

A PEP TALK TOO FAR?

THE POWER OF AIDS EDUCATION

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This presentation covers three broad areas –

First: the impact of HIV and AIDS on education systems and the ways in which conventional education responses have been shaped. Second: it looks at the rise in what is erroneously and glibly called the resurgence of the new right. Third: the power of AIDS education to change and transform the societies in which we live through a critical re-engagement with what is recommended for education, as well as a critical look at how this epidemic can radically transform education systems, the people in them and the societies they serve; for the better.

A great deal has been written about AIDS education by people who are neither skilled in writing nor schooled in education theory. A great deal of AIDS education has been given by people who are not trained as educators and a great deal of wisdom has been offered about what sort of education is needed to

combat HIV and AIDS by people who are neither wise, nor necessarily well educated.

To counter this, there is a growing body of literature and research, spearheaded by Kelly (2000) et al that looks at how we should be planning for education in the context of HIV/AIDS. The IATT (2003) has developed guidelines, UNESCO and the IIEP has various publications, the Global Campaign for Education has addressed HIV and AIDS and the World Bank has made HIV and AIDS and its relations to education one of its focus areas. There are also many national HIV and AIDS education programmes and assessments of the ways in which the epidemic will affect education systems.

However, with a few exceptions,(Kelly) these are descriptive accounts.

They *document* in close detail what the likely impact of HIV and AIDS on education systems will be, particularly in areas of high prevalence. They *explain* how teachers will be affected, how the student intake will be affected, how the management of schools and indeed whole national education ministries will be affected and they *offer technical remedies*. They give *lists* of what schools, national education departments and governments should do and they develop *checklists* (like school reports) against which the schools and their performance is measured.

Like good pupils, good schools/education systems are then promoted to the next level of funding or technical expertise that is offered.

Good as they may be, they are essentially static texts. They are mechanistic and technician and while they may offer some comfort, they offer no *vision* of how a revised schools system could look, no *vision* of a society post AIDS and most fundamentally of all, they offer no *vision* of a transformed curriculum for a

transformed society. They ask no critical questions. Most people in education systems know what is wrong – know how impossible it can be to transform a system embedded as they are in bureaucracies and national politics. These documents catalogue the obvious and the reason why so few departments act on them is that were it so easy; it would have been done – there is no excitement in meeting these goals.

They link an effective and functioning school system and the most basic education, to HIV Prevention in disturbingly simplistic ways. There is no critical engagement with how this epidemic might transform entire school systems for the better. This is essentially rational, good advice, aimed to shore up and defend the system against the ‘total onslaught’ (to use a good anti-terrorist phrase that we are becoming so familiar with) of HIV and AIDS.

Correctly, they promote a gender agenda – get young girls into school; they argue and they will be able to withstand the social, cultural, political and economic forces ranged against them. While equal education for girls is a human rights given, the question remains to be asked if this is the kind of education – this failing cumbersome post colonial complex system – we want any of the young people in high prevalence, developing nations at the mercy of the forces of globalization, to have?

Again with few exceptions, these prescriptive booklets (couched in the devious language of ‘empowerment’) are written by people who have no actual experience of running and maintaining education systems in rapidly changing societies or of teaching in these schools, other than through eager ‘participant observation’.

Are we surprised then that where school bureaucrats seem to be pleased for this help, they do very little. They, like all school learners, when faced with the

possibility of report cards and judged on performance, are going to shift, ignore, do some things, but not others and generally chaff against the implicit patronising tone of so much of what is offered. They will live up to the inadequacies and learned helplessness upon which these reports are premised; precisely because it is these inadequacies which are, in the main, the source of funding.

And perhaps the most crucial of all, is the growing belief that young people in developing nations, with high rates of infection, do not need an intellectual education. There is a fallacy that young people in developing countries do not need an education that teaches them to think, to dream, to be critical and to have visions of a transformed world; no - what they need (in the most Dickensian of responses) – they need facts, they need skills, they need to become and remain the proletariat of the world.

Not for them the complexities of literature (of whatever origin), philosophy, science and mathematics other than at the most basic level. No, they must 'learn to survive' (GCE 2004) – not only against the possibility of HIV infection in a world turned upside down by AIDS – but they must have the *skills* to survive. They are on the whole condemned to a life of having skills that may help marginally in their day to day lives and perhaps against HIV infection, but they will not have the skills to develop, maintain and sustain any form of development.

It is true that Nelson Mandela believes that 'education is the most powerful weapon you have to change the world' (GCE 2004) – but he understood by this – to radically transform the world. Powerful education does not merely tinker with what 'is', but rather gives the skills to use education to dream about, imagine and finally achieve what should and could be.

