Teachers Living with HIV

Introduction
Teachers play a key custodian role within the education system. They serve as role models, mentors and guardians. They are also central to efforts to achieve the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as education is seen both as a right and as a central pillar of efforts to eradicate poverty. Like all members of the population, however, teachers are susceptible to HIV. In countries with high HIV infection rates, most notably in sub-Saharan Africa, this susceptibility is increasingly noticeable. As more and more teachers die, an already weakened educational system is left with the dual challenge of increasing numbers of pupils and decreasing numbers of teachers.

Stigma and discrimination continue to hinder effective responses to HIV and AIDS. In this respect, HIV-positive teachers have not been exempt, especially in communities where HIV is incorrectly seen as an indication of improper behaviour. Because of this sensitivity, schools, teachers’ unions and governments have struggled with ways to support HIV-positive colleagues and, as a result, responses have been piecemeal and poorly documented. There is a great need to draw together experiences to develop a comprehensive response for HIV-positive teachers that fulfils their right to access HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services as well as their right to work without discrimination.

Current Situation
Teachers in countries with high HIV prevalence rates are both infected and affected by the virus. Global estimates suggest that the cost of HIV to the educational system could be as much as $1 billion per year as a result of teacher deaths and absenteeism, severely hindering the ability of education systems to deliver a quality education.

- In some countries, a tenfold increase in teacher mortality and absenteeism due to HIV and AIDS has severely reduced both teaching time and quality. Permanent or temporary absenteeism of one teacher can have strong repercussions on up to 100 children.
- Every month, 100 Tanzanian primary school teachers are estimated to die of AIDS-related illnesses and in 2006 alone an estimated 45,000 additional teachers were needed to replace those lost to the epidemic.
- In Zambia, HIV and AIDS are expected to reduce the number of teachers by 2010 from an expected 59,500 to only 50,000.
- 7,000 additional teachers will need to be trained in Swaziland by 2020 to compensate for AIDS deaths among teachers.
- In Kenya, over 14,500 teachers are thought to be HIV-positive.

Early in the epidemic it was thought that teachers were at relatively high risk of HIV infection due to their high levels of social mobility. The majority of evidence now available, however, seems to indicate that prevalence rates among teachers are similar to those found in the general population. While precise numbers remain unknown, the impact is well documented:

- Teachers living with HIV have an important role to play, both in efforts to prevent new infections and in helping to address the impact of HIV and AIDS on individuals, institutions and communities. Stigma and discrimination, however, still pose barriers to their involvement and the support available. For example, 75% of teachers recently surveyed in Kenya stated they did not know their HIV status. 60% of those not tested indicated that they did not want to know their status because they feared discrimination.
- While most education ministries have policies related to teachers and HIV & AIDS, in many cases those policies do not transfer to the school level due to lack of implementation and action plans and limited resources for supporting infected and affected teachers. For example, in a recent study, more than 90% of countries reported policies on non-discrimination, but only 7% had guidelines for implementing universal precautions to prevent and safely manage accidents in schools.
- Increasingly, teachers’ unions have taken up the challenge of providing support for their members and implementing HIV and AIDS programming. To date, however, efforts are still limited in scope.

Advocating for Change
If governments are to mitigate the impact of the AIDS epidemic on the education system, it is imperative that teachers living with HIV receive the support they need to live healthy lives and to become key advocates in the response to the epidemic. As respected members of their communities, they could and should be supported to play an important role in breaking down stigma and involved in decision-making around policies addressing HIV in the education sector.
A number of measures can help to ensure this:

- **Identify and address the varying needs of HIV-positive teachers** – Teachers are not a homogenous group and, as such, their experience of being HIV-positive will vary. To address their differing needs, it is necessary to assess the unique and varying situations that teachers face. Furthermore, a comprehensive response for supporting and involving teachers with HIV must recognise and target teachers at several levels: the individual (e.g. health and emotional well-being); the occupational (i.e. discrimination and absenteeism); the community (such as stigma); and the systemic (e.g. undermining of provision of education).

- **Tackle stigma and discrimination** – A key challenge when implementing any programme or policy is how to support HIV-positive teachers without increasing their vulnerability to stigma and discrimination. Advocacy is required at the community level to better understand stigma and discrimination and their harmful effects, and workplace policies established and reinforced to protect the rights of those infected with HIV (right to employment, right to education, right to health).

- **Ensure early access to prevention programmes, treatment, care and support** – One of the most urgent needs in countries with high prevalence rates is to ensure that teachers who are in need of treatment, care and support are able to access affordable and confidential information and services.

- **Prevent and address gender-based violence and sexual harassment** – Unions and governments should work together to establish codes of conduct that establish zero tolerance of sexual harassment and abuse in schools of students and colleagues. Codes of conduct for staff are critical to protect children, as well as to increase community confidence and demand for education.

**Key Questions**

1. How much teacher attrition is due to the epidemic? Is AIDS-related attrition qualitatively different to other forms of attrition?
2. Do stigma and discrimination in the school mask the true impact of HIV and AIDS? What programmes exist at the national and/or school level for teachers living with HIV? What has been the experience of these programmes, including outcomes to date and who is funding them?
3. How does AIDS-related absenteeism affect the quality of education? To what extent has teaching been affected by the epidemic? What other challenges has the epidemic created for teachers?
4. What role does positive living and the availability of anti-retroviral therapy (ART) play in mitigating impact? How can a school provide an enabling environment for teachers affected by HIV? What workplace policies, including access to ART, should be in place? What workplace policies and programmes, including access to ART, should be in place?
5. What support or training is provided to help school principals to deal with teacher absenteeism and death? With what effects?
6. How can unions advocate for rights and access in a harmonised and unified manner? Furthermore, how long can individual members provide their services without compensation?

**Looking Forward**

Teachers are vital to the success of achieving Education for All (EFA). They are also key role models in communities and as such, have an important role to play in breaking down stereotypes around HIV. To do this, however, it is imperative that policy makers, civil society and teachers themselves understand the true impact of the epidemic, both on the profession and upon those infected. Once this is more fully understood, it will be necessary to ensure that teachers feel protected and supported, both to know their status and then to engage in efforts aimed at combating the epidemic at all levels. Teachers’ unions should support groups of teachers living with HIV to enhance their reach and to advocate for change and raise awareness.

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