

**Direct information to increase uptake of sexual and reproductive health information among young
adolescents: Qualitative study in Kisumu County, Kenya**

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Direct information to increase uptake of sexual and reproductive health information among young adolescents: qualitative study in Kisumu County, Kenya Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa records poor sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes among adolescents (United Nations, 2009). Several social and biological factors elucidate the challenges that contribute to such poor outcomes: early initiation of sexual activities and limited use of contraceptives (Birungi, et.al, 2008). A recent study revealed that one in every 10 girls and one in every two boys attending secondary schools in Nairobi is sexually experienced (Oronje, 2008). Studies have shown that unmet need for SRH information among adolescents sometimes contributes to direct effects such as their infection with sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, and unintended pregnancies with several adverse outcomes, such as miscarriages, unsafe abortion, obstructed labour and other complications (KDHS, 2013; Birungi, et.al., 2008; Reynold et.al., 2006). Indirect effects include an increase in school drop outs, economic hardships and loss of self esteem among some single mother (KDHS, 2013). In order to avert these challenges, relevant interventions are urgently needed for the adolescents' ages 10-14 years and 15-19 years who constitute 13% and 10.8% of the total population, respectively or 23.8% (Government of Kenya, 2013).

With this backdrop in mind, Centre for the Study of Adolescence (CSA) has been implementing two online comprehensive sexuality curriculums, the World Starts with Me (WSWM) program since 2005 and the My World My Life (MWML) program since 2015. The WSWM and MWML curriculums provide age-appropriate SRHR information. The WSWM and MWML curriculums are also available in a written, hard copy format, for schools without Information Technology (IT) resources or reliable electricity source to conduct the program as originally designed (ibid). WSWM has been implemented since 2005 in 179* secondary schools in Nairobi, Kisumu and Coast counties. Conversely, the MWML curriculum is still being implemented in the pilot phase (3 primary schools) and will be rolled out in 37 schools in Kisumu County after the pilot.

Despite successes of the curriculums, WSWM and MWML remain largely teacher-driven as they are taught and implemented in class under the teacher's instructions. This means that learners have little control on how the curriculum is delivered, as well as prevents the learners from receiving direct unsolicited SRHR information. To provide direct SRHR information to younger adolescents in schools, CSA has recently adapted two newspaper pullouts, *Teen Talk* and *YTalk*, to disseminate SRHR information to adolescents for secondary and primary students respectively in 80 selected schools in Kisumu County, Nyanza region. An operations research (OR) qualitative study was conducted to assess learners perceptions and attitudes towards the pullouts as modes of cascading SRHR information to adolescents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescents seek health information from multiple sources including peers, adults and family members, schools, outreaches and social media. However, adolescents may struggle to decide which sources provide them with information that is correct, understandable and useful, particularly related to sensitive and risky health information such as sexual behavior, sexual diversity and contraceptive use.^{i ii} Direct SRHR information to young people enables them to access factual, correct information which has not been interpreted or 'opinionated' by other people. A direct platform such as newspaper pullouts ensures that young people can seek out and access available SRHR information which is unsolicited.

Newspapers have been used to provide adolescent sexual and reproductive health information (ASRH) to young people in Africa. In Uganda, Straight Talk Foundation (ST) has been providing SRHR information

through newspapers for young adolescents in schools and out-of school, as well as non-English speaking adolescents.ⁱⁱⁱ Results from an evaluation done on the Straight Talk magazines found that among both Ugandan males and females, exposure to ST activities was associated with greater ASRH knowledge, more balanced attitudes toward condoms, and having communicated with parents about ASRH issues. Another study found that people with higher media exposure were more likely to make better reproductive health decisions, like deciding to test for HIV than those who did not have media exposure.^{iv}

The Newspaper Pullout Intervention

The project targets adolescents in the 10 to 18 years bracket in primary and secondary schools. In this study, newspaper pullouts were utilized as channels for communicating SRHR information directly to adolescents in selected primary and secondary schools in Kisumu County, within Nyanza region of Kenya. The project assumes that the newspapers are direct source SRHR information which will stimulate discussions when learners read the newspapers in groups, as well as improve reading skills. In this regard, two newspapers were provided to primary and secondary school learners: the *YTalk* and *TeenTalk*, respectively. All students in secondary schools mentioned doing the WSWM curriculum but this was not the case in the two rural primary schools as MWML is being implemented as a pilot in urban primary schools. Each of the six operations research (OR) schools received 60 copies of the newspaper and 30 exercise books for the peer educators in secondary schools and group leaders in primary schools. A detailed distribution plan was provided to WSWM teachers in the secondary schools and head-teachers/guidance and counseling/biology teachers in the primary schools. The teachers then identified 30 peer educators/group leaders. The 30 peer educators/group leaders were told to form discussion groups comprising 10 students. In total, at least 300 students read the newspaper. In addition to the newspapers, each of the 30 peer educators/group leaders received an exercise book for making group discussion notes, comments and queries. The expected outcome of the intervention was increased SRHR knowledge among adolescents to enable them make informed decisions, and are healthier sexual, reproductive health and rights choices.

