

PEER EDUCATION: OPENING DOORS IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Peer education is a key health promotion strategy and an important mechanism to challenge and shift youth behavioural norms, especially with regard to sexual behaviour – an issue still not easily discussed between adults and youth in South Africa. Peer education provides opportunities for candid and genuine examinations of attitudes and choices to see and hear about different ways to be healthy from other young people. *Sharlene Swartz* explains.

Over many years of programme implementation, globally and in South Africa, empirical evidence regarding peer education's efficacy has been difficult to obtain, and evidence of change for participants has been elusive.

The HSRC conducted a three-year study to measure the impact and effectiveness of a peer-education programme in the Western Cape. The programme was funded by The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and was implemented by the Western Cape departments of health and basic education in collaboration with various NGOs, with technical support from the Centre for the Support of Peer Education.

The study showed how peer education increased levels of knowledge and discussion about HIV and AIDS among young people; improved measures of self-efficacy regarding sexual decision making; and heightened sensitivities among young people regarding their need for help and support. It also showed how participants made gains in other areas of their lives, including compassion, leadership and academic improvement.

Research design

A mixed method research design (with both qualitative and quantitative components) was used to assess the impact of a structured, peer education curriculum-based programme called Listen Up. The programme dealt with topics such as finding help and support for problems, how to make decisions, recognising healthy relationships, HIV risk, alcohol and teenage pregnancy. The target group was first-year high school learners with peer education delivered by same-age peers with support and training from NGOs and teachers.

Changes in participants' knowledge, attitudes and intentions were measured at three intervals: immediately before the intervention, immediately after the intervention and between five and seven months later, and then compared with a control group. A total of 35 schools (27 intervention schools and eight control schools), stratified by district, were randomly selected out of 236 schools in the Western Cape where peer education was being implemented. The initial sample comprised 2 904 learners with some dropping out over time.

For the qualitative study, eight of these schools were chosen to serve as in-depth case studies of how the programme was

implemented and to closely consider the contexts in which peer education took place.

The qualitative methods included focus groups with peer educators and peer learners, and individual interviews with adult stakeholders such as those from NGOs, teachers supervising peer education programmes, school principals, and education and health department officials.

There were three substantive findings from the study: the influence of school context on peer education; improvements in HIV knowledge and attitudes along with increased sexual self-efficacy as a key finding from the quantitative survey; and a number of more subtle changes in hard and soft skills, such as improved academic performance, leadership ability and compassion from the qualitative study.



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School contexts for peer education

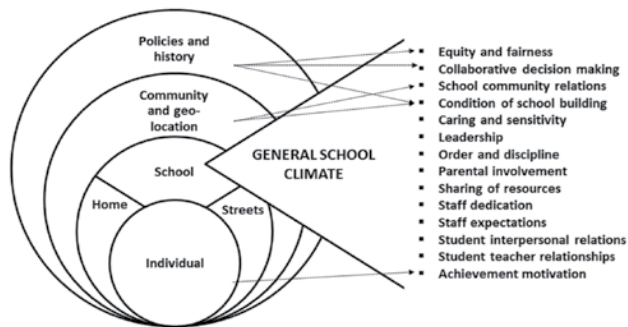
In this study, intentional efforts were made to obtain and analyse data gleaned from conducting in-depth observations of the school and community culture contexts.

Two theories were used to investigate how school context affected the outcomes of peer education. The data analysis was shaped by the ecological framework formulated by Russian psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, who emphasises that an individual is influenced by multiple contexts, from home, school and the streets through to community and geographical location and the policies and history of a location.

This idea was combined with the work of Norris Haynes, a US-based educator and academic, who has long investigated the factors that influence educational outcomes, especially in impoverished communities. He terms these the 'school climate' and details what Bronfenbrenner only brushes over.

In Figure 1, Haynes lists the factors that comprise the school climate, including staff behaviour and expectations; relationships between students, and students and staff; parental involvement in a school as well as school-community interactions (among others). In conducting their analysis for the HSRC study, researchers hypothesised that schools with a more positive climate (i.e. doing well in each of these areas) were also more likely to show better peer educational outcomes.

Figure 1: The components of school climate



Researchers found that the historically coloured rural schools and the extremely well-resourced suburban schools displayed the most positive school climate, according to Haynes' criteria. Conversely, the historically coloured-only schools and the historically black-only schools in urban locations displayed the least positive school climate characteristics.

An all-black peri-urban school established after the 1994 transition displayed a mix of positive and negative school climate characteristics despite the impoverished context in which it was located. Not surprisingly, in the final analysis, schools with the most positive climate (the coloured rural schools and the suburban school) also showed the largest gain in overall peer education outcomes.



This peer education programme fostered a compassionate and caring attitude among learners.

Changes in sexual self-efficacy

In the quantitative component of the study, when the results were compared at baseline (before peer education) with the results of those who had subsequently received peer education, the intervention schools were found to produce statistically better outcomes in five specific areas: future orientation; self-efficacy in sexual decision making; knowledge regarding HIV transmission; knowledge regarding HIV prevention; and knowledge about what constituted a healthy relationship.

After five to seven months, participants from the intervention schools were again measured and yielded statistically better outcomes with regard to self-efficacy in sexual decision making and knowledge of HIV transmission.



(The programme) developed peer educators' academic skills and improved their decision making, leadership and communication skills.

Uncovering more subtle changes

While these results were encouraging, showing that youth who were involved in this peer education programme were better able and more confident to make decisions regarding their sexual health and retained knowledge about protecting themselves from HIV infection over time, the more subtle effects of peer education were also uncovered.

In the qualitative part of the study, researchers collected stories of change from peer education participants, including teachers and other adults. These stories showed that this peer education programme fostered a compassionate and caring attitude among learners despite their environmental obstacles, and resulted in instances of improved family and community relations; developed peer educators' academic skills as well as improved their decision making, leadership and communication skills; opened doors for learners to deal with traumatic life experiences, such as abuse and exposure to violence; and had an overall positive impact on teachers' perceptions of learners – both on those who functioned as peer educators and those who participated in the programme.

These findings augur well for the future of peer education in South African schools, especially in communities that struggle with high-risk sexual behaviours and other social ills. The challenge now is to improve peer education as a key intervention strategy, and to add to the growing body of evidence of the doors that peer education opens in the lives of young people. ■

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The full report, Swartz S, Bhana A, Moolman B, Arogundade E, Solomon J, Timol F, & Vawda M. (2014). Opening locked doors. Evaluating peer education in schools in the Western Cape Province, is available on <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/research-outputs/view/6577>