

Preventing HIV through Educational Development Programs

MARY GUINN DELANEY

UNESCO Regional Advisor on Health and HIV
Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

An Interview with Jacquelyn Ingrassia

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Mary Guinn Delaney has been Regional Advisor on Health and HIV Education in the Regional Office for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean of UNESCO since April 2008. She has more than 25 years of experience in issues related to health, HIV, and development, including the design and management of projects and programs, technical support to governments and civil society, advocacy, and evaluation. Between 1993 and 1996, she was the director of the AIDS Program at the Global Health Council in Washington, DC, and from 1996 to 2001, she served as UNAIDS country coordinator in Namibia and Honduras. Based in Managua, Nicaragua from 2001 to 2005, she coordinated activities for the Latin American Initiative of the Synergy Project, a global activity financed by USAID. As an independent consultant, she has worked for various bilateral and multilateral development cooperation agencies.

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: For readers who are unfamiliar with your role, could you briefly lay out the specifics of your work with UNESCO?

Mary Guinn Delaney: I work for UNESCO, which is the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture. Specifically, I am based in the UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, where we cover the whole region. We focus our work on supporting UN member states to meet their international and national commitments to provide

quality education to all, in all circumstances. Our work includes all aspects of the quality of education: planning, teachers, content, curriculum development, learning assessment—a whole range of issues associated with the formal sector of education.

Journal: How does the work of UNESCO overlap with sexual and reproductive health?

Delaney: Our work in the region is consistent with our mandate within the UN System. Our efforts in sexual and reproductive health are historically associated with, and funded in part through, our role within the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV (UNAIDS), a cosponsored program among 11 different agencies in the system. Our mandate within that program, and as part of the UN system, is to support the right to education for all and, more specifically, to support HIV prevention among young people in the formal education sector. Because of the characteristics of the HIV epidemic in this region, it can be quite difficult to persuade some governments to specifically address the issue right from the start. The HIV epidemic in Latin America and the Caribbean is concentrated among men who have sex with men, people who use drugs, and commercial sex workers. As you can imagine, these issues are difficult to address and are especially sensitive in the context of formal education. For these and other reasons, an important entry point for us is sexuality education, which is well established in many countries in the region. Through that, we address a series of other issues, which obviously include HIV but also address gender, communication, relationships among peers and adults, biology, prevention of abuse, and, of course, human sexuality and sexual health. All of these are important aspects of comprehensive sexuality education.

Journal: Can you speak more about what the current sexuality education system looks like and what you and UNESCO are doing to advance it?

Delaney: Lots of countries have institutionalized comprehensive sexuality programs. In some countries, there are legislative frameworks in place that provide teachers with both the right and the responsibility to deliver sexuality education in the classroom. As such, there are support systems and training for teachers, high-quality instructional materials, and careful monitoring of progress. In other countries, sexuality education is not as well incorporated into the formal curriculum, and if it is there, it is sometimes optional or extracurricular, and often

inconsistent. It is often addressed mainly through biology, subjects much more dispersed throughout the curriculum, or resources such as guidance counseling or life skills training. Furthermore, it is generally aimed at kids aged 15 and above.

The evidence that we have reviewed over the years indicates that in order to be effective, sexuality education needs to start much earlier, before kids become sexually active. This is a tough sell in a lot of countries due to strong opposition, especially from faith-based groups, and also because teachers don't always have access to the specific kind of preparation that they need, both before and during their teaching careers. There are very few programs in the region that can help a teacher become certified or specialized in sexuality education. These are some of the issues that we're looking at while we try to promote knowledge exchange between countries that have made more progress and others that are still struggling.

Journal: Can you give an example of a method you have employed to overcome these barriers, whether religious barriers or barriers to training teachers?

Delaney: UNESCO is a specialized technical agency within the UN system. We are not a fund, meaning we don't finance country-level programs; rather, we produce and share knowledge and provide technical support to partners engaged in their own processes. One challenge is to encourage member states to include sexuality education among their UNESCO marching orders—this is so because there are

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many priorities and limited resources. The member states determine our organizational priorities, and given the diversity of countries in the world and their very different views on issues, that can be quite sensitive; obtaining their agreement is often a big undertaking in and of itself. As you can imagine, countries around the world hold all kinds of opinions, from very progressive ones to others who do not want to see any mention of sexuality education or related issues. What we do is respond to requests from the member states for technical support. We are a normative organization, so we produce international guidance. It's not binding, but it's technical—it's evidence-based—and we stand behind it.

