



Investment in the Work of the World: HIV/AIDS and Service-Learning

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Mitchell Ogden

the Inequity

AIDS is not an equal opportunity disease. The statistical likelihood of contracting HIV varies with age, color, region, gender, and socioeconomic status. Access to adequate health care, reliable information, and social support depends upon where you live in the world. If you live in sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, you are at the epicenter of the epidemic. Here, among many of the world's poorest nations, life expectancy plummets as rates of infection rise sharply, especially among youth. An entire generation in Africa is threatened as infected parents leave orphans behind who, along with their peers, face ever-increasing risks of infection. In the United States, where abundant wealth and education have somewhat stayed the tide of HIV/AIDS, tragic inequities are exposed as ethnic minorities comprise the overwhelming majority of new and existing HIV/AIDS cases, with teens and adolescents particularly affected.

the Infection

Select statistics:

Global

PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS (2001)

Global Youth w/ HIV/AIDS (ages 15-24)

11.8 million*

Global Population w/ HIV/AIDS (all ages) 40 million
Proportion of Youth 30%

REPORTED NEW INFECTIONS (2001)

Global Youth Infections (ages 15-24) 2.1 million
Global New Infections (all ages) 5 million
Proportion of Youth 42%

sub-Saharan Africa

PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS (2001)

African Youth w/ HIV/AIDS (ages 15-24) 8.6 million
African Population w/ HIV/AIDS (all ages) 28.1 million
Proportion of Youth 31%

REPORTED NEW INFECTIONS (2001)

African Youth Infections (ages 15-24) N/A
African New Infections 3.4 million
Proportion of Youth N/A

United States

PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS (2001)

Ethnic Minorities w/ HIV/AIDS (all ages)

466,000

U.S. Population w/ HIV/AIDS (all ages) 816,000
Proportion of Ethnic Minorities

57%

REPORTED NEW INFECTIONS (2001)

Ethnic Minorities New Infections (all ages) 30,100
Total U.S. New Infections (all ages) 43,000
Proportion of Ethnic Minorities

70%

Proportion of Minorities in total population 31%

*U.S. minority statistics from CDC. All others from Kaiser and UNAIDS/UNICEF.

the Initiative

As a sober—but resolute—response to the increasing impact of HIV/AIDS upon the world's diverse populations of youth the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) has launched the HIV/AIDS and Service-Learning Initiative [ed.LINK](#) [see side bar at the end of this article, page 32, for a summary of the launch]. What can service-learning do in the midst of this pandemic? If we can reduce water pollution, address factors and conditions of homelessness, and democratize education through the work of youth in cooperation with their schools and communities, then we can address the issues surrounding HIV/AIDS—no matter how ominous. The principles of service-learning are equally relevant. In fact, NYLC believes that nowhere will service-learning be more productive and effective than where it confronts the most dire challenges.

the Indigenous

By paying close attention to organizing and acting on a local scale, the practice of service-learning will empower and inspire communities to respond to critical issues in ways befitting their culture. The efficacy of service-learning will be enhanced exponentially as the many talents, resources, and capabilities of a community, its residents, and its institutions are combined. Young people provide many of those resources themselves and have a unique ability to solicit and secure others. Youth are the indigenous bearers of their own culture, wherever they may live. They can educate and influence their peers in uncommon ways. Local youth know the local landscape and understand the practices, problems, and possibilities that surround them in a way that adults and outsiders never do. Activated by education and involvement, youth will improve their world. As the ones who are most affected by HIV/AIDS, it is imperative that youth be central to the work of fighting it.

the Injunction

A monumental report from the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), entitled *Young People and HIV/AIDS: Opportunity in Crisis*, asserts the increasing urgency and necessity to engage youth in the work of the single greatest problem of their generation. Its statistical evidence is sobering; its recommendations are compelling. They offer an injunction: ten steps to forge a path forward. Three are particularly relevant to service-learning pedagogy: equip young people with life skills to put knowledge into practice; work with young people, promote their participation; engage young people who are living with HIV/AIDS. These suggestions dovetail with the principles of service-learning and implicitly endorse approaching HIV/AIDS work through service-learning.

the Integration

The HIV/AIDS and Service-Learning Initiative has identified Africa as its primary focus, with additional attention to North America, especially supporting the efforts of the many disproportionately affected ethnic and minority communities. In all cases the initiative will operate to support, encourage, and facilitate local innovations by local youth and local adult leadership as they approach HIV/AIDS issues according to local cultures and practices. When service-learning projects remain grounded within the framework of their own communities (with the benefit of partnerships and collaboration) they achieve holistic success and maximize sustainability. By discovering and promoting the range of local approaches, service-learning integrates diversity in a truly meaningful way—not by tokens or statistics, but by equitable participation and the resultant culturally-crafted practices.

