Children's Voices, Children as Innovators: A Poetic Representation of Children's Experiences Learning About HIV/AIDS Through a Child-to-Child Curriculum Approach

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ABSTRACT (Press Here for Sound)

This paper reports how children experienced and reflected on issues of sexual health and the risks of HIV infection as well as providing glimpses of their narratives of empowerment, created as a result of the child-to-child approach which was implemented in a grade four classroom in a rural Kenyan school. The children felt, it is time to break the taboos around open discussion of HIV/AIDS. Their words, in the found poems in this paper, illustrate how capable these children are of initiating this vital change.

They say it is a taboo for a circumcised boy
To talk about how HIV/AIDS is transmitted
In front of their parents
But I want to break that taboo
So that they are not infected by HIV/AIDS.
(Gidi Gidi, June 13, 2003)

In 2000, the government of Kenya introduced HIV/AIDS curriculum in all schools (Kenya Institute of Education, 1999). The curriculum was designed to develop the appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes to help learners develop appropriate behaviours (Aduda & Siringi, 2000). Despite this curriculum initiative, a significant number of young people in Kenya continue to be infected with HIV (Central

Bureau of Statistics, 2003). The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Kenya requires more intensive measures. This paper reports how children like Gidi Gidi experienced and reflected on issues of sexual health and the risks of HIV infection, as well it provided glimpses of their narratives of empowerment, created as a result of the child-to-child approach I implemented with a grade four teacher in a rural Kenyan community.

In order to address the real-life situations of the learners, many studies (Kelly, 2000; UNICEF, 2001; Kiiru, 2001) have suggested that teachers have to adopt a teaching approach that is highly interactive with a broad participation of the children, that is, a teaching approach that involves engaging children in problem solving and decision making regarding high risk behaviours and practices. I looked for such a teaching/learning method and was drawn to the child-to-child approach.

The Child-to-Child Approach

One interactive and participatory curriculum model that has been tried in health promoting schools is the child-to-child curriculum approach (Pridmore & Stephens, 2000). The child-to-child approach is greatly influenced by the notions of active learning and empowerment education (Dewey, 1929/1997; Freire, 1970). According to Hawes (1988), the specific principles underlying the child-to-child approach are:

> … education is more effective if linked to things which matter to children, families and community …, education in and out of school should be linked as closely as possible so that learning becomes part of life [and] … children have the will, the skill and the motivation to help educate each other and can be trusted to do so … (p. 3)

The child-to-child approach works from a belief that the purpose of the curriculum is to develop children's own capacities and problem-solving skills through stimulating their intelligence and imaginations rather than transmitting knowledge and facts (Barton & Booth, quoted in Hara, 1995).

I worked with one teacher participant, Praxey [this and all names of participants in this study are pseudonyms], and her classroom of 40 children in this study for eight months in 2003. The heavy reliance on the traditional lecture method, overemphasis on medical and biological facts, and a lack of addressing the real-life situations that young people find in their homes, communities, and the world (Galava, 2001; Kelly, 2000; Kigotho, 2000) made us adopt a child-to-child approach to teach HIV/AIDS curriculum in grade 4 in a primary school in Kenya.

As part of this approach, students were encouraged to take an active part in the lessons about the dangers of HIV/AIDS and ways to protect oneself from this deadly virus. I saw the stories lived both in and out of the classroom as moments of curriculum making. Praxey and I invited students to take part in a learning process that included introducing concepts such as how HIV is transmitted, asking students to investigate the concepts, to gather information from sources like their siblings, parents, and community members, and then sharing their findings through posters, drama, songs and stories. This view of curriculum making comes out of the work of Clandinin and Connelly (1992) who suggest that curriculum is where "teacher, learners, subject matter, milieu are in dynamic interaction" (p. 392). These four are referred to as curriculum commonplaces (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Schwab, 1978) and helped me to attend to and understand more about our curriculum-making experience. Of central importance in this paper is the gathering of information children were asked to undertake, because without this aspect of the child-to-child approach, students would not have been able to provide the insights they did in the found poems such as Gidi Gidi's at the beginning of this paper.

