The relationship between risk behavior and scientific knowledge of HIV/AIDS amongst South African school girls.

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Introduction: The prevalence of HIV/AIDS in South Africa remains worryingly high. This is in spite of numerous programs which are aimed at reducing risk behaviour, eliminating stigma and promoting disclosure about HIV infections. As part of these efforts, the South African government has mandated the integration of HIV/AIDS education in the school curriculum. Life Orientation for instance is a subject where students are taught the socio-economic aspects of HIV/AIDS including while in Biology they are taught the scientific nature of HIV/AIDS in relation to various body systems such as the immune system and the circulatory system.

Research methods: The current study followed a quantitative questionnaire based methodology to collect data from a group of 291 school girls aged between 15 and 18 years. Of these 180 were Biology students and 111 were non-Biology. A non-probability convenience sampling approach was used to select students to participate in the study with a view to obtain a sample that is representative of the South African population.

Results: Results showed that Biology students have a significantly higher knowledge of health literacy related to HIV/AIDS (M = 54, SD = 20) than non-Biology students (M = 27, SD = 23), t(289) = -10.498, p = 0.001. It was also found that the HIV/AIDS literacy of Biology students (M = 74, SD = 16) was significantly higher than that of non-Biology students (M = 62, SD = 19), t(289) = -5.691, p = 0.002). The self-reported behaviours of the two groups however were not significantly different (p = .283). Further analysis of the data showed a significant correlation between Health Literacy and HIV/AIDS literacy. However, both Health Literacy and HIV/AIDS literacy did not correlate significantly with self-reported behaviour. Data also revealed that both groups reported tendency towards risk behaviour related to multiple sexual partners and unprotected sex.

Conclusion: The major finding of the current study was that scientific knowledge related to HIV/AIDS does not always correlate with self-reported behaviour amongst the youth. This is in agreement with scholars (e.g. Mnguni, Abrie & Ebersohn, 2016) who have suggested that knowledge alone does not influence behaviour. This also echoes views that scientific knowledge alone will not affect morality, character and citizenship (Mnguni et al., 2016). As reported by Mnguni et al. (2016), HIV/AIDS related behaviour could be affected by various socio-economic factors which are context specific, rather than scientific knowledge alone. Furthermore, it is possible that the lack of correlation between scientific knowledge and behaviour is due to misalignment between school curriculum and factors affecting the society such as HIV/AIDS. The current researchers believes that there is an urgent need to explore the alignment between school curriculum and HIV/AIDS education in order to ensure that students are able to utilize scientific knowledge in their everyday life.

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