Investment in the Work of the World: HIV/AIDS and Service-Learning

Continued

the Innovations

As the HIV/AIDS and Service-Learning Initiative moves forward through its initial, planning year, it considers examples of work around the world that already engage youth and employ principles harmonious with service-learning. Four innovative efforts are featured here. They are intended to suggest paths and directions to youth, community activists, and service-learning practitioners. Legitimate responses to them include replication, rejection, refinement, and reflection.

in Uganda: Straight Talk Foundation

Founded first as a youth-created newspaper in 1993 with funding from UNICEF, Straight Talk has grown into an influential and effective foundation with a full range of programs operating across Uganda that promote health—especially reproductive and sexual health—among adolescents. As their name suggests they confront the stigmas and taboos of sex, HIV/AIDS, and pregnancy with unflinching forthrightness. The newspaper has evolved into two monthly editions: Straight Talk (for ages 15-24) and Young Talk (targeting adolescents 10-14 years-old) that are distributed through the primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. Straight Talk also enters schools personally, bringing doctors, counselors, and nurses to facilitate discussion not only with the students, but with teachers and staff as well. Since 1999 the Straight Talk Radio Show has broadcast a weekly, 25-minute program across the country and has become one of the foundation's most popular and recognized activities. Today more than 11 stations broadcast reliable information from adolescent hosts and their expert guests. Once a month the shows are dedicated question and answer sessions, responding to a wide range of listener questions. The style and spirit of Straight Talk have been so engaging that over 250 Straight Talk Clubs have been established all over Uganda. These clubs, although affiliated with the Straight Talk Foundation, are independent and autonomous, enabling them to respond immediately and appropriately to the situations and interests of the youth who participate. Working consistently and with youth leadership for over a decade, Straight Talk now finds itself integrated with the popular youth culture of Uganda.

in Ghana: The Red Cross

Established in 1958, the Ghana Red Cross is well known across the country. Like most of Africa, young people (age 25 and younger) constitute the majority of the population in Ghana, making up almost 60% of the population in the districts where The Red Cross operates. Their focus is appropriately upon Ghanaian youth. In 1993 the Ghana Red Cross and the Ghana Scout Association collaborated with the World Health Organization (WHO) to implement a pilot peer education program in the Greater Accra region. In the past decade it has flourished and now operates in all ten geographical regions of Ghana. Peer educators are trained by the Red Cross to conduct participatory outreach activities. They operate

in their home communities, calling together their friends, family, and neighbors. Targeting urban youth, who are both in and out of school, a pair of peer educators works with a group of sixteen youth four times in a month. Games, role plays, demonstrations, dramas, and songs are used to initiate conversation and stimulate learning about HIV/AIDS infection and prevention. Conducted on the local level, provisions and adaptations are fluidly applied to customize the learning for the local linguistic and cultural conditions. Pre- and post-tests help measure the learning. Conservative estimates of the "ripple effect" of peer education (expecting each pair of peer educators to reach sixteen youth each month, and each educated youth to then inform four others) lead to dramatic results. With almost 1000 peer educators at present, over 380,000 youth can be reached in a single year (Tackie, 2003).

in Nigeria: National Youth Service Corps

Individuals graduating from universities and tertiary learning institutions in Nigeria are required to participate as members of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) for a full year. Harnessing the sheer force of the 100,000 member corps, Nigeria is taking aggressive action against the spread of an aggressive disease. With the help of a partner organization, the Association for Reproductive and Family Health, all 100,000 corps members are being educated with accurate information about reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. Five thousand members will be further trained as trainers of peer educators and will mentor at least 40 young people as peer educators during their year of service. Peer educator trainers' work is centered in local schools where they can establish their presence and reach out to youth from the surrounding communities. To assure continuity once assigned to a state, peer educator trainers will not be re-deployed to another state, allowing them to establish deeper relationships and to most effectively cooperate with local residents. The ripple effect of this effort (5000 trainers, 200,000 peer educators) will reach at least 20 million young Nigerians (Protection and Prevention, 2002).

in America: Community Colleges

In 1995 the American Association of Community Colleges instituted the Bridges to Healthy Communities project to prevent HIV infection and related health problems among young people. With support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention twenty-two community colleges participated in the Bridges project. Service-learning has been the essential practice which has connected campuses to their communities and has provided a common approach shared by all the participating colleges. By integrating HIV education into curricula and then dispersing students into action, the colleges have maximized the sustainability of their contributions to significant community-based efforts while instilling principles of community participation in their students. Peer education, HIV testing, and support for children living with HIV/AIDS were among the many activities undertaken by participating colleges. At Raritan Valley Community College, for example, the RVCC Latino Club made connections with students from Orguillo Latino High School and discussed issues of HIV/AIDS within the local community. The Bridges project has provided inspiration and a replicable model of engagement and service-learning for hundreds of community colleges across America (Ottenritter and Barnett, 2001).



