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Children and Youth Voices about Sex and AIDS and implications for life skills education: Experiences in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa

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The HIV/AIDS epidemic and the complex socio-cultural factors that fuel HIV transmission among many societies in the world have led to governments adopting the multi-pronged and multi-sectorial approaches to deal with the phenomenon (Buthelezi, 2013). In education, the curriculum is identified as an area where HIV/AIDS and sexuality knowledge that is integrated within life skills education is incorporated (World Bank, 2002; Kelly, 2000). In South Africa, the life skills and HIV/AIDS education is included in the National Curriculum policy for schools. The paper foregrounds the primary and secondary school learners' voices, which articulate their experiences of the rural context.

Methods: The project, *Ixopo duty-bearers' Project Number One*¹, was done in the Ixopo rural area of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The qualitative framework was used, and 84 learners (54 primary and 30 high school learners) participated. Having cleared all ethical procedures that helped consolidate trust between the two schools involved in the project and the NGO working in the area, I embarked on the data production process. The qualitative approach; specifically, the arts-based and participatory methodologies were used. The learner participants, aged between 8-19 years wrote stories of their lives through drawings, and textual narratives in dialogue journals. Data from the dialogue journals were analysed qualitatively through open and axial coding, patterning, re-coding, and categorisation until the themes emerged.

Results And Discussion: Together the learners expressed narratives of worry, mainly about AIDS related deaths, TB, poverty, sex, and teenage pregnancy that are common in their context. After completing her life story, one learner wrote in big letters, *"The earth is death"* (FP11-13years). This four-word metaphor accurately captures the contents

of almost all dialogue journals, which described in detail the learners' experiences, where the death of family members due to AIDS related conditions is common. When parents die, children experience poverty and abuses including sexual abuses by the remaining relatives. Adult-adult and adult-child sex is prevalent in the community. Learners themselves engage in transactional sex to survive. Then, learners live to worry about getting pregnant.

The absence of relevant support for learners affected and infected by HIV/AIDS leads to depression among learners who, as a result, see death as an option. In the learners' voices, this is reflected as *"I just think of taking the rope and kill myself to have peace."* or *"I wish I should drink poisoned water"* or *"I wish my dead mother comes and fetches me."* Poverty and the ineffective delivery of life skills education exacerbate depression and hopelessness.

Conclusion: Problems and challenges facing children in the area are complex; however, theoretically a person is not a subject of his/her environment. In an environment of anti-child culture (van Greunen, 1993), education, particularly life skills education becomes a mediating factor between the child and his/her environment (Buthelezi, 2007). Consequently, the child develops his/her full potential and engages with the environment on personal, cognitive, psychological, socio-economic and constitutional levels, assumes responsibilities for their lives and make the most of life's opportunities.

Speaker Biography

Thabisile Buthelezi is a qualified nurse, midwife, teacher, and Adult Basic Education Practitioner. She works as an Associate Professor in the School of Education, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. Her teaching and research interests are on Life skills-based and sexuality education, HIV/AIDS in curricula, Education and Society, Language Education, Gender and culture, African languages and social aspects.

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