We have missed so far the opportunity to think how AIDS and the multiple social, economic and political challenges it poses could be used: not to defend

education systems and make them relentlessly mediocre, but to change them. What kind of education do young people need in the world today, unstable as it is, due to the terrible forces that have been unleashed against terror?

Research has shown (GCE 2004) that about 40 per cent of countries have not yet taken the basic step of including AIDS in their school curriculum. This is an enormous possibility to ensure that if and when they do include it; they will do so in ways that separate it from merely being lifeskills and EFA, but that they can use AIDS and AIDS education to rethink the whole age, class, curriculum content of the education system. The fact that they have not yet moved to include AIDS education in their programmes, may mean that they know more than we do about the effectiveness of these kinds of programmes.

To transform the education system so that it reacts proactively against AIDS is possible and will require no greater funding than is already being offered against the report cards of success.

We have to use AIDS to see how failed and failing structures can become the leading institutions in the creation of positive imagined futures – not the bastions to protect current realities. Using AIDS we need to think and imagine a future that is rewritten by this epidemic and all the issues that it has highlighted.

We need to ask: what is the kind of education that young people need in a society with falling life expectancy, social, community, family and personal dislocation? How do we understand what radical innovation, in this context means? In all of education writing and in the education environment as it currently is assessed, there is no sense that the future may be very different from the past, that our current educational theory and thinking might be lacking and that the solutions we need to find may and should be very different from the

current ones that are based from within the status quo; rather than seeking educational and social transformation.

We know that societies post AIDS will be very different; are we going to allow schools and education systems to just survive or are we going to have the vision to say that education systems must change - yes – but that they must fundamentally change? It may be harder to achieve this in Africa or the Caribbean where the technicist forces are at work shoring up weak systems against HIV, but in India, China, SE Asia we maybe ahead of this managerial straightjacket and ensure that we make significant progress.

In many developing countries school age linked to grades or standards is not as certain as it is in developed countries. Young people move in and out of the school system according to family demands and economic constraints; high level of HIV infection and the demands of home based care. How do we then develop a structure and a curriculum that caters for this; what does 'age appropriate' mean for child-headed households, which are led by young people expected to be adult in all things, except their role in education systems; how do we make the whole idea of what young people learn and how they learn it more flexible? How do we think about subject choice and options; how do we train teachers better so that in addition to being successful educators, they are also inspired by a vision of a fundamentally different society and their role in it? How do we use education to free: certainly the lives of young girls and women: but also to liberate young men from the terrible ways in which we describe and categorise them?

Through a critical imagination of the impact of AIDS on education systems, we should be seeking imagined futures. Our roles should not be to prescribe, to dictate, to judge, capacity build and to blame those who are in the midst of this war. Our roles should be to free people from the ways in which education systems are thought about, taught about, spoken about and described to develop

new ways of seeing (Berger), new ways of understanding, and new ways of understanding the society in which we are trying to make an education system that thinks faster than the epidemic (CSA 2002). An education system that is obsessed by quality, by critical consciousness, by intellectual creativity and by radical innovation.

Developing countries with high infection rates need skills of course and sophisticated skills, but they also need young people who can think in complex abstract ways, who can philosophise, who can dream and who have an education that is exciting and challenging. This is possible. This, as much as getting all young people into school, will transform the ways in which societies can and will tackle AIDS and its many manifestations beyond the school playground and the formal curricula.

This is the first way we need to understand the power of AIDS education and how we can use it in ways not yet described or imagined to change the education systems and the world.

Edward Said wrote in *Traveling Theory* in the book *the Word, the Text and the Critic*:

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas ... having said that however, one should go on to specify the kinds of movement that are possible, in order to ask whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation. (Said 1983)

This brings me to the second part of this paper.

The gathering together of so many people at these International AIDS conferences is one practical embodiment of traveling theory and ideas and we are all challenged and enlightened by what we see and hear. Sometimes we are distressed and dismayed by what we hear, particularly when we are hearing about failed interventions or about how the dominant discourse of one or two rampantly aggressive nations seek to control these ideas and theories by a slavish adherence to ideas from one historical period and use this to control funding and to strangle work and projects that do not conform with this vision.

We are presented with case studies where AIDS education has worked: through determined adherence to particular dogma. (Green et al 2004) There seem to be many such cases though the reason why this success has taken place, is seldom clear and convincing. We are presented with best practice as if there is some universal truth that can be sought and given and we have competing education theories and solutions that are driven more by donor agendas, by religious orthodoxy or by political expediency than by critical understanding of what young people in the (developing) world need to know.