Youth performers from the NIT Elementary Dance Troupe of St. Paul, at the Tuesday night HIV/AIDS Pre-Conference Dinner (both photos on this page)

Continued...

HIV/AIDS Continued...

the Invitation

As you consider these three examples (and innumerable others), we invite your participation in the process of framing the future work of the HIV/AIDS and Service-Learning Initiative. Please think and ask questions. Engage your wisdom and passion and come forward with suggestions. In the spirit of collective learning and collaborative action we hope to move ahead with insight and ingenuity from smart people and effective programs all over the world.

We believe that youth should be fully engaged—sooner than later—in the campaign against HIV/AIDS and its proliferation. We see youth of the world not as the potential victims but the potent victors who will lead the campaign of education, prevention, and preservation.



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The Launch of the Service-Learning and HIV/AIDS Initiative

On the eve of the 14th annual National Service-Learning Conference in Minneapolis the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) announced its launch of an international initiative to interweave the best service-learning practices with those of preventative health-care. The evening's banquet was characterized by passion and committed enthusiasm. A collection of highlights follows.

HIV/AIDS: The Defining Issue

"I don't think any issue will define the next generation any better than how we approach and deal with the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. I think that is the most defining issue of where we are right now in our history."

—Senator Norm Coleman, United States Senator – Minnesota

Building Relationships, Calling Forth Youth, Bringing Wholeness

For almost twenty years, Dr. Mark Jacobson has worked in Tanzania as a physician against the devastating spread of HIV/AIDS. His medical expertise is strengthened by his cultural, societal, and spiritual principles. Espousing the values and power of Tanzanian perceptions of wholeness, he spoke with a perspective on current HIV/AIDS issues that urgently needs to be heard:

"Our challenge tonight is not how to raise more money. No, our challenge is to look for the ways in which to build these relationships—relationships of people to people, of youth to youth, people of faith to people of faith...Yes, we need the resources of a wealthy nation, but what we need even greater is the energy, idealism, creativeness, and the faith of the next generation..."

"So I think what challenge lies before us this evening is to issue a new call to our youth. Let us call them forth from their schools and their universities and their churches and mosques across the land. Let us call them forth with their energy, their idealism, and their commitment to make a difference. Let us call them forth to engage in this battle against this horrific epidemic, who can become the ones not to serve as youth to youth but as youth with youth, as people with people—people with needs serving and working with others of need..."

"The challenge for us tonight is to find a way in which we can bring restoring relationships into the picture, of bringing wholeness into the brokenness of this world."

—Doctor Mark Jacobson, Medical missionary,
Selian Lutheran Hospital, Arusha, Tanzania

Ultimately We Will Save Lives

In response to the destructive myth, now rampant in Africa, that a man infected with HIV/AIDS can be cured by having sex with a virgin, Rose McGee wrote the play "Sleep with a Virgin: A Perspective on AIDS." Vignettes of this powerful dramatic work were presented at the banquet. She said:

"My purpose in writing [the play] was to educate via the arts in a manner that will ultimately save lives. I believe that this play will inspire young people who are attending this conference from around the world to go home and become involved in a service activity that helps promote HIV/AIDS awareness."

—Rose McGee, Poet, storyteller, playwright

Join Us

"We need to challenge our young people to work to solve the issues surrounding HIV/AIDS...Together we can find hope. Join us."

—James C. Kielsmeier, Ph.D., President and CEO, NYLC

Called Forth: Inspired Students Go to Work

The pre-conference banquet ignited the minds of four students from Franklin Senior High School (Franklin, Louisiana). Samantha Capak, Kalan Jones, Brittany Cuillory, and Kaiesha Thomas were so inspired by Rose McGee's play that they returned to their school and secured the help of their drama coach (Mark Lunsford) and librarian (Kathleen Prados) to create HIV/AIDS prevention poetry and plays. The students have since been awarded funding through a service-learning grant to expand their work of HIV/AIDS advocacy and education.