THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF SCHOOL DIRECTORS TO STRENGTHEN SCHOOL-BASED RESPONSES TO HIV / AIDS

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The spread of HIV/AIDS is compromising countries' efforts to attain their Education for All goals, and is threatening to reverse the gains that have already been made in the capacity to deliver quality education. HIV/AIDS not only causes the illness and death of teachers and teacher trainees, but also impacts the demand for education in terms of the numbers and the composition of the school-age population. It poses a severe threat to the education system. The impact of the epidemic on African education systems clearly shows that Asian countries need to learn from these lessons and be proactive. If nothing is done about the epidemic, in some areas the impact of HIV/AIDS may become as severe as it has proven to be in sub-Saharan Africa. This impact applies to demand, supply, quality, content, and planning within education systems (Shaeffer 1994; Kelly 2000; World Bank 2002; Wijngaarden and Shaeffer 2003).

Education and HIV/AIDS

Although jeopardized by HIV/AIDS, education itself offers one of the main hopes against the epidemic and its negative consequences (UNAIDS Inter Agency Task Team on Education 2002; World Bank 2002). Given the absence of a cure or vaccine, HIV prevention/sex education and the transfer of skills and attitudes to reduce people's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS are the most effective tools to fight the pandemic. Therefore, the education sector can play an important role in fighting the epidemic. The Ministry of Education (MOE), school heads and teachers play a crucial role within the school system to reduce the spread of the disease by promoting and providing health education for the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Educators have a unique opportunity to influence young people's ideas about sex and romantic relationships, and to provide them with skills before taking risks.

The education sector can do a lot to prevent HIV/AIDS/STI by assisting young people in acquiring the knowledge, attitudes and skills they need to delay sexual intercourse, reduce their number of sex partners and avoid infection by using condoms. Educators need to teach behaviours that will empower children and adolescents to make healthy choices related to sex and other health issues. Encouraging boys and girls to respect themselves and one another is an important first step. They must impress on all children the idea that sexual intercourse may only proceed when there is mutual consent. The curriculum needs to provide children with opportunities to learn and practice life skills, such as decision-making and communication skills, which can strengthen other important areas of child and adolescent development. Different aspects of comprehensive HIV/AIDS/STI education must be integrated into all appropriate subject areas, such as reproductive health, home economics, family life, social studies and science.

Furthermore, the education sector needs to reduce the fear of HIV/AIDS and of people who have HIV/AIDS by promoting care, compassion and non-judgmental attitudes among students so that stigma and discrimination of this group is lessened. Schools should be enabled to learn how to play an active role in looking for HIV affected and infected children in their communities, and in persuading them (or their parents/guardians to allow them) to come back or remain in school.

Advocacy to Mobilize the Education Sector Against HIV/AIDS

In order to help mobilize the potential of the education sector, in 2002 the UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education developed a generic advocacy and information toolkit on HIV/AIDS and education aimed at sensitizing and helping mid- to senior level officials in Ministries of Education to strengthen education responses to HIV/AIDS. After the *Toolkit for Ministries of Education on HIV/AIDS and Education* was developed and commented on by "peer reviewers," it was finalised and printed in the first half of 2003. Since then, ten countries have successfully translated and adapted the Toolkit for use in their particular country context (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Lao PDR, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Viet Nam), with Thailand, Iran, and Nepal currently undertaking translations.

During the adaptation process in several countries, it became clear that key stakeholders – while mostly recognising the need for strengthened high-level education sector commitment – would like to see a toolkit targeting headmasters, school administrators, and teachers, as well. In many instances, "peer reviewers" at the country-level suggested an adaptation to that effect. Therefore, it would make sense to develop and introduce a similar document for this target group that addresses their particular needs at the school level and provides hands-on advice with a more 'on the ground' focus.

School directors and teachers could play an important role in reducing fear and ignorance surrounding HIV/AIDS, in general, and stigma and discrimination of people living with HIV/AIDS, in particular. The UNICEF-supported project in Sampatong, Northern Thailand offers a strong example (Devine 2002).