Using a Narrative Inquiry Methodology

I used a narrative research methodology developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) to inquire into children's experiences learning about HIV/AIDS using a child-to-child approach. I worked with Praxey in the classroom on whole-class activities using the child-to-child approach such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph, which enabled all 40 students to create empowering narratives and/or artwork around the dangers of HIV/AIDS. However, the participants whose responses I draw upon here were from a focus group of eight children aged between 10 and 11 years with whom I spoke after school in a series of group interviews. The four boys and four girls were purposefully selected from a classroom of 40 based on equal gender representation. These eight were children who: talked openly about issues in their community; engaged willingly in a conversation with me; and who had parental consent to participate. After consent was obtained from parents, I invited the eight children to one-hour weekly conversation for a four-month period. For each session, the eight children reflected on their learning experiences through the child-to-child curriculum approach in the classroom on the topic of HIV/AIDS. The conversations were tape-recorded to document the work and to permit easy revisiting of the sessions.

Threads in Narrative Accounts

As a narrative inquirer, I read and reread the transcripts of each child participant and I created narrative accounts for each. As I reread the children's narrative accounts, I looked for threads that linked elements in the stories they were living in these moments of learning about the subject of HIV/AIDS. I pulled out threads or themes that resonated across the eight children's narrative accounts.

I decided to represent the child participants' stories in found poetry because after listening to their conversations, I saw the power in their words and the way these were expressed. The idea of writing found poems has been part of my work since I started my graduate program. Reading the works of Butler-Kisber (2002) and Glesne (1997) gave me the impetus to present the narrative accounts of the child and teacher in found poems. Butler-Kisber (2002), on using found poems, wrote:

> The researcher uses only the words of the participant(s) to create a poetic rendition of a story or phenomenon. Because I was most comfortable working with words rather than other alternative forms, I decided found poetry might offer a viable way of portraying what I was finding. (p. 232)

Like Butler-Kisber, I chose found poetry because I felt it had more power, energy and vividness.

Five threads or themes stood out in the transcripts of the children's conversations with me: students living as empowered learners; students taking up educators' roles in and out of school; students challenging cultural taboos; students becoming empowered to sustain themselves; and students imagining their lives in a hopeful world. Each thread reveals significant ways in which the children were becoming knowledgeable and independent activists in HIV/AIDS prevention. As I considered each thread, I developed found poems which contain the children's voices, and then responded with comments about the meanings I made from what each child said. As I responded to the various threads, alongside my comments I looked for other scholarly or theoretical conversations in which to engage. I pulled forward the works of scholars to add depth to my understandings of these resonant narrative threads.

Thread #1: Students Living as Empowered Learners

The first thread that emerged across the narrative accounts of the eight children is of students living as empowered learners in and out of school. When children

told their stories of confronting people engaged in what they described as immoral activities in different contexts, it showed they were committed to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. Freire (1970) writes of problem-posing education where "students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (pp. 68–69). As children were faced with the problems of HIV/AIDS relating to themselves in the world, I heard them speak of feeling both challenged as well as obliged to respond. In the following found poem, drawn from transcripts of conversations with one student, Sharon [pseudonym] tells her story of being accosted by a guard:

During the school holidays
I was going to fetch water from the river
I met a guard who seduces young girls
I told him not to continue that practice
He will be infected with HIV virus
He was bitter and chased me with a cane
I left him and went to fetch water
On my way back I found him drunk
There was a girl accompanying him
I didn't know where they were going
These days since I learned about HIV/AIDS
I have stop those who indulge in risky behaviour
I report those who indulge in such behaviours
That is why I confronted the guard
We are expected to teach them to stop the practice. (Sharon, May 7, 2003)

Sharon experienced this incident as a moment of empowerment, an empowered way of living both in and out of school. She felt she had to stop people who were sexually harassing young girls. According to Greene (1971/1997), "the student will only be in a position to learn when he is committed to act upon his world" (p. 146). For Greene, only when students are empowered are they in a position to learn. Such is the way Sharon has been learning now that she is empowered to act vigorously to change the world around her.