What happens when supposed theory becomes cultural dogma?

Appropriated to schools or institutions, they quickly acquire the status of authority within the cultural group. Though of course they are to be distinguished from grosser forms of cultural dogma like racism and nationalism, they are insidious in that their original provenance – their history of adversarial, oppositional derivation dulls the critical consciousness, convincing it that a once insurgent theory is still insurgent, lively and responsive to history.

I want to use PEPFAR as an example of what happens when criticism fails and when cultural dogma masquerades as theory: when support and funding (given in such a self congratulatory burst of national pride) is available only to those who support this dogma – or those who pretend to and alter their funding proposals and reports accordingly. When this way of thinking and dogma seeps insidiously into the social world views and where the lives that are to be saved are linked to this dogma and when lives become important only when behaving in particular ways.

The PEPFAR document section IV comments:

It is time, however, for new thinking and approaches. Past and current prevention messages have often failed to achieve the widespread behaviour changes that are necessary to end the pandemic.

This, as far as it goes is absolutely correct. Could this be the radical innovative new thinking I am arguing for? More than twenty years on into the epidemic new thinking and new approaches is exactly what we need.

However, alas no, there is nothing new in the PEPFAR messages. Indeed they are the same messages we have been hearing for over 20 years but dressed up to look like new theory whereas, in fact, they are old dogma.

These are the ABC messages, delayed sexual initiation and condoms in the main only for high risk encounters defined as sex workers, truck drivers. Careful analysis will of course show that in the right place and context and determined by the person concerned, each of these interventions can be legitimate.

It is when they are linked to and determine funding that they need to be challenged for it is the rigidity of the thinking that discredits the PEPFAR from the start and undermines its own premise. It is also clear that the kind of behaviour it seeks to address; is that which is allegedly found predominantly in resource poor settings, the developing world – adding a racial and imperialist agenda.

It claims to use evidence based prevention programmes as its base, but the evidence for these is largely selective and informed by the work of writers, claiming to have objectively discovered that ABC works, that condoms do not work and that controlled and delayed sexual behaviour is actually what these young people want. And while this may be the case in small random controlled trials, it is unlikely to be the case in the majority of the lives of young people today, who are in so many ways so radically different from young people of just a few years ago – living in a world so altered by the recent events and all the terrible consequences of this for their own lives and the world of rampant and ruthless globalization.

This work is often based on a nostalgic view of Africa and the developing world – a nostalgia usually fuelled and felt by the outside participant observers and very seldom by those whose daily lives are lived in this reality.

This emergency fund will target prevention funds to methodologies that are effective in helping avoid behaviours that put (young) people at risk. These risk avoiding behaviours are – abstinence, fidelity, faith based, and condoms only to high risk populations – off a base of risk elimination and risk reduction. In a tone that is patronizing, paternalistic and prescriptive, the section to scale up skills-based HIV education, especially for younger youth and girls reads:

Young people need to be reached early, before they begin having sex, with skills-based HIV education that provides focused messages about the

benefits of abstinence until marriage and other safe behaviours. Activities should help young people to develop the self esteem to say “no” to sex (as well as alcohol and drugs which increase vulnerability to sexual pressure) ...

There is nothing new about this! Nothing inventive; and no new thinking or approaches. No imagined future. Read any of the texts of the 1950s for sex education and you will see exactly these desires expressed. The PEPFAR approach shows what happens when an overriding theory or dogma blinds people to the reality of the modern world, where young people are grappling with a great deal more than sex, drugs and alcohol.

What we learn from Foucault is that the greatest intellectual contribution we can make through education is an understanding of how the will to exercise dominant control in society and history has also discovered a way to clothe, disguise, rarefy and wrap itself systematically in the language of truth, discipline, rationality, utilitarian value and knowledge – and this is exactly what the PEPFAR document and its allied supporters manage to do.

And, as Giddens and others keep reminding us

Young people and young girls in particular, are participants in and contributors to, a major reorganization in what marriage, and other forms of close personal tie, actually are. They talk about relationships rather than marriage as such, and they are right to do so (Giddens 1992)

We also know that in the current context in sub Saharan Africa, marriage can often be the highest risk young girls can take and that while we may be educating young girls to see themselves differently, we are not supporting this with a compelling vision that young men have bought into.

It is this language in its naturalness, authority, professionalism, assertiveness and anti-theoretical directness that makes it so destructive and so beyond the lived reality of so many people. Is this the kind of future and society that young people want in Africa and the Caribbean and even Vietnam? As Said tells us, these are very different countries – at different historical periods and with different national cultures. We must ask whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation. (Said 1983)

Education about HIV and AIDS is particularly susceptible to this kind of intolerance and narrow perspective.