The study was designed with the consideration of meaningful youth participation. The process entailed establishment of editorial boards in which selected learners contributed to newspaper articles as well as collected opinions from their classmates/peers. After this stage, CSA together with Straight Talk Kenya collected the students' notes and compiled them into the newspaper, while offering expert opinions/correct information. After the newspapers had been distributed in school, the learners formed reading groups which is headed by peer educators. Each group consists of 10 members. The group leaders were provided with notebooks to write down any questions, comments or queries made during the group discussions. The educative role of newspaper is to bring about proper knowledge and the socio-political awareness among the people.^v Targeted and well designed newspapers for audiences can reach a wide range of audience. Young people in particular are generally recognized as heavy users of mass media and therefore easy to accommodate newspapers. Use of newspapers in education has several advantages: improves reading ability; sparks interest; furnishes variety of style and content; provides context and anecdotal reference points for less accessible subjects; acquaints the reader with current ideas, practices, and trends; and gives the reader an introduction to specialized topics. Furthermore, newspapers do all this with considerably less cost than one would have to pay for the number of books it would take to achieve the same outcome. Existing research on the rationale for using newspapers in education still validates that newspaper-based instructions add value by building students' learning and thinking skills, growing their knowledge base and stimulating their interest in reading.^{vi}

The program endeavours to provide SRHR information to young people through direct access using board games, radio shows, newspaper pullouts, peer education and the WSWM and MWML curriculum without interference by intermediaries who may hinder uptake of the intervention due to socio-cultural challenges like consideration of sex as a taboo subject.

Main Objective

- To contribute towards addressing the unmet need for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information among adolescents through newspaper pullouts in selected primary and secondary schools in Kisumu County, Kenya.

Specific objectives

- To find out what are the perceptions and attitudes of the learners about the newspaper pullouts and what young people consider as the added value
- To establish how the young people are using the newspaper pullouts, the information gaps and the predicting and inhibiting factors for utilization of these pullouts
- To determine if the pullouts lead to more dialogue and discussion among learners, and between learners and teachers about SRHR
- To ascertain if the pullouts lead to increased capacity (knowledge, positive attitudes and confidence) to make safe and informed decisions
- To determine how the pullouts can be successfully linked to peer education
- To find out if exposure to newspaper pullouts increase participation of students in class/communication with parents about SRHR

Methodology

Qualitative data was collected in two phases. In Phase 1, twelve focus group discussions (FGDs) and twelve key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted in 3 primary schools and 3 secondary schools in Kisumu County. Each FGD contained 8 respondents per group, and each school had 2 FGDs. Primary school learners were grouped by class while secondary students were grouped by sex. The key informants were teachers who were involved closely with the WSWM and MWML curriculums. In Phase 2, six FGDs were conducted among students, 3 FGDs were conducted among parents and 6 KIIs among teachers were conducted in three schools.

Results

The study was done in 6 schools with learners aged between 10 and 19. The schools consisted of urban, peri-urban and rural to be representative.

Learners Perceived Newspaper Pullouts as Encouraging

The students found the newspaper as encouraging and educative. [Participants in 4 FGDs, 10 references]. This is because characters in features shared similar experiences with adolescents. The information empowered adolescents by building their capacity through acquisition of knowledge on SRHR that is necessary to cope with challenges that affect them.

I think the magazine is so much **inspiring** as youth because even the issues are raised by teenagers like us. So, whatever is there [content] is so much related to our lives. It is good and educative.(Male student, Form 1)

Information inside here [newspaper pullout] is **encouraging**. It encourages us teenagers on how to manage, or take control of ourselves. It gives adequate information, and builds confidentiality to disseminate information [about SRHR]. (Male Student, Form 2)

Factors that Facilitated and Inhibited Utilization of Newspaper Pullouts by Students in Selected Primary and Secondary Schools in Kisumu County.

