The New Model Me

In teaching values and human behavior, a program in Lakewood, Ohio, is directing students away from those aggressive acts that can destroy property and lives

BY FLORENCE BEATTY

With discipline problems, violent crime, and vandalism on the rise in American schools, educators are taking a close look at curriculums built around positive, preventive approaches to these crises. One such curriculum—The New Model Me—funded in its developmental stages by ESEA Title III grants, is giving high-school students in 29 states a sound framework for classroom discussions about why people behave as they do, how to handle frustration and aggressive feelings, and how to make responsible decisions in everyday life. While The New Model Me is nonjudgmental in its causal approach to human behavior, it seems to be providing something that many educators feel has been missing from the American classroom: a restoration of the importance of values.

For the school administrator and the teacher, The New Model Me has a protean quality along with an abundance of suggested activities that can be adapted to an individual school's needs. The curriculum can stand alone as a semester's course, or parts of it can be integrated into existing courses in health, social studies, language arts, or psychology. Too, it can become the basis for group-counseling sessions. Once The New Model Me's introductory unit on human behavior has been covered, for instance, a teacher may elect to consider any one or all of five related units—social controls, the real self, values clarification, human responses to situations, and change in human behavior and relationships.

For the student, The New Model Me deals with the many feelings and frustrations over problems that exist just beyond an adolescent's grasp. "It helps students understand why people do what they do and how to apply this understanding in their own lives," explains John R. Rowe, coordinator and director of the project out of which The New Model Me grew. "Through activities in each of the six units, students begin to see that a problem can be solved in more than one way. Behind each New Model Me activity is the reasoning that every action has its own set of short-range and long-range consequences which must be thought about before a decision is made."

A favorite New Model Me activity is the "Bomb Shelter Dilemma." It is one that students in Norman Pieschalski's social-studies class at Lakewood High School usually select from *The New Model Me* student book. A bomb has been dropped, reads the text, and the only ten people still alive in the world are in a bomb shelter. However, food and oxygen can accommodate only seven of the survivors until the fallout has reached a safe level. These seven will have to create a new society.

Each group of ten students must decide unanimously which three are to leave the shelter: a 70-year-old minister, a laboratory scientist, an electrician, a female vocalist, an armed policeman, a famous writer, a professional athlete, a high-school girl, a pregnant and hysterical woman, and her husband.

The first selected, says Mr. Pieschalski, is invariably the 70-year-old minister because "the students generally feel that a religious person would want to sacrifice his life." The next to go are the husband of the pregnant woman and the high-school girl, usually in that order. "What is fascinating," he says, "is how the discussion brings out ideas that the students would never ordinarily verbalize. I've never seen a group, for instance, discard the armed policeman."

When Kenneth Miller taught the "Bomb Shelter Dilemma at St. Edward High School in Lakewood, his classes also picked the 70-year-old minister. The group decision, though, was based on age rather than religion, leading into a full-scale study of aging, including attitudes that other cultures have held about the concept.

Whatever the outcome, the "Bomb Shelter Dilemma" is more than a fun-and-games exercise. Human behavior, students discover, is complex. Nor is group consensus easily reached. The students also begin to discover some things about themselves. "For young people," says Kenneth Miller, who later spent two years as a project disseminator for New Model Me, "the issue of honesty—whether in politics, advertising, human relationships—is a high concern. Adults, they feel, play games and aren't honest with them. As students role-play their way through New Model Me activities such as the Bomb Shelter Dilemma, they see the same games going on among themselves."

The New Model Me emphasizes relating to others, not just fulfilling one's own needs. This emphasis, according to Daniel Kalish, assistant superintendent for Lakewood schools, is its major strength. "Unlike a curriculum that deals strictly with values clarification," he argues, "The New Model Me tries to teach youngsters to accept responsibility for their actions. It encourages them to do something to change aggressive actions that are not constructive."

Teachers, too, Dr. Kalish contends, are affected by The New Model Me experience. "It opens their eyes. They begin to understand students and their motivations and why particular patterns keep occurring in the classroom. I think almost any teacher could handle the curriculum, but those who feel more comfortable with group discussion and do not mind the unpredictable paths it can take seem to enjoy it the most."

In another New Model Me activity, "The Straw Tower," a class divides into small groups to build a tower out of plastic straws and masking tape. The frequent toppling over of fragile straws amid the sticky masking tape usually seems amusing at first. But then frustration sets in. In Norman Pieschalski's class, the students quickly realize that the key to completing the tower is

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collaboration. At another high school in Lakewood, the social-studies teacher throws a deliberate monkey wrench into the building of the straw towers by instructing one student in each group to be a "spoiler" or disrupter. The groups must try to work together and, at the same time, contend with a disrupter.

