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Beliefs and perceptions of adolescents about sexual relationships: a case of two public secondary schools in Soweto, Gauteng

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ABSTRACT

Navigating sexual relationships during the adolescence phase is a complex and challenging experience for adolescents globally as the outcomes often affect their education. In South Africa, this is seen in the incidence of unplanned teenage pregnancies that remain on the rise. Several factors influence and confront adolescents that cause them to form sexual relationships. These include exposure to sexually explicit mass media material, peer pressure, lack of parental guidance, poverty and, economic constraints that successively put adolescents' health and education at risk. Health risks include contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as HIV and AIDS. Additional risks are teenage pregnancy, teen births, and abortions. Educational risks are poor scholastic performance and school dropouts. It is evident that when sexual relationships are not dealt with responsibly, they can negatively influence adolescents' health and education. The study explored adolescents' beliefs and perceptions about sexual relationships by employing a qualitative research approach. A multiple case study design was employed. Twenty adolescent participants representing both sexes were selected using purposive sampling. Four focus groups were conducted, two focus groups per school – one focus group for boys and one for girls. Each focus group had five participants representing the different sexes. The research instrument used was a focus group guide, and the method of data collection was focus groups. The method of data analysis used was thematic analysis. Findings revealed that sex education programmes, including the life orientation subject curriculum, do not tackle all issues surrounding sexual relationships and the challenges adolescents face when negotiating sexual encounters. Despite the positive views that adolescents have regarding sexual relationships, negotiating the sexual part of the relationship remains a challenge for most adolescents. Majority of adolescent boys and girls disclosed that adolescents feel unease to discuss the sexual encounter and gaining consent beforehand. Therefore they shy away from verbal communication and resort to non-verbal communication tactics and gestures to express their sexual interest. In contrast, female participants believe that it was easier to use the indirect strategy of giving excuses rather than submitting to their partner's sexual demands. Recommendations made include revising the content of Life Orientation (LO) curriculum, engaging experts and guest speakers to educate about sexual education topics, conducting focus group discussions with learners facilitated by School Social Workers. Recommendations for future research include making use of different data collection methodologies.

Key Words: Adolescents, Beliefs, Perceptions, Public Secondary Schools, Sexual Relationships, Soweto