Search. Critical inquiry stemming from personal experience is not only meaningful and empowering; it also builds the very skills of research, analysis and writing advocated for by social studies researchers and critical pedagogues alike.

As Postman and Weingartner wrote over thirty years ago, learning how to ask questions enables students to learn whatever they "want or need to know." It fosters an orientation toward critical inquiry that is broadly useful and applicable for life. The I-Search project described in this study provided students with a structured opportunity to grapple with troubling issues in their own lives.

Notes

1All names of people, institutions, and places have been changed to insure confidentiality. [back to text](#)

2See the first handout in the appendix for a description of how students learned to formulate their questions. Class time was devoted to this process as well. [back to text](#)

3Students began the I-Search process by writing an "idea piece" in which they described their question of interest and how they were thinking about it at the beginning of the project. [back to text](#)

APPENDIX

Materials from I-Search Project

I-Search Paper: SOCIAL ISSUES

Overview: You will select a topic of your choice related to the general topics of our Social Issues curriculum: *Communication, Relationships, Crisis Prevention, Race and Gender, Sexuality, and Drugs*, and conduct a research project which allows you to investigate a specific question within that topic.

Outcomes:

- * Ability to develop a question for research
- * Ability to conduct interviews
- * Experience with research on a specialized topic
- * Ability to write a first person narrative
- * Ability to intertwine narrative with third person research
- * Ability write a lengthy, coherent, interesting paper
- * Understanding of historical research and writing
- * Ability to complete a large project with several deadlines

Above all, you should:

1) Truly want to know the answer to your question.

2) Not already know the answer to your question.

Here are some questions which Social Issues students have developed:

- o How does your physical self affect your mental self?
- o How do doctors view the medical use of marijuana?
- o How does teen alcohol use/abuse differ between Europe and the United States
- o How does self-image differ between males and females
- o How effective is Social Issues class in helping students to make better decisions?
- o How common is sexual harassment at the high school level and what are the effects?

WARNING: Do not fall behind. You will become hopelessly overwhelmed. As an extra (and I know unnecessary) incentive to stay on track you will receive points for each segment of the I-search assignment which is completed on time. You need to complete each section regardless, so stay on time and gain points!

Questions, Concerns, Comments:

I-Search Components

I. Question Paper (25 points)

In this paper you will present your answers to the following questions:

- 1) What do I want to know? (This should include one over-arching "essential question" and several sub-questions).
- 2) Why do I want to know this? and/or How did I arrive at this question?
- 3) What is the significance of this question for myself and for others.
- 4) How will I go about investigating this question?

II. Journal (20 points) Due 4/17

Once a week you will write a 1/2-1 page entry in your journal documenting the progress you have made in your research, your questions, frustrations, preliminary conclusions, and other ideas. There will be a total of four journal entries.

III. Notecards (25 points) Due 3/20

You will conduct library research on your topic. You may use books or magazine articles as sources for your information. Each fact or idea you encounter will be recorded on a notecard, with the full citation (to be explained in class) written on the back of that notecard. You will complete at least 20 notecards, from a minimum of 5 print sources. Internet research is extra credit.

IV. Interviews (25 points) Due 4/7

Identify at least two people who are experts in or have first-hand experience with your topic. You will develop questions and conduct interviews with those people. Provide a transcript of your interviews.

V. Rough Draft (25 points) Due 4/14

The rough draft, either handwritten or typed, will be critiqued and edited in class by peers. For teacher editing please arrange an appointment during tutorial or other time, or submit the draft by 4/10/97. See below for format.

VI. Final Paper (100 points) Due 4/21

The final paper should incorporate items I, II, III, and IV, as well as your conclusions based on your research. The paper should be a mix of personal narrative and research results. It should include reflections on the process of your investigation and data gathered from interviews, reading and other research. Models and a rubric will help to guide you in your writing.

The final paper must be typed. This is a six week project - PLAN AHEAD. The final paper should be at least 5 pages in length, and no more than eight pages. It must include a proper bibliography and a title page.

Questions, Comments, Concerns:

Start brainstorming your topic:

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Beth C. Rubin

Beth C. Rubin is Assistant Professor of Educational Theory, Policy, and Administration at Rutgers University. Her research interests center on issues of equity and school reform, researching student perspectives, and critical pedagogy in the social studies. She is co-editor of *Critical voices in school reform: Students living through change* (with E. Silva, forthcoming).

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