A few years ago we supported a major study—a meta-analysis that looked at formal evaluations of sexuality education programs around the world. The goal was to assemble and use the evidence base that we have on what does and doesn't work, which enabled us to identify characteristics of successful sexuality

education programs and what the content of a comprehensive program needs to include. We don't have a single curriculum that we take to countries to say, "Here, teach this, and here's what you must do." Instead, we say, "Let's review what you're doing"—and we help them do this—"and determine if it is contributing effectively to the results you need." Then we consider changes that would need to be made if the goal is a comprehensive, technically sound, scientifically accurate sexuality program at different levels. Our recommendations start at age five and go up to 18 years, and they address six different key concepts with age-appropriate learning objectives. The age-appropriateness is really important, as are cultural sensitivity, the inclusion of gender issues, and a firm evidence base.

The whole UN system is working on HIV, and, of course, we are a part of that. We know that the education sector has so much potential to reach kids, mainly because they spend the majority of their time there. But it goes beyond just teaching them about HIV or other sexual health issues. For example, we know that in the specific case of HIV, people who are either lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transsexual, or are perceived as such during childhood and adolescence, often have a really hard time in school, and this can result in life-long damage. There is hard evidence to this effect. Everyone is worried about bullying in general, and school-based violence, but we know that violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity has long-lasting effects in all kinds of ways. Like with other forms of school violence, academic performance suffers, and it also causes psychological and occasionally physical damage. Homophobic and transphobic bullying is gender-based violence because it is based on rigid notions of gender. We know that the bad experiences people have while in school as children, just because they are LGBT or gender-nonconforming, or are perceived to be, can be the start of a vicious cycle of vulnerability that can extend into adolescence and adulthood. This cycle at times includes sexual risk patterns that put young people and adults at risk of HIV, mental health issues, substance abuse, and other health issues. Beyond the obvious LGBT rights issues, we try to link the right to education for all in a safe environment to these gender issues.

In this context, we take a broader look at what makes people vulnerable to HIV. What happens during childhood in the school setting is part of a cycle. Our focus is including these issues among all the factors that make certain people more vulnerable to HIV infection than others. In Latin America, the notions of what is masculine or feminine are very culturally rooted. There is a lot of gender-based violence in all countries in this region, often resulting from pervasive machismo and manifesting itself in devastating rates of murders of

trans people. It is therefore urgent to address some of these issues. Many teachers are very concerned about what they see and want to do something about it, but they simply don't know how. We see our role in supporting their efforts, as well as those of the educational community in general, as one that focuses on gathering the evidence of prevalence, consequences, and good practices in different places. On this basis, we develop orientations that address policy, teacher training, materials development, didactic strategies, services for students—including victims, aggressors, and bystanders)—and partnerships with civil society and other stakeholders.

Journal: Moving on from the programmatic goals, can you tell us a bit more about the specifics of how you recommend schools talk about sexuality and HIV, without infringing on cultural and religious identities and beliefs?

Delaney: It's important not to simply assume that just because certain religious, faith-based groups or institutions are vocal on these issues, they are automatically opposed to all kinds of sexual education. I am quite convinced that there are many that believe that sexual education is really important. We might have differences about when it should begin and what the content might be, but sexuality is part of everyone's lives, and there are real dangers in being silent about it with kids. There is sexual abuse, violence, and teenage pregnancy—to name a few—which are problems in Latin America, the Caribbean, and countries all over the world, no matter how developed. There are ways to show people this and convince them that there are important opportunity costs related to not addressing them during childhood—the most formative stage of life. As I mentioned, the “hows” and the “whens” can be discussed on the basis of technical evidence about what works best.

What produces the best results or the results that everyone is interested in? How should this happen? How should the

curriculum be organized? What kind of programs should be implemented? How long should they last? How many sessions? What should the modules look like? We have a lot of scientific information on effectiveness, and our main concern is that programs are efficient, effective, and in a position to take advantage of this evidence, regardless of the contexts in which they work.

The other aspect that UNESCO always emphasizes, as does the whole UN

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system, is that sexuality education is a part of the basic human right to quality education that it is undeniable and indivisible from other rights. Other arguments emerge from certain faith-based opposition, whether they are Catholics, Christians, or Muslims. There are many myths about sexuality education: that it's going to make kids more interested in sex; that it might encourage them to have sex earlier and more often than they "should"; that sexuality is an issue that should only be discussed at home or in the family; that kids are going to be "corrupted."

From the evidence that we have, we know that at least a number of these things simply aren't true. Comprehensive sexuality education programs actually delay sexual debut and reduce risk behavior. People tend to have fewer partners and are more likely to engage in safer sex behaviors from the beginning. This is what almost everyone says they want to see. So, as I hope is obvious, an evidence-based and rights-based framework is at the center of our approach.

