

The Art of Loving Well The Report Card

No part of The Loving Well Project was more daunting than the evaluation required under our federal grant. Admittedly more inclined to the poetic and narrative than to the statistical, those of us in the Loving Well office were both grateful for and apprehensive about the grant stipulation that the formal, quantitative evaluation come from a source external to Boston University. The research evaluator hailed from Boston College.

Finding test sites was initially difficult because the questionnaire designed to evaluate changes in eighth graders' attitudes and behavior was intrusive and sexually explicit. Schools and parents who protested had a legitimate complaint. It was also unfortunate that this questionnaire administered at the outset and conclusion of the Loving Well unit set an inappropriate tone for the program, which is far more than a sex education program and does not contain sexually explicit language. However, as the Loving Well Project became known in the field test states of Massachusetts, Maine, and eventually South Carolina, schools were willing to overcome their objections in order to be included.

Another problem, albeit a gratifying one, had to do with control groups. In an attempt to establish a more rigorous evaluation standard than most other research based pregnancy prevention programs, we required teachers who taught Loving Well to use one of their classes as a control group (a group that did not study the curriculum). By giving pretests and post tests to both experimental and control groups and comparing the differences, we could more reliably determine any changes in attitudes or behavior that resulted from the curriculum. Once familiar with Loving Well, however, schools were reluctant to deny the curriculum to any eighth grade class and some only complied with our control group requirement under protest. Furthermore, the literature and discussions were so engaging that teenagers naturally wanted to talk about them with all their friends. It required significant commitment on the part of both faculty and students to minimize casual conversations about the substance of the curriculum outside the classroom in order to avoid inadvertently contaminating the control group.

Throughout the field testing, the anecdotal, or qualitative, evaluation was uniformly enthusiastic. Project staff who observed classes regularly and held periodic teacher workshops heard uniformly glowing reports from students, teachers, and those parents who could be enticed to participate. Among the most memorable was the comment from one teacher who reported that her experiences teaching The Art of Loving Well had reminded her why she had gone into education in the first place. Another claimed that "Loving Well is one of the most exciting places of discovery that I have experienced in sixteen years of teaching." And many in lauding the teacher training sessions expressed gratitude for the opportunity to contemplate good literature and discuss life and love with colleagues. Teachers were energized in ways that were evident to their students, and closer, more trusting relationships were forged in Loving Well classrooms.

The enthusiasm of parents was very much a relief. Boston University attorneys had been alerted to expect some of the controversy usually associated with sexuality education programs, but there was virtually none. Initial apprehensions were almost always allayed by close scrutiny of the book and Teacher Guide.

When it came to a statistical evaluation of the project, however, developers remained skeptical. And if the truth be known, some still wonder about the reliability of eighth graders' self-reports on sexual attitudes and behavior. However, the project evaluator found significant statistical corroboration of the positive impact of The Loving Well Project. When control group attitudes toward issues of sexuality were compared to attitudes of the experimental group, students involved in Loving Well developed a clearer understanding of both the short term and long term consequences of premature sexual activity. In higher proportions they also felt that people should not be pressured into having sex, and they did not intend to have sex while young teenagers.

This result was confirmed by another dramatic finding that focused on students who had never had sexual relations when they entered eighth grade. Those who participated in the Loving Well program were three times more likely to continue to abstain throughout the course of the eighth grade than were their control group peers. A disturbing 28% of the control group became sexually active during that year; in the experimental group that number was only 8%.

A more detailed summary of the evaluation report can be obtained by writing The Loving Well Project, School of Education, Boston University, Boston, MA 02215, or call 617-353-4088. However, nothing in the 34 pages of formal evaluation says it as well as one 15-year-old young man in Lynn, Massachusetts: "It sounds like a stupid title, but it teaches you a lot of things about life."