

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Deadly Education: The Spread of HIV/AIDS

HIV will kill at least a third of the young men and women of countries where it has its firmest hold, and in some places up to two-thirds. Despite millennia of epidemics, war and famine, never before in history have death rates of this magnitude been seen among young adults of both sexes and from all walks of life. (UNAIDS, 2000)

HIV/AIDS is changing the world in unprecedented ways. It attacks individuals, alters populations and challenges systems. It kills ten times more people per year than war and society's young adults suffer disproportionately (UNAIDS, 2000). According to UNICEF (2000), nearly one third of all people with HIV/AIDS are between the ages of 15 and 24. In the year 2000, 500,000 children died of AIDS, bringing the total of children's deaths to date to 4.3 million. Every minute, six young people under the age of 25 are infected with HIV.

In the face of such shocking statistics, the most common solution offered to stop the spread of the disease revolves around changing individual behavior via education initiatives. With no promise of a medical cure in sight, prevention is the focus of all efforts. Indeed, education becomes a panacea, viewed both as the key to decrease individual infections by promoting health-maintaining and life-sustaining behaviors, and as the stabilizing force for the social fabric of communities and countries torn apart by the debilitating effects of the disease. Yet, almost all attempts to contain the disease are failing. Heated debates continue regarding whether educational programs can accomplish public health objectives in preventing HIV transmission.

This volume of *Current Issues in Comparative Education* examines some of the issues surrounding these debates. Our contributors write from the perspectives of researchers, scholars, and practitioners currently engaged around the world in the struggle to create and implement what one author calls the "education vaccine" for HIV/AIDS. Their articles present some of the great challenges confronting those currently working to contain the disease through social service mechanisms, and reveal some of the most confounding questions HIV/AIDS presents. If education is to serve as the foundation of prevention, what should we make of the continuing rise of infections among school age populations? If education is to fight the frontline battle of prevention, what are the implications of the increasing rates of infection among schoolteachers? How will education systems carry health promotion curricula to students when educator populations are themselves decimated?

In The "Education Vaccine" Against HIV/AIDS, Jan Vandemoortele and Enrique Delamonica provide compelling evidence of a rapidly changing social profile of the AIDS pandemic and its implications for education. They argue that HIV/AIDS has been discriminating increasingly against the illiterate and the poor worldwide. If AIDS is perceived as a disease that predominantly affects the poor, then public commitment to find a cure or a vaccine, or to support public awareness campaigns may be in jeopardy. Given the potential consequences of the changing profile of the HIV/AIDS pandemic,

the authors the urgency for achieving universal primary education in order to equip the poor with the basic capabilities to protect themselves against HIV infection. In this context, the authors view education as one of the most powerful "vaccines" for slowing and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Carol Coombe, an independent education consultant from South Africa, argues in *Keeping the Education System Healthy* that HIV/AIDS not only attacks individuals, it also attacks systems. She states that until recently, HIV/AIDS has been perceived primarily as a health problem that can be contained by effective health education programs. As the deadly virus continues to spread, it is having a profoundly adverse impact on communities and institutions. In the case of South Africa, the government's health-focused HIV/AIDS plans have failed to consider what must be done when HIV/AIDS is out of control and state systems are themselves threatened. This article suggests that while working to limit the spread of the disease, it is necessary to recognize and manage the pandemic's impact on the education system itself.

Michael Kelly, a Jesuit priest and lecturer at the University of Zambia, focuses on one particularly devastating development within the intersection of health and education--HIV/AIDS in schools and its effect on students and teachers. In his article *Standing Education on its Head*, Kelly describes how school participation can enhance the risk of HIV infection. He argues that by continuing to deal with HIV/AIDS in a traditional way in the conventional school curriculum, school systems are failing to meet their objectives. These and other factors necessitate a radical re-thinking of educational provision. He suggests that the formal school system move to incorporate some of the participatory features of non-formal education, with emphasis on the involvement of young people at all stages.

Rosah Moonga Malambo, a graduate student at the University of Oslo, presents findings of a case study examining the views of teachers and students on the teaching of HIV/AIDS in basic schools in Zambia. In *Teach Them While They Are Young, They Will Live to Remember*, Malambo found that although the HIV/AIDS topics were integrated into school curricula, they have been given less emphasis than other curricular components and appear as topics in passing. The article notes that lack of school discussions could have led to the lack of factual details the students display about the disease. Finally, the author discusses cultural beliefs and their impact on the spread of HIV/AIDS. Highlighting the tendency of some parents and adults to avoid discussing HIV/AIDS, the article suggests that more programs are needed to help parents and adults realize the importance of providing information and discussing HIV/AIDS related issues with children in order to reduce the current increasing trend of HIV/AIDS infection among young adults.

Perhaps nowhere is the challenge of finding an education solution to the HIV/AIDS epidemic more pressing than in South Africa. In his article *South Africa as the Epicenter of HIV/AIDS: Vital Political Legacies and Current Debates*, Johnny Sachs, who works with the Department of Health to restructure the public health laboratory service and the South African HIV vaccine initiative, points out that South Africa is the world epicenter for rapid increase of HIV/AIDS. He discusses reasons for South Africa's lead in the global increase of HIV/AIDS, highlighting the impact of the legacies of apartheid.

Indeed, when searching for effective responses to this epidemic, Sachs stresses that it is particularly important to embrace disciplines other than medical services, such as education, and to dissect the socio-political structures that continue to enable the spread of the disease.

Finally, Isabela Cabral Félix de Sousa, a researcher from the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation and the Brazilian National Research Council, provides an example of how Western conceptual frameworks have limited the understanding of the course of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Brazil and therefore failed to properly define HIV/AIDS risk groups. In *Conceptual and Practical Approaches to HIV/AIDS: The Brazilian Experience*, Félix de Sousa argues that the lack of a self-identified homosexual community in Brazil has delayed the addressing of HIV/AIDS related problems and put women at greater risk of becoming infected by HIV/AIDS. In addition, the author discusses how historical tendencies to address health problems by targeting individual behavioral change have further exacerbated the problem. She stresses that unless a health promotion approach addressing individual and social problems is employed, there is little hope to change the course of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. To be efficient, health education must be part of broader programs aimed at social change and targeting all aspects that lead to the infection and the disease.

We hope that as you read this issue, you will gain a clearer perspective on ways in which the issue of HIV/AIDS is paradoxically at the center of controversy and sidelined by silence about its causes and prevention. While many discussions in the HIV/AIDS literature focus on the content and form of health education curricula, the editors of CICE seek new and diverse arguments relating to school safety, the politics of health education, issues of responsibility, and the consequences of the spreading pandemic on the education system itself. We hope that this issue will shed some light and spark further debate on current theory and practice surrounding this deadly epidemic.

References

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