The other aspect of working with religious groups is that they also deserve to be listened to. We know that abstinence works, and if everyone were abstinent, then there wouldn't be teenage pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. However, the problem is that if programs take an abstinence-only approach and don't address the whole range of issues that are at the heart of sexuality and sexual behavior—gender notions, communication among peers and with adults, relationships, human biology, sexual and reproductive health, as well as rights—they simply are not as effective. In fact, there is evidence that abstinence-only education can be counterproductive. If a child is taught that it is simply a matter of saying "no, no, no" to all kinds of issues that almost always come up during adolescence, and suddenly the "no" turns into a "yes," they might be caught in an unexpected situation that they don't have the skills or knowledge to handle. We all want kids to be less vulnerable, but less vulnerability translates into better capacities to communicate, to negotiate, to say "no" if that's what they decide to do, and if they say "yes," to be safe. That young people are by nature interested in sex, and that many have sex during adolescence, is undeniable. The idea that talking openly about all the issues that come with this will encourage them to be reckless is actually a little bit naïve, and the evidence shows us that is simply not the case.

Journal: When you are thinking about these programs and implementing them in schools, do your recommendations include ways to deal with potential backlash from the community, or is that beyond the scope of what you do?

Delaney: UNESCO doesn't implement programs directly. Our goal is to support member states—whether through their Ministries of Education and Health or through other partners—to design, implement, and evaluate their programs in the best possible way. UNESCO is not on the front line in some municipality in Costa Rica, taking on the local parish priest on these issues, for example. We try to ensure that these partners are familiar with the arguments, the successful experiences, and the evidence about what works. In Latin America, these capacities are already quite strong in many countries. We want to make sure that they're in touch with other people and countries facing the same problems and work together to address this resistance themselves. That's what the role of an agency like UNESCO is. We don't engage directly with local or national political issues, but we often try in a more neutral way to facilitate a dialogue that takes into account local conditions, uses the evidence, and when necessary, takes advantage of the space that UN agencies can open to sit down and talk and to review things together with the same goals in mind.

The other thing is, certainly with the religious groups, we're seeing growing opposition in many countries in the region. It's not a linear progression that countries go through and can "check off" these issues once and for all—it has a much more cyclical nature. We're seeing, for example, that Brazil used to be very progressive and active on these issues, even just four or five years ago. Since then, a very well-organized evangelical Christian political block has emerged, with a very strong stance on these issues. For example, from the perspective of many, Brazil has backtracked over the last couple years because of pressures that groups like this have put on sexuality education and anti-homophobia efforts. My point is not to single out Brazil, as there are many countries that have shown a similar evolution at one time or another, but rather to illustrate that other political considerations can set things back. The opposite is also true—political commitment is at the core of progress. It's often two steps forward, one back, one more ahead. Issues around sexuality are often so sensitive for some that we can't count on guaranteed progress. As a result, the work never ends. From my perspective, our job is to accompany our technical colleagues in their ministries and make sure that they have the access that they need to the latest information and that they have contact with other people at their level in other areas who can strengthen their capacities, including the political skills necessary to advance this agenda.

Journal: Given this countermovement against sexual education, are you optimistic about the future of implementing these programs, or do you find the way

that some of these countries have backtracked to be a very significant barrier?

Delaney: As I mentioned, if we're always in an upward-moving spiral, obviously it would be more encouraging. But again, there's so much technical capacity in the region; things are more and more documented. If we can, at the political level, encourage countries to make formal, binding commitments that are a matter of state and not just the sitting government, that would be a big achievement. In this region, continuity is a big challenge for initiatives of all kinds. When governments change hands every four or six years, especially from one political color to another, there is often important turnover. Starting over with a whole new government can take a long time—campaigns are long, there are often long periods of relative uncertainty both before and after elections. But again, the evidence that we can consolidate and facilitate to the countries—and not just to governments, but civil society—is crucial.

Beyond the management of the more political aspects of sexuality education, there are other important strategies that are longer term. I would say that the most important one relates to supporting teachers. Like most people my age, and many much younger, I certainly did not have an adequate sexuality education in school, and we have to assume that most teachers did not have one either. Like many parents and adults in general, we need to bear in mind that teachers and school authorities are wary of the issues because they don't feel like they can open Pandora's box and answer any question that might come up.

You have to admire a teacher who is prepared to stand in a classroom of hormonal 12-year-olds and receive any question they might have about sexuality. In some countries, ministries and partners make specific efforts to involve parents in what they are teaching in school. For example,

in Argentina, the national program distributes materials for families through the kids. In this way, families can learn about the issues at the same time and know what their kids are doing in school. This helps to circumvent opposition that they might have because it is often resistance based on the lack of information. Opening up channels like this really helps, as we also know that many, many parents actually support sexuality education in school.

I recognize that I keep going back to the importance of evidence-based, rights-based arguments. In my opinion, the more people know about human

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rights, the right to education, and how it links with other rights, the better. The global agenda of human and economic development simply won't happen without access to quality education, and comprehensive sexuality education is an integral part of the very definition of quality education. 