Stephanie [pseudonym] describes a similar experience when she told how she challenged people who were engaged in unsafe sexual intercourse:

Since I came to know about HIV/AIDS
I stop people from engaging in illicit sex
I tell them not to play around with their bodies
They can be infected with HIV/AIDS

One time I found a boy and a girl
Having sex in a maize plantation
Belonging to my cousin
When they saw me, they ran away
I reported them to their father. (Stephanie, March 18, 2003)

Stephanie describes this experience as finding courage to tell people to stop engaging in reckless sex. Freire (1970) suggested that when we bring consciousness into existence, "that [which] existed objectively but … [is now] perceived in its deeper implications begins to stand up, assuming the character of a problem and therefore a challenge" (p. 70). Stephanie's words suggest she was becoming conscious of problems posed by HIV/AIDS. Stephanie was living an empowered life in which she was challenging behaviours associated with the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Rock (pseudonym) describes a similar experience of wanting to confront young people who publicly displayed "bad behaviour."

I was sent to Kisii town
On my way I met two boys and a girl
They were talking, holding one another
I stopped and watched them
I wanted to tell them that is bad behaviour
They were older,
I feared they would hurt me
I was undecided, to follow them or to proceed
I decided to continue my journey. (Rock, May 7, 2003)

Rock's experience was risky too—he wanted to confront them, but feared he would be injured. Freire (1970) suggests education is liberatory if it "bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality" (p. 71). As Rock was faced with a reality—a context where HIV/AIDS could potentially be spread—he felt challenged and obliged to take action.

Sam [pseudonym] experienced empowerment by describing how he shadowed and then reported child sexual abuse involving a school watchman and a school girl:

I saw a school girl in this compound
She is in Standard 5
She was coming towards our home
Then a school watchman called her

This girl went to meet him
They entered in one classroom
It was on Saturday evening
It was around 4pm
I decided to monitor what they were doing
There were no other students
I told her there were boys calling her
She told me to tell she was coming
They made love as I hid in a corner
The girl complained, she was tired
The man set her free
I went home and told my father
My father came and inquired about it
He denied what I had seen. (Sam, May 7, 2003)

Nyerere (1967) suggests that education should "prepare young people to live in and serve the society, and transmit the knowledge, skills, and values and attitudes of the society" (p. 2). I observed Sam felt morally challenged to take action as he monitored the crime the watchman was committing.

Thread #2: Students Taking Up Educators' Roles in and out of School

The second thread that resonates across the narrative accounts of the eight children is of students taking up educators' roles in and out of school. When I read the stories of the children, I heard them speak about how they have become empowered educators (Dewey, 1929/1997; Freire, 1970). They had a sense that they could be educators both in and out of school. Freire (1987) explains how "education is a moment in which you seek to convince yourself of something and you try to convince others of something" (p. 33). As I read what the child participants were saying, I understood they were, in many ways, taking up the educators' role. Sam describes how he experienced a change in how he felt about what he needed to do:

I want to educate children
Not to indulge in illicit sex
They be good children
They would become good adults
I would like to show how it spreads
I would go to the community
When I will tell them
I would recite them my poem

To announce HIV/AIDS is dangerous
If they want me to use a radio
I will use it to educate about HIV/AIDS. (Sam, June 13, 2003)

Sam experienced empowerment as taking up the role of an educator of children about the dangers posed by the HIV/AIDS menace. Sam now believed that it was his responsibility to educate children to protect themselves from being infected by HIV/AIDS. Noddings (2002) suggests that educators of moral education should be those who "reach towards the living other with a feeling that responds to the other's condition" (p. 42). Sam wanted to share his stories of experiences, the poems, and radio announcements and, in so doing, reach a wider audience in and out of school. Sharon described a similar experience out of school:

I have taught people
There is this girl who indulges in sexual adventures
I told her the dangers she risks
I told her she could be infected by HIV/AIDS.
She has stopped the practice
She now goes to school
Then there is other woman
Who liked to move around
With men in the bar
I talked to her about the risks
I told her HIV/AIDS is dangerous
It has no cure
It has killed many people
And it has no friend
These days she has stopped
She now stays at home. (Sharon, June 13, 2003)

Sharon spoke of being an educator of girls and women in the community, making inroads by highlighting dangers posed by HIV/AIDS. Her actions resulted in a change of behaviour in two women's lives. Freire (1985) suggested that "education for freedom is an act of knowledge and a process of transforming action that should be exercised on reality" (p. 102). Sharon's words suggest that she experienced education for freedom which empowered her to act on the reality of the HIV/AIDS menace, as she tried to change risky behaviours of women and girls in and out of school. Similarly, when I read what Bevin [pseudonym] was saying, I could hear a voice of an educator.

I can educate people about HIV/AIDS
I can stop illicit sex
I can stand before people
I can recite a poem
I can draw picture of infected people
Tell them how HIV/AIDS is transmitted
I would like to have good life
I will be careful in relating with boys
I don't want to be infected by HIV/AIDS. (Bevin, June 13, 2003)

Bevin would like to educate people to hate the HIV/AIDS menace by reciting poems, drawing pictures of infected people, and being a model of living a good life without HIV/AIDS. Freire (1973) explains the "role of man was not only to be in the world, but to engage in relations with the world—that through the acts of creation and re-creation, man makes cultural reality and therefore adds to the natural world" (p. 43). I found Bevin trying to re-create the world by educating people to change their choices in the face of the HIV/AIDS menace.

In the same way, when I read what Rock was saying, I heard the voice of a boy who was becoming an educator about HIV/AIDS. He says:

At home I educate men when earning salaries
They shouldn't spend it all in bars
Look for prostitutes to spend with
They shouldn't leave their children starving
Should take care of their families
I teach my friends not to steal maize
Not to steal money to take to friends
In exchange for sex, it is dangerous. (Rock, March 18, 2003)

I found Rock to be particularly interested in educating adult men who spend their time in bars with prostitutes. Rock thought that not only do these men abandon their families, but also they were likely to expose themselves to many risks associated with such behaviour including illicit sex and HIV/AIDS infection. Freire (1985) suggests that a student attained what he calls "vigilant attitudes … [when she or he] … wants to transform reality so that what is happening in a given manner begins to happen in another manner" (p. 158). Rock appeared to be a child who had developed a vigilant attitude about immoral behaviours as he tried to educate adults in bars and the youth he knew.

Thread #3: Students Challenging Cultural Taboos

The third thread that resonated across the narrative accounts of the eight children is of students challenging cultural taboos. In learning through a child-to-child approach, children sought information from the parents and communities in the broader milieu outside of the school. Consequently, these children found themselves challenging the cultural taboos within their community. Silin (1995/1997) writes that talking about HIV/AIDS means "talking about sex, drugs, and even death, often taboo subjects that are not easily packaged" (p. 235). Talking about HIV/AIDS in this Kenyan community raised issues such as Kelly (2000) noted, specifically that "in many societies, parents do not provide information on or discuss sexual issues with children" (p. 21). In this situation, "a wall of silence surrounds it, publicly and privately" (Kelly, 2000, p. 30). Now that these children were empowered, they felt capable of challenging these walls of silence which prevented them from talking about the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Sharon is one of those who wondered how to negotiate an opening with her mother, to start talking about the subject matter of HIV/AIDS. She says:

The teacher asked us to go and find out
More about HIV/AIDS from our parents
I went and asked my mother
I just went and asked her
I was asking her while outside the house
We were seated under a shade
I interviewed her in the evening, 4 pm
I was with my elder sister
I was afraid my sister was laughing
She was laughing
I thought I will be punished
My mother was just quiet, she didn't laugh
At first I was annoyed,
Then mother asked her to leave us alone
It is when she left
My mother asked me who sent me
I told her, it was my teacher. (Sharon, March 14, 2003)

In her story, I particularly understood her thinking that this was a taboo subject. Sharon felt vulnerable to those around her, her mother and elder sister, but she too persisted and felt that the "source of knowledge lies in inquiry, or in the act of asking questions" (Freire & Antonio, 1989, p. 37). It was not until her mother learned Sharon had been sent by her teacher that her mother created space to talk about HIV/AIDS.

