

Do You Know What Your Students Are Thinking?

Carole Perlman, director of the Bureau of Student Testing in the Chicago Public Schools, and Michael Benson, an obstetrician/gynecologist on the faculty of the Northwestern University Medical School, have developed and tested the Non-Cognitive Assessment Survey, a 69-item multiple choice questionnaire that measures both desired and undesired behavior among 6th-12th grade students. The 40-minute survey measures behaviors and attitudes concerning sexuality, substance abuse, gang participation, and television viewing habits.

The measure is designed to help educators get a clear picture of how students spend their time and what they think about when they are not in the classroom, on the premise that behav-

ior and attitude are just as important a consideration in fine-tuning curriculum as cognitive test scores. The survey was given to 1,500 students in Chicago and New York public schools and 500 incarcerated juvenile delinquents in Los Angeles.

Grant money is now being sought to administer the survey at no charge to as many as 10,000 students during the 1991-92 school year. These resources will be applied on a first-come, first-served basis. When outside funding ceases, the NCAS will be available to school officials for \$1-\$2 per student; statistical results will be sent back to the school within six weeks.

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Surely it is time for caring adults to start talking and for schools to encourage serious discussion about sexual issues at appropriate points throughout the secondary curriculum. Opening dialogue with teens need not require major time commitments or curriculum revisions. It does require a new determination to be honest with our youth, to face with them the confusion they confront as they grow into sexual maturity.

Teachers may find this determination when they realize the dilemma young people face when the exploitative media speak and caring adults do not. They may find it when they establish rapport and truly *listen* to the lives of their students or when they have teens of their own who are sensitive to the pressures that surround them. Once teachers find the determination, they may become advocates for teaching authentically about the realities of adolescent lives. Often, by persuasion and by example, they convince both parents and administrators.

Sexuality in Literature

All teachers are "sex educators," but

there are two disciplines where the absence of sex-related discussion can occur only by deliberate avoidance—English and social studies/history. In fact, most of us probably know an English or social studies teacher who is a sexuality educator in the most profound sense. I know one English teacher who developed a course, "Adolescence in Literature," in which adolescent sexuality was presented within the context of the whole of an adolescent's life. Students arrived at my class from this teacher's, excitedly debating the behaviors of various characters; the relationships the characters had with each other, their parents, and other adults; and ideas of masculinity and femininity. Sex was not segregated for special treatment, it was incorporated into a search for understanding of self.

When the sex-educator function of English teachers is recognized, they can deliberately help adolescents make connections between their studies and their lives. To achieve this, schools can give teachers permission to explore sexuality issues when they arise. They can provide teachers with training to increase

their comfort in discussing sensitive topics and their knowledge of historical and cross-cultural perspectives of sexuality. They can help teachers develop their skills in facilitating discussions comparing one's own attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors with those of authors and literary characters.

For example, take *Romeo and Juliet*. How are their sexual scripts similar to and different from those of teens today? Does American society give adolescents more help growing up? *Romeo and Juliet* are seen as victims of their families' feud; are American teens victims of adult behavior? Was there any way *Romeo and Juliet* could have "saved" themselves? How about American teens?

Or take *Anne Frank*. How was the experience of puberty different for *Anne* because of her life situation? How were *Peter's* feelings similar to *Anne's*? Different? Is "first love" different today?

When one of the course objectives is that students will become aware of their own sexual values and standards, teachers can devise English assignments to examine these. For example, in interviews with grandparents or other elders, students can ask about girl/boy relationship patterns and marriage expectations. Such interviews, guaranteed to delight teens and elders alike, can be written into essays on "Adolescence: Past and Present" that require thoughtful consideration of today's sexual norms.

The Social Studies Connection

Like English, social studies and history provide so many opportunities for helping students understand themselves. I wonder how educators have managed to avoid this avenue for addressing issues of teen sexuality? Apparently, the goal has not been to help adolescents understand the social roots of their own behavior, but rather to control that behavior, primarily through promotion of abstinence—in spite of the fact that virtually all public messages to teens deny that option.

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