Operating from a principle of the protection of “youth and innocence” education is seen as the site in which it is possible both to protect the innocence of youth, but at the same time equip them with the tools they need to protect themselves from infection with HIV or indeed any other STI and the other evil consequences of sex at the “wrong place, the wrong time, the wrong age and with the wrong person”.

As it is currently constructed, HIV/AIDS education cannot do both. It can either be the site where attempts are made to protect: or it can be the site where - through a radical rethink of the role of education in the face of the epidemic - we can ensure that young people (and indeed their teachers and parents) are liberated from these views and able to develop the critical and reflective tools they need to understand what it is they need to do to be protected from a range of social challenges.

In the harsh reality of the developing world young people lose their 'innocence' very fast through deprivation, hunger, inequality and an education system that fails on every level to give them a better life and better life chances.

Therefore the second way that the power of AIDS education is important is through a negative operation of power – it is the rise of an educational orthodoxy that is attempting a resurgent comeback years after its limitations as an overarching effective intervention were revealed. Some successes in some parts of the world do not make this a universal truth.

This negative power is highlighted in the section of the PEPFAR which situates AIDS education within a very narrowly circumscribed view of the world as embodied by the ABC campaign and the linking of AIDS education particularly to the A of this campaign. The rationale behind the education and preventive aspects of PEPFAR are; in the current context of world infection; entirely counter intuitive.

The ways in which we have developed school based AIDS education over the past two decades has been characterized by one thing – its overwhelming oversimplification of what are complex and difficult issues – its belief in an individualized behaviour change model and a facile understanding of social, economic and political forces that shape and determine how people behave, how their identities are constructed and how they understand their behaviour in a world that defines, tries to explain and judges such behaviours both against social norms but also against risk of infection.

Thankfully, in human history there is always something beyond the reach of the dominating systems no matter how deeply they saturate society and this is obviously what makes change possible, and limits (this) power. (Said 1983, 247)

This brings me to the third and last part of the paper –

the power of AIDS education both inside and outside of school to transform our societies and ensure that we emerge from this epidemic with societies that at every level are better than they were when we first confronted it. We can use AIDS education to bring back social integrity, equality, human rights, compassion and understanding, to enhance and support sexual, racial and cultural diversity. We can develop a critical consciousness that understands that AIDS, the greatest social rupture of our time is also the greatest catalyst we have for ensuring that societies can get new life from this epidemic, new social and education constructions and new hope and most fundamentally a new vision of that which is possible.

A new vision that takes us forward rather than always looking backwards with nostalgia, a new vision that celebrates the kind of societies we could become rather than the shadows of the societies we wish to protect. A vision that uses AIDS education as a new critical lens to rethink and revisit all our old tired certainties and use this opportunity to create the sort of society that seems to have evaded us in the past.

AIDS offers such a radical challenge to how our societies are constructed that we need to rise to that challenge and use it to transform the world, not use it to control and manage a world view that is part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

What is critical consciousness at bottom if it is not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives? (Foucault)

Schools based AIDS education should embody, what Stuart Hall has called, *metaphors of transformation*. These metaphors of transformation he said must do at least two things.

First: they must allow us to imagine what it would be like when prevailing cultural, social and political values are challenged and transformed, when the old social hierarchies are overthrown, old standards and norms disappear and new meanings and values, social and cultural configurations begin to appear.

Second: such metaphors must also have an analytic value. They must provide for us new ways of thinking about the social and symbolic domains in this process of transformation – show us how to think in a non-reductionist way.

The question before us today then, is what alternative metaphors do we have for imagining a new social, educational, cultural and economic politics? How do we overturn the symbolic order and from it create a new understanding of a radically transformed society and our role and position within it?

What are the metaphors we are confronting in AIDS education?

The AIDS epidemic as Paula Treichler reminds us has been invested with an abundance of metaphors and meanings. Along-side its medical definition as an infectious disease, the AIDS epidemic has produced a parallel epidemic of meanings, definitions and attributions. This epidemic of meanings is readily apparent in the chaotic assemblage of understandings of AIDS that now exists. (Treichler)

This effort to “make sense of AIDS”, must be done for the social dimensions of AIDS and for its potential impact on our societies whether privileged or developing.

It is through a careful examination of language and culture that enables us, as members of intersecting social constellations, to think carefully about ideas in the

midst of a crisis: to use our intelligence and critical faculties to consider theoretical problems, develop policy and articulate long term social needs; even as we acknowledge the urgency of the AIDS crisis and try to satisfy its relentless demand for immediate action.