While designed to reach all adolescents, The New Model Me has proved effective in helping those with behavior problems. At Lakewood High School, 30 students are in a special program because they have a history of being either aggressive or withdrawn in the regular classroom. Although they have no learning disabilities, they have serious enough adjustment problems to meet regularly with a social worker, counselor, or psychiatrist. Several of them are able to attend school only a few periods each day.

For their teacher, James Onk, the challenge is to help these emotionally troubled young people to the point where they can return to the regular classroom. Since 1971 when he first began helping test New Model Me materials, Mr. Onk has used the curriculum. When the present class began, the youngsters were very cautious about opening up, given their long track records of failure and frustration. By the time the class moved into the values unit, just beyond the curriculum's halfway point, the formerly painful silence where dialog was to have taken place had been replaced by easy conversation often leading to verbal confrontation. It had taken Mr. Onk weeks to reach a point where members of the class could listen to someone else's opinion.

At this halfway point in the course, Mr. Onk asks one of the students, Linda, to read aloud from the student book as a review of the valuing process. "A value," Linda begins, "is a strongly held belief, freely chosen from among alternatives after careful consideration of the consequences of each alternative, that is both prized and esteemed, publicly stated and acted upon, and repeated in daily living."

"In your own words," Mr. Onk asks, "what does this mean?"

Linda speaks softly. "It means that when you make decisions, you first should try to think about all the choices you have."

"What about short-term and long-term consequences?" asks Mr. Onk.

"Well, you might not want to go to college now, but when you get to be a senior, your ideas may change."

"Or, as another example," adds Mr. Onk, "cutting class might be fun when you're a freshman, but in the long run what seemed like fun can hurt you. Or let's say maybe you value school and there's a gang of kids on the corner who are taking off for the day. They might say to you, 'That's dumb to go to school.' What would be your decision?"

"Still go to school," Linda answers.

Mr. Onk lets it rest there, switching to the "Identity Auction." This is an activity that requires each student to write down five things he or she would like to do or become within the next five years. Mr. Onk then compiles them into a single list which he distributes to the students, along with $2,000 in play money. He cautions: "Look over the list carefully and think about which items you want to bid on. Make sure you don't bid away all your money and then find something you'd rather buy."

The items on the compiled list cover a lot of ground. Some deal with careers: to be an auto mechanic, electrician, teacher, nurse, or pilot. Another set clusters around travel to Europe, California, or Florida. A third is recreational: skiing, sailing, fishing, hunting, swimming. Other items turn on material wants: to be wealthy, go shopping, begin a business, and build a house. Still others are addressed to emotional needs: to have a good life, to be loved, or to love others. Within this last group, the items vary widely from one student's poignant wish "to want to live" to another student's more violent one of "seeing a plane blow up."

Mark, the selected auctioneer, starts the bidding on the first item—"to be on TV"—which opens at $200 and quickly climbs to $580. After 15 minutes of brisk bidding, the class has picked the list clean, and Mr. Onk asks the students to write down what they have learned from the auction.

Bryan volunteers what he has written: "I learned that money can buy something you really want, like friendship, only if you're playing a game."

"That's not necessarily true," interrupts Mike.

Someone else interjects, "If you bought friendship, it would be bribery."

Bryan persists: "Who'd want a friend you had to pay money for? It wouldn't be much of a friendship. You can't just say, 'Here's three bucks, Jim. Be my friend.'"

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money. Say you meet someone you really want to have for a friend. You could buy him dinner, maybe take him to a movie. That can open the door to a friendship."

Bryan is unconvinced. "You can make real friends without buying something for them," he insists. On this values note, the bell rings. As the students put away the New Model Me books, Mr. Onk puts in a final word. "Think about the choices you made in bidding. Are you happy with what you bought? We'll pick it up tomorrow."

After class, Mr. Onk talks about another New Model Me activity, "The Oatmeal Box," in which students write down something that is bothering them and then place the slip of paper in an oatmeal box. Everyone takes a turn reading the slips. A youngster might draw his own slip of paper and yet feel comfortable reading it as an anonymous statement: "I've got an alcoholic dad who keeps everyone awake until 3 o'clock in the morning and I don't know what to do." Chances are someone else will say, "I know a kid with a dad like that and this is what he did . . . ."

