

# Sex Education and Gender Equity

By developing their own awareness of gender inequities, teachers can help students cope with sexuality in a nonsexist way.

Sexual issues affect students' lives in ways that schools often ignore. National attention has recently focused on child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, teen parenthood, and AIDS. These problems do affect many students, but other sexual issues affect *all* students. Furthermore, many sexual issues affect female and male students differently because of society's stereotypes about gender roles. Teachers should help students cope with their developing sexuality—in ways that counter the pervasive sexism in our culture.

## How Do Schools Teach About Sexuality?

With the exception of formal sex education, teachers generally avoid instruction about both the "private" parts of female and male bodies and functions such as menstruation, making love, or reproduction. This omission is damaging because sexuality plays an important role, not only in the development of sexual attitudes, knowledge, and behavior, but also in other areas of academic achievement.

In the primary grades, teachers often avoid discussing sexuality, even when students ask direct questions. For example, when a preschool boy

asked his teacher how girls go to the bathroom, she replied, "They go to the girls' room." In another case, when a small boy asked classmates if they were virgins, the boy's teacher ignored the incident. Any discussion of sexuality with children only 5 to 7 years old is admittedly risky: teachers may incur parental or administrative wrath. If teachers remain silent, they avoid controversy—but teachable moments are lost. The children, of course, will continue to discuss virginity, or any other aspect of sexuality, without guidance from adults (Best et al. 1986).

What educators *do* can also be damaging. Teachers receive little formal training or policy guidance on sexual issues; consequently, they react in subtle, possibly unconscious ways based on their own unexamined values.

## Addressing Gender Equity

Neither sex educators nor advocates of gender equity in education have paid much attention to each other's concerns. Consequently, few sex educators use gender-equity criteria to guide students' development of sexual attitudes, knowledge, and behavior. Sex educators usually espouse nonsexist egalitarian views, but in fact

many operate from the inequitable paternalistic framework dominant in our society (Myerson 1986).

Moreover, many gender-equity researchers and advocates have avoided the topic of sexuality in education. They have probably feared that addressing controversial issues related to sex education would discredit their efforts to combat sex discrimination and gender stereotyping (Klein 1987).

As educators improved their understanding of issues related to gender equity in education, they developed policies and programs to address overt sex discrimination and stereotyping. But many subtle gender inequities are related to sexuality and are especially difficult to identify because they are often private, complex, and controversial (Wirtenberg et al. 1981).

Most sexual concerns affect both female and male students—sexual attraction, desire to masturbate, sexual orientation, sexual harassment, physiological changes, parenthood, and sexually transmitted diseases—but formal and informal educational processes may differ for female and male students.

*Educators' double standard.* Teachers often expect girls to be less curi-

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ous about sexual knowledge and behavior than boys and at the same time more responsible for safeguarding morals and health. Best et al. (1986) reports how this expectation resulted in inequitable punishments of a 2nd grade girl and boy caught exploring each other's bodies on the grounds of their private Catholic school: Cynthia was expelled; Robert, the instigator, was not.

Fortunately, exceptions to this double standard exist. For example, some public policymakers and educators are trying to ensure that males share equitably in responsibility for sexual activity. Recent "Grandparent Liability" legislation (Wisconsin Act 56, 1985) mandates that parents of teen fathers share financial responsibility for the grandchild on the same basis as parents of teen mothers. Various courses for teen fathers emphasize equitable parental responsibility; these courses use materials that promote flexibility in male roles (Meyer and Russell 1986, Moody et al. 1986).

*Gender equity in formal sex education.* Based on an analysis of sexology textbooks, Myerson (1986) concludes that while the field of sexology purports to be nonsexist, it relies on the patriarchal models of sexual dimorphism, male hegemony, and heterosexuality. According to Breit and Ferrandino (1979) and Stubbs, Rierdan, and Koff (1986), certain ways of teaching about menstruation often rein-

force negative stereotypes, causing embarrassment and disgust for both females and males. Also, in examining 25 college health and sex education texts, Whatley (1985, 1986) found many inaccurate in their emphasis of sex differences. For example, most of the texts referred to male and female hormones without mentioning that these androgens and estrogens are present in both sexes. Some stated that breast development is strictly a female change when research indicates that temporary breast enlargement occurs in 65-75 percent of adolescent males as well.

Whatley recommends curriculum materials that are accurate, free of sexist, racist, and heterosexist bias and that do not attribute biological causes to social behavior. She praises the curriculum by Cooperman and Rhoads (1983) for emphasizing sex similarities by describing changes in a teen named Chris not identified as either female or male. Other secondary school sex education materials that attend to gender equity include those by Kramer (1986) and Bell (1988).

