Different Strokes

Where do we go from here? These essays are all over the map

November 1, 1997 By Michaelangelo Signorile

Acting on AIDS is a fearless book. Not because the essays it contains put forth challenging ideas—though some certainly do. It's fearless because it does not toe a party line. As editors Joshua Oppenheimer and Helena Reckitt note, "From their multiple, sometimes conflicting positions, and across a vast array of disciplines and discourses, contributors are in a dialogue and counterpoint with each other." Open-mindedness is essential at this juncture, as protease inhibitors change the landscape of prevention as well as treatment. Acting on AIDS shows us that many activists who were in the same place 10 years ago are now in vastly different places—and that's perhaps not a bad thing. This collection underscores that we must open the floodgates to ideas, and risk offending anyone and everyone in search of solutions. Rather than try to silence those with whom we disagree—we must debate—and listen to—one another, intently and patiently. — Michaelangelo Signorile

[EXCERPT]

Like psychologists and activists seeking to prevent HIV infection in gay men, adults working with children often have difficulty facing their clients' real lives. This reluctance was evident to me when the director of Project Healthy Choices talked to my college faculty meeting about her work. The most affecting parts of this talk were the words and pictures of the seven-year-olds themselves. A picture of two boys, two massive trees and a football bears the following inscription across the top: "He have AIDS. We play together. I am his friend." Initially the artist had written "We have AIDS" but later crossed out the "We" and substituted "He." In classrooms where four or five children may have lost a close relative to the disease, such an error is understandable.

But HIV is not the only or most immediate threat to survival that these inner-city children face. Their drawing provide a sense of the larger context in which our AIDS education efforts sometimes take place, and remind us that our conversations must reflect the real experience and concerns of children. For example, seeking to grasp the connections among the more visible forms of violence and less obvious but equally devastating effects of drugs and alcohol, another child draws two stick figures pointing huge guns at one another....

The most unsettling picture contains no word. The upper two-thirds of the paper is covered by a

sky drawn with large blue marker strokes and dotted with four simple inverted V-shaped birds. In the upper left-hand corner a large, bright yellow sun has its nose, eyes and mouth drawn in black. The lower third of the page contains rolling green hills and two trees on either side. Scattered across the ground is a mix of objects, including clearly identifiable syringes and beer cans. The child describes the scene: “This is the sun wearing sunglasses, and the sun is trying not to see the drugs. These are all the beer can and drugs and dead birds dying, and the grass is dying, and the sun is dying and trying to keep everything alive, and the trees are dying and the leaves are falling down and dying.”

Although each of these pictures is subject to many interpretations, it was the awed silence among the adults that drew my attention to our faculty meeting. Finally, one dismayed person exclaimed, “Is there no joy in these children’s lives?” I don’t know the answer to this question nor the best response to my colleague’s evident despair. I do know that if we turn away from the children’s painful and confusing experiences, then we turn away from the possibility of relief as well. Classrooms are places in which children should feel comfortable exploring a full range of emotions including authentic moments of distress and pleasure. We are fully engaged as learners only when the curriculum is responsive to the material contexts of our lives. It is through such engagement that we realize our freedom and our humanity.

To accept that children live in a world where they come to learn about AIDS, drugs and community violence at a far earlier age than most of us would prefer, does not mean we are participating in the denial of childhood. But it does mean we need to creative classrooms in which children can feel safe to examine these issues. And it does mean that adults will have to take responsibility for the changing nature of childhood.

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