Similarly, when I read Rock's story, I heard the voice of a frustrated boy who had a challenging task in getting information about HIV/AIDS from his parents.

I went and asked my older sister
She laughed at me and ran away
I was ashamed I went and asked my mother
My mother told me she had not been taught
I asked my father,
He told me to let him think about it
He was going to work the following day
I went to ask my elder brother
I was at first scared
I feared he would blast me
He was not worried, he knew about HIV/AIDS
He was laughing with his wife
I also started laughing too
He told me HIV/AIDS is dangerous. (Rock, March 14, 2003)

From Rock's story, I understood that he was uncertain about how to get the information. I wondered if Rock's parents were genuinely ignorant or if they were feeling vulnerable discussing a taboo subject. Silin (1995/1997) explains that for "some adults the reluctance to talk with children about HIV/AIDS reflects their own lack of knowledge" (p. 233). However, Rock's brother's response made him feel secure in pursuing the subject. Only by being persistent and challenging was he able to get the information he was seeking.

Thread #4: Students Becoming Empowered to Sustain Themselves

The fourth thread that resonated across the narrative accounts of the eight children is that of students becoming empowered to sustain themselves. Dewey (1929/1997) writes that to prepare a child

> … for the future life means to give him [child] command of himself; it means so to train him [child] that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command …" (p. 18)

As the children came to know the risks posed by HIV/AIDS, they did not want to be drawn into any activities associated with sex. This was the beginning of what Dewey refers to as giving children command of themselves for future life. When

I read Nyamote's story, I recognized his voice as one that is empowered:

This man would stop young boys
He demands sex by force
He will threaten you with a cane
He gives you money in exchange for sex
There is a boy in this school
He is in Standard 2
He gave him money
So they could have sex
He one day tried to grab me
I beat his arm
He hit me back
I then stoned him and ran away. (Nyamote, May 10, 2003)

In reading Nyamote's story, I understood him telling young people to learn to say "No!" to any sexual advances even if it takes a fight to escape, as this would save them from being infected by HIV/AIDS. Silin (1995/1997) suggests that "children need to study what is, reflect on what might be, and experience strategies that help them to achieve their ends" (p. 249). Similarly, when I read Sharon's story, I recognized it as the voice of a girl who is empowered:

One evening I met a man at the shop
I had also been sent to the shop
He bought sweets
He wanted to give me
I refused and dropped them
I refused his kindness
I bought what I wanted to buy
I then ran back to our home
I have been taught by my teacher and mother
To say NO! to such gifts
I could be lured into risky activities. (Sharon, May 15, 2003)

In reading her story, I understood Sharon was showing her firmness not to entertain gifts from shop owners or strangers. Her resolve to say "No!" helped her escape daily traps. Silin (1995/1997) argues that "we have the responsibility to provide opportunities for children to know themselves as young community activists and to experience the power of collective responsibility to large and small social problems" (p. 249). Sharon was a child who was concerned with the spread of HIV/AIDS in her community. In Silin's words, she was an activist in her community.

Likewise, in Rock's story I recognized a voice of a young boy who has made a decision to abstain from sexual activities. He writes:

There a woman living near our place
She sells goods by the roadside
She likes to make love
She fights after people's husbands
She says this is mine
One day she tried my father
My father ignored her
She would snatch young boys
Take them to her house
One day she grabbed me,
Taking me to her house
I beat her hand, I ran away
One day at 6am as I was going to buy milk
Another man came out of her house
He was tall and bearded. (Rock, September 24, 2003)

Silin (1995/1997) also argues that "students should be asking questions about societal responses to HIV/AIDS and learning to see themselves as citizens who can make decisions that will give directions to that response" (p. 242). Rock was living in the context where adults did not seem to care that they could be infected by HIV. Consequently, Rock decided not to indulge in sexual intercourse that could expose him to HIV.