Advocacy at the School Level

The argument for advocacy at the school level becomes even more compelling considering the global trend of decentralization in education, allowing for greater school autonomy. As Kandasamy and Blaton state in the UNESCO publication, *School Principals: Core Actors in Educational Improvement*, this is not always the result of a request for more autonomy by the school – sometimes it has been part of an attempt by national authorities to evade their own responsibilities. Decentralization needs to be accompanied by policy-making and by training of head masters and community members about what the expanded, more autonomous role of the school versus the central level implies. Areas of autonomy need to be defined, and accompanied by a strong and consistent support system, especially for beginning or isolated head teachers (Kandasamy and Blaton, 2004:147-149).

We believe that while it is also important to reach young people, parents, and teachers with relevant information and skills, there is a strong need to focus on strengthened support for and advocacy with school directors, since they are currently not mobilised at all. They are often important gate-keepers and influencers – especially in countries where part of the school curriculum is determined at the district level, and where HIV/AIDS is not, or not sufficiently, mainstreamed in the core curriculum (which is nearly all countries in the Asia-Pacific region).

Apart from being a logical follow-up to the existing advocacy toolkit for mid- to senior-level education officials, a new kit targeting headmasters, school administrators, and teachers would also be seen as an integral part of the comprehensive education sector response currently being developed under the Global Initiative on HIV/AIDS and Education (EDUAIDS), which was launched by UNESCO and UNAIDS in 2004.

Why Focus on School Directors?

It is assumed that in many countries, several printed materials aimed at young people already exist. UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, in one of its other projects, is focusing on improving and expanding teachers' access to information that is needed in order to teach about HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, and sexuality. However, to our knowledge, currently there are no materials targeting school directors. Apart from the trend towards more school autonomy in most countries mentioned above, there are seven good reasons to focus on school directors:

1. School directors are often influential people in the community, and can be role models for good practice – both for HIV prevention (promoting responsible behaviour and a healthy lifestyle) and stigma/discrimination reduction, as well as for promoting care and support of people living with HIV/AIDS. Several initiatives such as the Sampatong project in Northern Thailand have convincingly shown this potential by turning the community around towards embracing and supporting affected or infected community members.
2. In some countries, school directors and the teachers have an important say in defining parts of the curriculum. Especially in countries where HIV/AIDS is not, or not sufficiently, integrated in the curriculum and where part of the curriculum planning is decentralized (i.e. for the school/ district to determine), educators may be an important channel for increasing students' exposure to HIV/AIDS prevention in the classroom.
3. In countries where sex education is culturally highly sensitive, school directors may need to deal with community resistance (including from religious groups). They need to be armed with arguments, as well as with scientific information and knowledge, to defend their decision to provide young people with information, attitudes, and skills for HIV prevention.
4. In case the curriculum is overloaded, school directors can be instrumental facilitators in the establishment of 'youth clubs' or other forms of extra-curricular activities like non-formal, peer-based education on HIV/AIDS prevention, possibly by linking up with Community Learning Centers (CLCs) or with local NGOs or youth groups.
5. School directors often need to deal with fear-based resistance of parents against allowing infected or affected pupils to share a classroom with their children. They need to be able to fight these fears of parents (and possibly teachers) and explain clearly that there are no risks involved in sharing a classroom with HIV-infected pupils as long as some basic precautions are taken.
6. School directors are often responsible for following up on policies and guidelines from the central or provincial level. In many countries (including Cambodia, Viet Nam, Thailand, and the Philippines), excellent laws and policies exist on, for instance, non-discrimination of teachers and administrators infected and/or affected by HIV/AIDS, on upholding each child's right to education, on including children from AIDS affected families, or on the right of teachers to apply for assistance or treatment when they are ill. However, most of the time these rules and regulations never reach the school level, and school directors and teachers are, therefore, not aware of them. The Toolkit would 'translate' existing rules, laws, and regulations at the country level to the school level, and attach them for reference.
7. School directors could play a major role as fund-raisers in under-resourced environments affected by HIV/AIDS, especially in countries where the education system is insufficiently guided or resourced from the central level.

It is expected that UNESCO and its partner agencies will develop, test and implement a toolkit for school directors and administrators in Thailand and possibly in other Asian countries during the year 2006 with funding received from UNAIDS.

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