*Attitudes and behaviors.* Jorgensen and Alexander (1983, p. 131) suggest that a gender-equity orientation may help decrease teenage pregnancies. "When adolescents hold traditional gender-based views relating to occupational aspirations, marriage, family roles, and sex-appropriate behavior (males dominant, assertive, and aggressive; females submissive, passive, and nonassertive), they are more likely to become sexually active and less likely to employ effective contraception on a regular basis than those who embrace more egalitarian gender expectations." This finding suggests that decreasing gender stereotypes is associated with more thoughtful sexual behavior.

**Sexuality and General Education**

*Sexuality and academic achievement.* Sexual influences may help explain gender and cultural differences in general education outcomes. Margaret Feldman (1985) hypothesized, for example, that increased early female sexual experience during the 1970s, com-

pared to a much lower increase for males, may have contributed to the decline in female SAT and related scores. She also wonders if a cultural norm among the generally high-scoring Asian-American students influences them to delay sexual involvements in favor of studying (Feldman 1987). Supporting this idea, Petersen (1987) found that the academic achievement of some girls declined from 7th to 12th grade as they became more concerned with popularity. When their social self-image improved, their academic achievement decreased.

Moreover, teachers' responses to students can be influenced by sexuality. One male teacher admitted, "If a pretty student didn't like me, I'd resent her" (*The Male Teacher and Sexuality* 1985, p. 11). Somewhat similarly, Kahle (1987) reported how a male high school science teacher in Australia discriminated against or favored girls based on their sexual attractiveness. Since most of his interactions with girls were personal rather than academic, the teacher failed to reinforce academic competence even for the bright attractive girls.

On the other hand, fears relating to sexual attraction have been known to detract from positive learning opportunities and friendships (*Sexual Harassment* 1978). Based on interviews with male teachers, Eccles (1986) suggested that this tension may account for the limited interactions male math teachers report with gifted girls in their classes. Concerns about sexual behavior can restrict friendships or mentorships for students of either gender who could benefit from studying with partners of the opposite sex.

*Gender stereotyping.* Gender stereotyping contributes to sex discrimination. Romance novels (Andrews 1986), comics (Walkerdine 1987), pop culture trinkets (Engel and Peter 1987), and the punk rock culture—all generally depict stereotypes of male dominance, devaluation of women's bodies, and even sexual violence against women. Similarly, Best (1986) and Thorne and Luria (1985) have noted that students' use of "dirty" words often signifies macho bravado. Boys use words

like *mother-fucker* to deride the sex act or girls; girls use sexually explicit language such as *fucking bitch* and *slut* to insult other girls, but they rarely insult male sexuality.

Schools should guard carefully against perpetuating gender stereotypes. Some education policies, such as dress codes that require girls to wear skirts, contribute to gender inequities in attitudes, knowledge, and behavior.

**Homosexuality.** When educators are supportive of students regardless of sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or handicap, they help increase self-esteem and the ability to learn. Educators can promote equity for gay students by eliminating policies that mandate heterosexual norms, such as requiring male-female dates for school proms, and by debunking homosexual stereotypes, which have negative effects on straight as well as gay students. Fear of being labeled

lesbian or gay has discouraged many students from participating in "inappropriate" sports activities or in non-traditional career training programs (Chamberlain 1985; Lenskyj 1986; Schafer 1984, 1986). Homophobia among adolescents is especially strong since teens are fearful of being different. Boys in particular are often taunted for signs of homosexuality or for feminine qualities. Also, students have reportedly been excluded from educational opportunities, such as admission to medical school, because of homosexuality.

**Teenage pregnancy.** Besides helping male teen parents to assume equitable responsibility for parenting, educators should not discriminate against pregnant teens or teen mothers. In 1984 a federal court ruled that it was a violation of Title IX and the 14th Amendment to expel an honor student from the National Honor Society because she was pregnant, as a similar

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## "Sadly, fear often inhibits friendly touching and hugging between teachers and children."

action would not be likely against the potential father (*Wort v. Vierling*, 1982). In addition, school-based health clinics are effective in reducing teen pregnancy, and programs to provide convenient day care help young mothers stay in school (Reid and Dunkle 1985, Stark 1986).

Potential motherhood has also been used to discriminate against women in higher education. A disabled scientist told me how angry she felt when, in order to be accepted into a prestigious graduate school department, she was asked to sign a statement: "Due to medical reasons, I do not plan to have children." Educators must work to eliminate such barriers to equal opportunity.

The best solution to the teenage pregnancy problem is, of course, prevention. Providing children accurate information about sex does not lead to more sexual experimentation but to fewer pregnancies (Gordon 1986, Kirby 1984).

