

The sexual and reproductive health needs of school-going young people in the context of COVID-19 in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Natsayi Chimbindi^{1,2,3}, Ursula Ngema¹, Nothando Ngwenya^{1,2,3}, Andrew Gibbs^{2,3,4}, Candice Groenewald^{5,6}, Guy Harling^{1,2,3,7}, Nondumiso Mthiyane^{1,2}, Busisiwe Nkosi^{1,2,3}, Janet Seeley^{1,3,8}, Maryam Shahmanesh^{1,2,3}

1 Africa Health Research Institute, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa 2 University College London, London, United Kingdom 3 University of KwaZulu-Natal, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa 4 Gender and Health Research Unit, South African Medical Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa 5 Centre for Community Based Research, Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa 6 Department of Psychology, Rhodes University, South Africa 7 MRC/Wits Rural Public Health & Health Transitions Research Unit (Agincourt), University of the Witwatersrand, Gauteng, South Africa 8 Department of Global Health and Development, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK

1. Background

- Adolescents in South Africa face interlinked epidemics of poor sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and high HIV-incidence in a context of exceedingly high youth unemployment, orphanhood, and violence
- A review on the impact of the COVID-19 on adolescents' SRH in Africa found that the pandemic significantly restricted access to SRH services and led to increases in teenage pregnancies and reports of sexual violence.
- The impact of school closures due to COVID-19 raised widespread concerns about children's health and wellbeing.
- We examine the impact on the sexual health-needs of learners in the context of COVID-19 related lockdowns in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.**

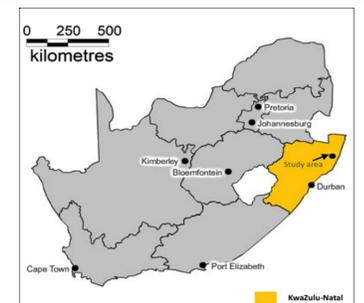
2. Methods

Study site

- Africa Health Research Institute (AHRI) in uMkhanyakude district, KwaZulu-Natal, SA
- Site is mostly rural and poor, with high unemployment (>80% of those aged >18), high HIV prevalence ~24% (15-49 years)
- There is very little or no school-based delivery of health services

Data collection

- Qualitative study - July-November 2020 and August-November 2021
- Purposively selected 4 schools (Grade 7-12) rural/urban
- 24 In-depth interviews** with principals, teachers and school governing board representatives (n=14), Department of Education (DoE) (n=2) and non-governmental organization (n=3) representatives, community members/parents (n=5)
- 8 Group discussions** with learners (Grade 7-12) (n=2 boys and n=2 girls), peer navigators (n=1), NGO (n=1), community members (n=1 men and n=1 women)
- All interviews were telephonic, audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic content analysis using Nvivo 12.



3. Findings

Theme 1: The sexual and reproductive health (SRH) of learners in the lead-up to the pandemic

- Learners and stakeholders reported that the SRH of young people was affected by alcohol misuse, poor SRH knowledge and few pathways to link learners with services.

"...a school kid has 5, 6 boyfriends. Boys they are busy over here smoking marijuana, drinking [...] They smoke eh [including girls], they are courting here [in the rented places], they have (sex), and some end up getting pregnant. They do not use condoms" (peer navigator, FGD).



- Stakeholders working with schools reported that a lack of access to biomedical interventions (e.g., contraception) and HIV services within schools increased learner pregnancies and poor HIV testing uptake.

Theme 2: The impact of COVID-19 on learners' SRH and well-being

Sexual reproductive health challenges and abuse

- Teachers and community members reported increases in rape cases and sexual and physical abuse of learners during the lockdown.
- Teachers reported that COVID-19 resulted in increased teenage pregnancies as the children spent less time in school indicating the important protective role of keeping children in school.



Mental and psychosocial challenges

- Gender-based violence in learners' households was reported to have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic related to loss of income.

"During the lockdown there were a lot of reported cases which included rape, substance abuse, and gender-based violence. Sometimes the learners would report that their mothers were experiencing gender-based violence. Substance abuse was very rife during the lockdown. People were under a lot of stress, so they turned to drugs for comfort and because this is a rural area alcohol is easily available and even if it is banned from the shops, people brew their own. Another issue we are faced with is currently is "insangu" [marijuana]" (NGO life coach, IDI).



Theme 3: The opportunities schools provided to support wellbeing of learners during the pandemic

Learning spaces for COVID-19

- Schools were seen as places young people could learn about COVID-19, be monitored and ensure they adhere to COVID-19 prevention strategies, unlike at home.

Daily screening for COVID-19 identified learners with other needs

"When you record in the morning, then you see the way they are dressed, you can see that no, this child needs an intervention. Maybe the jersey is no longer right...seeing the children that no, [colleagues] please come closer to this child, I [noticed] that they are not well. So, we prepare for that person [to be referred and helped]. (Principal, High school)



Theme 4: The role of schools in supporting SRH for learners

- Schools play a key role in promoting sexual well-being and mitigating some of the SRH vulnerabilities (through enrichment and providing a safe space) that learners face in their community.

Health promotion – SRH promotion

"The (nurses) offered to talk to the children [...] they just come to the clinic at a certain time. They gave them the time 4 'clock onwards, they would attend to them without any questions asked" (high school principal, IDI).

Social enrichment – Keeping adolescents safe and occupied

- Schools provide sporting and extracurricular activities which are used to teach and engage learners in activities other than academic subjects.

"Eh, at school there used to be [X NGO] that came and taught us about sports, exercise, (and) just eating a balanced diet. If we wish to test for HIV we can go to the existing containers [temporary shelter] to test at that time" (peer navigator, FGD).

Menstrual hygiene. Some schools provide sanitary pads donated through NGOs for female learners.

Food security through feeding schemes

"A lot of learners were dependent on the meals that were provided at the school. ...the lockdown brought a lot of suffering to many households. Sometimes you find an 18-year-old who is taking care of younger siblings, and all these kids depend on the school feeding scheme" (NGO, life coach IDI).



4. Conclusion

- Schools in rural KwaZulu-Natal are perceived as a safe space to reinforce and deliver interventions and promote SRH and health and well-being during pandemics.
- COVID-19 pandemic may have increased SRH needs and vulnerability of school-going children in our setting. School shutdowns reduced the opportunity for schools to provide a vital safe space and information to enhance SRH for adolescents.
- There is need to strengthen and protect the health promotion and social protection role that schools provide, especially in the context of HIV and sexual health during pandemics by ensuring that non-pharmacological public health responses do not impact negatively on school-going children's ability to access SRH information and services.