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An effective curriculum requires years of planning, developing, and testing before it ever gains acceptance, and The New Model Me is no exception. Its curriculum for high-school students actually came out of a larger search for courses in health and family living from kindergarten through high school. The search began in 1968 when members of the Ohio General Assembly were concerned about student protests, vandalism, apparent abuses of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco, and changing sexual behavior. The Assembly ordered a survey of the needs of Ohio schools and designated the Cleveland-based Educational Research Council of America (ERCA) to make the study. One of the conclusions ERCA drew from its data was that schools should assist youths in developing a basic approach to problem-solving. The Lakewood City Public School System, working with ERCA consultants, first de-

collaboration. At another high school in Lakewood, the social-studies teacher throws a deliberate monkey wrench into the building of the straw towers by instructing one student in each group to be a "spoiler" or disrupter. The groups must try to work together and, at the same time, contend with a disrupter.

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veloped materials for middle schools and junior highs in a student book, *Dealing with Aggressive Behavior.* As these prototype materials were tested in 1970, work was begun on a student book for grades 4-5, *Dealing with Causes of Behavior.* For grades 1-3 a separate teacher's manual was written.

Turning their attention on the high schools, Lakewood educators and ERCA completed The New Model Me by the fall of 1973. Begun in 1969, the project's first four years were funded by Title III grants totaling $388,500 through the Ohio Department of Education to the Lakewood schools.

Back in 1968, Mr. Rowe recalls, there was little research on aggression. "What we did uncover was conflicting or, at best, inconclusive. We managed to compile from the findings a brief list of factors that promoted aggression:"

- reinforcement of a child's aggressive behavior by increased attention during the outbursts,
- parental use of physical punishment, which the child may then seek to emulate,
- parental permissiveness of a child's outbursts,
- frustration caused by not reaching a goal or meeting a need, and
- violence seen on television.

But the scant research was at least a starting point. "Next we consulted with scores of parents, teachers, social workers, police officers, and child psychologists," says Mr. Rowe. "We came up with a two-part working definition of aggressive behavior: (1) behavior intended to harm some person or object and (2) behavior that is positive, energetic, assertive, and necessary in order to reach some goal.

"We tried to create materials that could help students understand themselves and, consequently, channel their aggressive energy constructively," he says. "We have used Dr. Ralph Ojemann's causal approach that requires a person to look beneath the surface of an event to consider its possible causes. Second, we recognize a hierarchy of human needs developed by Dr. Abraham Maslow: from the basic ones of physical survival and physical safety to the more complex ones of love or belonging, esteem, and the urge to become all that one is capable of becoming. Implied in this hierarchy is that the more basic needs must be met before the others."

The curriculum developers worked out eight goals for New Model Me students: understand the human motivations underlying behavior; realize how resources and physical and social environments influence a person's behavior; study the nature and sources of frustrations and seek constructive methods for resolving them; discern that there are many ways to respond to a given situation; determine how constructive their own behavior is; make decisions based on what effects various courses of action will have on themselves and others; understand that aggressive behavior can be constructive or destructive; and use what has been learned about behavior and problem-solving in everyday life.

When The New Model Me was selected in 1974 as one of the original 21 Developer/Demonstrator Projects within the Office of Education's National Diffusion Network, other schools around the country began hearing about the curriculum. It has proved to be a flexible one. At Richfield High School in Waco, Texas, for example, Mary Nell Eichelberger teaches The New Model Me in home and family-living classes. At Notre Dame Academy in Miami, Florida, Principal Sr. Joseph Marion uses it as a separate nongraded course and a popular alternative to study hall. At Clayton High School in Johnston County, North Carolina, the course is offered three periods a week.

Vernon Stokes, assistant superintendent for the Burleson (Texas) Independent School District, wants all freshmen in his school to study The New Model Me for at least one quarter, with follow-up study near the end of high school. Dr. Stokes sees the course as a preventive discipline program and he may well have caught the curriculum's basic appeal in a time of destructive behavior in our schools and society. In front of the Cleveland Museum of Art sits one of 26 full-scale copies of Auguste Rodin's "The Thinker," valued at somewhere between $50,000 and $100,000. On March 24, 1970, a vandal placed a bomb at the base of the statue, blowing away part of one of its legs. The statue remains unrepaired, an ironic monument to the "unthinking," and a poignant reminder of the need for programs like The New Model Me. □

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For further information about the New Model Me Program, write to Mr. John Rowe, Title III Project Director, Lakewood Board of Education, 1470 Warren Road, Lakewood, OH 44107.

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