Factors that Facilitated Uptake of the Intervention

i) Interesting Topics

The most enjoyed topic was on bodily changes adolescents' experience. This topic was discussed in 7 out of 12 FGDs and mentioned 14 times by both secondary and primary school learners. The secondary school students were interested in the topic in the *Teen Talk* pullout because it helped them understand the nature of changes that adolescents experience as shown in the following excerpts:

I was eager to learn more about broadening of hips and the enlargement of breasts. That is common in schools. Some girls... feel shy [about these bodily changes]. (Male student, Form 2)

ii) Comprehension of the Content

Most secondary and some primary school learners comprehended the content of both the *TeenTalk* and *YTalk* pullouts, respectively, as stated in 7 out of 12 FGDs. Secondary school students were better able to comprehend the content of newspaper pullouts than their primary school counterparts. Commenting about the simple language, a participant stated, "*The content is easy to understand because it [pullout] uses simple English.*" (Male Student, Form 1). Another learner found the content to be clear and comprehensible, "*It was easy to understand due to clear information.*" (Male Student, Form 1).

iii) Design of the Pullouts

Secondary school students were impressed with the design of the *Teen Talk* pullout due to its attractive pictures. . Commenting on this aspect, a learner observed, "*I like the pullout because of pictures that are colorful for easy attraction, as well as use of simple English.*" (Male Student, Form 2). Teachers equally liked the pictures in pullouts because they could identify with the students therein. Other teachers had been involved in preparation of the pullout. When asked about her perceptions of the *Teen Talk* pullout, a teacher observed,

I like it [the newspaper pullout]. The students in the newspaper are from my school, I have been involved from the beginning." (KII, Respondent 11)

iv) Dialogue among Learners and Topics Involved

Results show that most learners discussed about SRHR issues in the pullouts with their peers. Three topics that were mostly discussed include: first, how to gain confidence to discuss SRHR with other people [this topic was discussed in 3 FGDs with 8 mentions]. For instance, by joining relevant clubs in order to interact with peers and also equip oneself with knowledge so as to gain confidence to discuss SRHR issues. Second, establishment of healthy relationships; emphasis was put on the fact that healthy relationships do not necessarily involve sexual intercourse; and that there is a difference between love and infatuation. Third, use of contraceptives by adolescents in order to avoid unintended pregnancies, myths and misconceptions, such as contraceptives being the cause of infertility, were clarified."

v) Dialogue between Learners and Teachers

Results showed little interaction and dialogue about SRHR between learners and their teachers [only three FGDs discussed this issue with three references]. Two learners stated they were free with their teachers but had not yet shared SRHR information with them. This is due to the possibility of the teacher sharing the conversation with her/his colleagues. When asked whether they shared information in the pullout with their teachers, a student observed, "*No she/he may share with other teachers' about our conversation.*" (Male student, Class 4) Another student reiterated, "*No, she'll suspect me of being sexually active.*" (Female Student, Class 4). However, some students said they felt free to discuss SRH issues with their WSWM teachers. A participant observed that students only share education issues with teachers but refrain from discussing topics that could attract punishment. Although results revealed that the pullout intervention had not improved interactions between teachers and students, more effort

should be made to create a trustworthy relationship for improved communication to attain better SRHR outcomes among adolescents.

v) Dialogue between Learners and Parents

During the FGDs, adolescents were asked whether they shared the pullout with their parents. Majority of the respondents had not done so because their parents are 'too cruel, judgmental, too busy with work or reluctant to discuss matters related to sexuality with their children'. Some learners in primary schools found the content in their pullout too embarrassing to share with parents. However, few students reported they had shared some topics with their mothers. In many cases, the response was negative. When narrating how her mother responded to the pullout, a respondent observed, "*I took it home and my mother asked me [to wait till] I attain the right age to read such information.*" (Female student, Class 5).

Conclusions and recommendations

Use of simpler language, more imagery and less words are vital to communicate SRHR information to younger adolescents. Peer-led group discussions should be encouraged, with time set aside for reading as well as taking them home. There is need to strengthen teacher and parent communication about sexuality with adolescents.

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ⁱⁱ Shiferaw K et.al, 2013, Assessment of adolescents' communication on sexual and reproductive health matters with parents and associated factors among secondary and preparatory schools' students in Debreworkos town, North West Ethiopia, Reproductive Health 2014, <http://www.reproductive-health-journal.com/content/11/1/2>

ⁱⁱⁱ Adamchak S et.al, 2007, The Straight Talk Campaign in Uganda: Impact of Mass Media Initiatives, summary report," Horizons Final Report. Washington, DC: Population Council.

^{iv} Sambisa, W et.al, 2008, AIDS stigma and uptake of HIV testing in Zimbabwe, Working Paper - Demographic and Health Research, <http://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/WP49/WP49.pdf>

^v What is the Role of Newspaper in enhancing Education? <http://www.preservearticles.com/201105056317/role-of-newspaper-in-education.html>

^{vi} John G and Betty L, 2009, The National Newspaper as a Tool for Educational Empowerment: Origins And Rationale, http://www.nytimes.com/ref/college/faculty/coll_mono_gard.html