When I read Nyamote's [pseudonym] story of almost being raped, Rock's story of being invited to a woman's house, Sharon's story of being bought sweets, Sam's story of being invited and declining, I understood they were becoming empowered to sustain their lives in the face of these encounters.

Thread #5: Students Imagining Their Lives in a Hopeful World

The fifth thread that resonates across the narrative accounts of the eight children is of students imagining their lives in a hopeful world. In their stories I understood they were living in a hopeful world. Freire (1994) describes,

The moment we not only lived, but began to know that we were living—hence it was possible for us to know that we know, and therefore to know we could do more ….We cannot exist without wondering about tomorrow. (p. 98)

I hear Freire's ideas echoed in the words of the children as they began to imagine living empowered lives and were starting to have a sense they could change the world, making it more hopeful through taking social action. When I read Sam's story, I recognized his voice as one of a happy boy who had made a decision to live a hopeful life:

I have learned HIV/AIDS is dangerous
I want my life to be good
I have learned the good and the bad. (Sam, June 13, 2003)

When I read what Bevin was saying, I recognized the voice of a hopeful girl who had made a decision to live a good life:

I would like to have good life
I will be careful in relating with boys
I don't want to be infected by HIV/AIDS. (Bevin, June 13, 2003)

Jevne and Miller (1999) point out that "the person speaking really does believe, really does see the possibility" (p. 21). Bevin's words suggested she thought HIV/AIDS could ruin her good life and that she had to be careful in the way she related with boys. When I read what Stephanie was saying, I recognized her voice as that of a hopeful girl who had made a decision to try new ways to live in her world. Stephanie was hopeful she would succeed. She explains:

I will be the model
I want my life to be good
I would like to show good behavior
I should not indulge in reckless sex
I will be careful when I go to shop
I will refuse free pops from boys. (Stephanie, June 13, 2003)

Jevne and Miller (1999) suggest to "begin by turning off your 'interior judge,' that part of you that so easily squashes untested ideas. Tell yourself … Sometimes, in fact, it is that seemingly absurd thought that will ignite your hope" (p. 31). In reading Stephanie's story, I understood she wanted to try these untested ideas of being a model, avoiding sex, and refusing gifts for the good of her life.

When I read what Gidi Gidi said, I recognized his voice as that of a hopeful boy who had made a decision that life was worth living by setting criteria around sexual intercourse. He describes:

I want my life to be good
Before I marry I will be tested for HIV/AIDS

My wife will also be tested
Then I will marry her.
I will avoid taking illicit drugs and alcohol. (Gidi Gidi, June 13, 2003)

Jevne and Miller (1999) explain that, "hope is not about moving mountains. It's about moving one single stone, and then another. Hope is not about changing the world. It's about making a little difference in one part of the world" (p. 33). Hopeful is how I describe Gidi Gidi as he tells the stories he has chosen to live by. Gidi Gidi, Sam, Stephanie, and Bevin are now imagining their lives in a hopeful world.

Conclusion

As a result of having a space to tell stories of themselves as empowered persons determined to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS and as willing to discourage others from unsafe practices, the children in this paper have hope of a future free of the epidemic of HIV/AIDS. The child-to-child approach provided a democratic space for children to make personal meaning about how HIV/AIDS shaped and may shape their life experiences. The children were able to speak loudly and confidently of what they were experiencing personally and in the community with their friends and relatives afflicted by HIV/AIDS. As Gidi Gidi states in the opening lines of this paper, it is time to break the taboos around open discussion of HIV/AIDS, and it seems that children like Gidi Gidi and his classmates will be leaders in this movement. Their words, in the found poems in this paper, illustrate how capable these children are of initiating this vital change.

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