We need to focus on the intellectual debates and political initiatives and successes that the epidemic has engendered, its function as a site for competing ideologies and sites of knowledge and its possibilities for guiding us towards a more humane and enlightened future.

Critical theory is about people's lives. As Stuart Hall has said, our inability to understand and to end this epidemic humbles us - as intellectuals, as policy makers, as funders, as community workers and governments; but at the same time the epidemic demands our attention:

AIDS is one of the questions which urgently brings before us our marginality as critical intellectuals in making real effects in the world – anyone who is seriously into intellectual practice must feel ... its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we have been able of change anything or get anybody to do anything.

(But at the same time Hall writes)

AIDS is indeed a more complex and displaced question than just people dying out there. The question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not?

Not only is the AIDS education discourse fuelling the epidemic and our ability to really understand why and how this epidemic is playing itself out in the way that it is, it is a discourse that is often profoundly antidemocratic, profoundly anti social, personal, sexual rights and freedoms.

The most compelling aspect of AIDS education has been how, it has the power and potential to roll back the social, sexual, political and economic advances – essential to functioning democracies, emergent societies and essential to understanding ourselves as diverse social and cultural beings.

With AIDS we have tried to reinforce a social and moral code that is as outdated as it is restrictive. We have tried to use AIDS to protect and shore up (without alternatives) the very institutions that must be on one level failing or at least transforming if we are seeing the rates of infection that we are.

Instead of using AIDS to develop a radical and critical consciousness of our societies and their values and institutions and to see where these may be or may have changed and transformed, we have used AIDS to try to relocate social and cultural behaviour within them. In societies where over 60% of women are infected by their husbands we promote the sanctity of marriage as a protective institution.

In societies where there are very high levels of sexually transmitted infections, pregnancies or HIV we try to promote abstinence and delayed sexual initiation. It is not to say that abstinence, or delayed sexual initiation or monogamy are wrong – it is rather to ask where is the critical social analysis that seeks to understand whether these social, cultural, religious and national responses are still the most appropriate and relevant for the worlds we are living in today.

Do we have these major epidemics around the world because these social forms and conventions are largely ignored or flouted? Do we have this epidemic because people are seeking new ways of living, new partnerships, new relationships and new ways of being?

Do we have this epidemic because international destabilizing forces have ensured that societies are undergoing such momentous social and cultural changes that we cannot really keep up?

One way to deal with rapidly changing societies whether this is through HIV and AIDS or other forces is to cling in all kinds of ways to the certainties of the past. This is how we have dealt with AIDS education. In societies where clearly behaviour is changing we have reinforced messages about the behaviour that is no longer a social certainty, or necessarily accepted or the most appropriate.

We have educated implicitly and explicitly against these behaviours rather than engaging with them, or trying to understand them and working with them. We have prevaricated with the either/ors' of the ABC campaign, we have promoted marriage and fidelity when the rationales for both of these in pure capitalist forms maybe floundering on new economic realities and longer life-spans.

Instead of celebrating (rather than tolerating) social and sexual diversity we have tried to offset it with appeals to the way things were – rather than the ways things might be. We have tried to use AIDS education to control rather than to liberate, we have used it to conform rather than to try out new social possibilities and we have used it to try and recreate a society of the past when the social, economic and political forces of the world were very different.

We have used condoms as a moral force, we have educated against desire, against eroticism and we have educated against an understanding of our rapidly

changing and transforming world. Instead of creating a new social integrity, a new social ethics, new respects and trust and holding onto that of the past that could act with us against this epidemic, rather than those aspects that collude with the epidemic, we have turned our backs on social and critical theory as the most powerful explanatory force we have to understand this epidemic.

We have addressed what is essentially a manifestation of the irrationality of our world in overbearingly rational ways. We have failed to get vast numbers of people to understand what this epidemic is; beyond the simplistic notions of personal behaviour and therefore to engage critically with it in ways that allow them to understand it as a powerful metaphor of positive social and personal transformation.

The ways in which we have constructed AIDS education has restricted how we understand ourselves as sexual and democratic beings. It has also restricted our understanding of how, through HIV and AIDS, and the ways in which we understand it as the greatest social representation of our times, we can come to a deeper and better understanding of who we are, how we relate to other people, and how we regain, develop and maintain social integrity and respect for others.

In this construction of AIDS education we have attempted to save the world as we know it. Preventing any new infection means challenging fundamentally at every level the world as we know it and the active and critical construction of new social identities, citizenship, leadership, education structures and accountability.

In conclusion, and in the words again of Edward Said –

There must be criticism; there must be a powerful critical consciousness if there are issues, problems, values – even lives to be fought for.