**Sexual abuse and harassment.** Sexually abused children often have serious difficulties in school. According to recent estimates, 30-40 percent of females and 9-11 percent of males have been abused by age 18. Only 1 percent of this abuse occurs in school, while 85 percent is in the home. Over 95 percent of the perpetrators are male; the few female perpetrators are often accomplices to males (Gilgun 1984).

The overwhelming majority of victims of sexual harassment are female. Although male students may be sexually harassed by women or homosexual men in positions of power, these cases are rare. Furthermore, male victims are less likely than females to lose self-esteem and restrict life choices as a result of harassment (Chamberlain et al. 1986).

Contrary to popular belief, "student-to-student sexual harassment is far more prevalent than teacher-initiated sexual harassment" (Chamberlain, Stein, and Taylor 1986, p. 2). Best (1986) describes an incident in which a group of 6th grade boys held a female classmate captive until the boy who professed to "like her" could kiss her. The girl was described by teachers as "very shy" and "very upset", by

the incident. One of the many incidents of sexual harassment of high school girls described by Chamberlain, Stein, and Taylor (1986, p. 1) involved the only female in an auto mechanics course. The girl found condoms and pornographic pictures in her tool box, was pinched when leaning over the hood of a car, and was ignored when acting as "foreman" of the shop.

Sadly, fear often inhibits friendly touching and hugging between teachers and children. Teachers know that touching students in a friendly way may be considered sexual abuse or harassment. Similarly, they are afraid to allow students to touch one another because of taboos related to sexual attraction. Distinctions between friendly touching and sexual harassment are explained in student materials by Morris and colleagues (1985) and Hughes and Sandler (1986, 1987).

**Sexuality and health.** Males apparently take their bodies and their sexual and bodily functions more for granted than do females. Females' concern for acquiring an ideal body image may contribute to eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, which afflict 12 percent of college women (Marquardt 1987). Also, from about age 12-35, females spend much more time than males on personal care activities (Juster and Stafford 1985). Finally, young girls are more likely to suffer from physiological changes associated with early or late puberty than their male peers (Best 1986, Petersen 1987). These health-related sexuality problems are likely to decrease girls' time for learning and subsequent academic achievement.

**Sexuality as a distraction to learning.** Some teachers may insist that inserting a picture of a nude female in a lesson helps motivate male students, but it often distracts all students from learning. Bogart (1985) noted that teachers' comments about a student's appearance, as when a male teacher interrupted a science discussion to ask a female student if she had freckles all over her body, generally interfered with learning academic content.

Even without external stimulation from teachers or peers, students tune



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in to their own private sexual fantasies. A study of teen girls in Great Britain focused on how sexual relations controlled their social life because, as one girl commented, "You think about it all the time" (Lees 1986, p.23).

### Developing Awareness

To help students cope with sexuality in a nonsexist way, educators and policymakers should consider carefully the following questions.

- How can egalitarian sexual behavior improve classroom and school climate at all levels? Best (1983) described how teachers can facilitate cross-gender friendships in *We've All Got Scars*, and equity programs with cooperative learning components, such as Gender/Ethnic Expectations and Student Achievement (Grayson and Martin 1987), can contribute to this goal.

- How can teachers use sexual attention and attraction to break down barriers to gender equity?

- How can teachers channel students' sexual energies to foster friendships and trust that will promote learning, cooperation, motivation, and character development? For example, how can teachers make the most of students' "crushes" on them without showing favoritism or creating inappropriate sexual expectations?

- Will acknowledging the sexuality of disabled students improve their self-esteem and motivation to learn?

- Will denying tax benefits to schools that forbid interracial dating, such as Bob Jones University, help provide students more equitable educational opportunities?

- Might addressing child care needs of staff and students improve the educational system? Some school districts provide child care for children of teen students and even for school bus drivers. But how many provide it for children of staff?

- Would longer school days and more extended-day services increase adolescents' engagement in academic learning and decrease their sexual activity? Long and Long (in press) found that at least one-fifth of the latchkey adolescents in a recent Washington, D.C., area survey reported being sexu-

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ally active while at home unattended.

In brief, educators should develop a comprehensive approach to formal and informal aspects of sex education. They must attend to gender equity as they select learning goals for sex education. And they can improve educational opportunities for females and males by decreasing sex discrimination and stereotyping related to sexuality. If educators follow these precepts, they will help their students become more knowledgeable and responsible—and help to create a just society as well. □

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*Author's note:* This article was prepared in my capacity as a private citizen and is not related to my responsibilities as an employee of the U.S. Department of Education. If you would like to contribute to my research on gender equity and sexuality in education, please write to request a Critical Incidents reporting form.

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