AIDS Awareness Within the Community: A PNG Case Study

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It is now recognised by the Papua New Guinea Government and health officials that there are many hundreds of HIV infected people in PNG. "In March 1994, there were 132 identified cases of HIV/AIDS. But it is clear that this number represents only a small proportion of those infected" (Pacific Aids Alert, 1994). Although no exact figure is available as to the numbers of people who have died of the ailment or who are HIV infected, what is known is that people with the affliction come from all sectors of PNG society and sexual preference groups. "Transmission is overwhelmingly sexual and nearly as many women as men are infected, indicating that HIV is spreading mainly among heterosexuals" (Pacific Aids Alert, 1994). The fact that little research has been conducted on the sexual mores of those with the infection does not help in the understanding of the disease's continued progress.

However, because the disease is here and because the public awareness campaigns which have been promised by the PNG Government have largely failed to keep momentum with their initial burst of energy in the late 1980s, many educationalists have taken the matter of public awareness into their own hands. For example, the Language and Literature Curriculum Unit (which until recently was called the English Unit) has recognised that they must include information about AIDS in their syllabuses. Such information includes aspects of the social and medical ramifications of the disease.

Research was conducted by the author in 1992 amongst 443 Grade 7 and Grade 8 students to determine what knowledge these students had about the various medical aspects of this global pandemic. The research was conducted in seven high schools - five Government and two Catholic schools. Four schools were urban and three rural. The questions ranged from knowledge of the modes of transmission to the symptoms of the disease. Eighty-seven percent of the students were able to answer all of the questions correctly.

One of the most surprising outcomes of the study was that in only one of the seven schools had aspects of the medical side of the pandemic been taught. This very high level of awareness may have something to do with the nature of the disease, that combination of sex and death. Be that as it may, the equally high correct response rate from children in rural areas demonstrates that the AIDS message has reached rural students most of whom, unlike their urban counterparts, are largely removed from most media resources. Knowledge amongst the same research sample about common ailments such as typhoid and diarrhoea was much less than that about AIDS. This is despite the fact that the general curriculum teaches about such health issues and that such ailments are much more widespread than is currently the case with AIDS.

One result of this study was that the relatively high level of knowledge about certain aspects of HIV/AIDS (such as modes of transmission and fallacies often associated with transmission) means that the curriculum being written for the Language and Literature Department of community and secondary schools needs to include aspects of the disease which might otherwise have been thought too advanced.

Such information is currently being prepared by curriculum planners and writers as a language resource book for the Grade 11 and 12 students at National High School in which such aspects as safer sex and the nature of sexually transmitted diseases generally will be integrated as content material into the English as a Second Language text. Information on gender, the relative powerlessness of women in PNG society and the associated links to HIV infection are included. However, there appears to be some reticence in acknowledging the potential impact of the disease within PNG society. The inclusion of materials into the PNG curricula is still ad hoc and dependent on a few individuals who see the problem as one which should be addressed now rather than later. Like the public awareness campaigns which started with a
flourish and then petered out, the inclusion of AIDS awareness materials across the curriculum, and even within the Language and Literature division, which is perhaps the most progressive, falls short of what is considered necessary by this educationalist.

One ESL publication from the Cameroon (Peace Corps, 1993) demonstrates how involved the English curriculum can become in disseminating AIDS Awareness knowledge. The text book under discussion is entirely devoted to the AIDS issue. All ESL content is integrated into such areas as the social, medical and economic aspects of the pandemic. There has been criticism of such a text being devoted entirely to AIDS or for that matter to any other health issue or social issues. The critics state that such a heavy emphasis on diseases within the English curriculum is didactic, tedious and overwhelming. Such a combination of negative "heavy" issues can ultimately be counter-productive and turn the students away from usefully processing the knowledge. There is certainly a message to be learned from this criticism.

One possible way of overcoming the potentially negative effect of such a text is to diversify the materials. That is, in an ESL health book, the use of different genres can be employed. The current texts being written for the PNG Grade 11 and 12 programmes have included poems, songs, newspaper articles, interviews, fiction, advertisements and so on in the text. Also, the texts have not concentrated on just one health issue. AIDS has been included along with other major health issues in PNG, such as malaria, rehydration techniques, influenza and birth control.

The philosophy behind the increased emphasis on health issues in the PNG Language and Literature curriculum comes from stated government policy on the need to include relevant issues in the curriculum. It has been increasingly recognised by educators that 85% of the children who leave school between Grades 6 and 10 will return to their home environment, which is one characterised largely by subsistence agriculture. There is little opportunity for this group of school leavers to find paid employment, despite the present emphasis on academic education. Therefore, in a nation characterised as being largely rural, and with one of the highest mortality rates in the world from preventable diseases, educators are becoming increasingly aware of the need to maximise the relevant knowledge in the curriculum so that students can return home more prepared for the realities of such an environment.

The question of AIDS education has been taken very seriously in the one government secondary teacher training institution (UPNG - Goroka Campus). All teacher trainees must complete three years of English instruction - English for Teachers through the Department of Language and Literature. In their first year of English for Teachers all students must research and write an essay on an aspect of health pertinent to the rural community. In 1993, that issue was AIDS awareness in the community. After having learned about the issues involved, the students were given basic instructions but left largely on their own to plan and initiate a community awareness campaign. In groups of eight to ten, the students went into the villages and performed role plays and dramas about various aspects arising from the pandemic.

One of the strongest themes to emerge in the various dramas was the need for tolerance towards those with either/or HIV/AIDS. There had been at that time two cases in the area of people with AIDS who had returned from the city to their respective rural communities. Both cases, a male and a female, were largely ostracised by their communities. The female had been built a small house on the outskirts of the village and food was left by her hut twice a day. Otherwise she was left unattended and when she died her house was burned immediately. The male did not fare much better, although as an educated man he did avail himself of local medical practitioners. It was this fear of contagion displayed by the villagers that the teacher trainees tried to address.

Further work on community liaison and education, and specific health issues is continued throughout the three years of EFT and is now seen as a vital component of teacher education.
Behaviour change is one of the major issues which must be addressed by educators through their curricula. The irony of much of the education on AIDS becomes apparent when we look at the sexual practices of the teacher trainees themselves. Their knowledge of HIV/AIDS is excellent. However, despite this and the knowledge that HIV/AIDS is now to be found throughout PNG, their sexual practices can be described in the words of one female student as being "carefree". This is demonstrated by the fact that between 1988 and 1993, twenty percent of females (the majority being unmarried) conceived once or more during their three-year programme. This is despite the fact that condoms and other birth control devices are freely available and that the students have a very strong knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases. Anecdotal evidence suggests that both male and female students have a poor knowledge of what safe sex means. The evidence shows that most students feel such practices as unprotected, non-penetrative sex are either culturally inappropriate or just "not enjoyable". A possible contradiction arises here. Traditionally, multiple sex partners and sex before marriage was taboo in most PNG societies. This appears to be no longer the case, certainly at this campus. But acceptance of safe sex and the use of condoms is often considered "non-traditional".

Educators in developing nations characterised by a largely rural and uneducated population need to be aware that they can help the health of those communities by imparting relevant health knowledge through any subject in the formal curriculum. This should include information on safer sex practices, the use of condoms and the link between HIV infection and the low status of women. That women often have little choice but to participate in unprotected sex is a major problem. Those students who do attend school can then, it is to be hoped, take that knowledge with them to their communities. The education system cannot be given the sole responsibility of changing a nation's awareness of health issues but it can, in my opinion, go a long way in helping positive momentum in that area.

References


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