policy brief
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Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality

# Do South African learners stigmatize HIV/AIDS-infected peers?

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## Introduction

***South Africa carries the world's largest number of people infected with HIV – 5.4 million and 18.8 percent of South Africans in their prime (15–49 years of age) are living with HIV and AIDS[1] (UNICEF, 2007).***

The HIV-AIDS pandemic represents a major challenge for the social and economic development of nations located in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV-AIDS (UNAIDS, 2010: 180) has estimated that in this region there are more than 20 million people living with HIV, and that around 10 percent of these people are below the age of 15 years.

The United Nations has recognized that the education sector has a critical role to play in terms of the delivery of effective HIV-AIDS prevention and awareness education programmes. National Ministries of Education have responded by implementing education initiatives that aim to ensure that all young people possess the basic knowledge that is required to make informed decisions about behaviours related to HIV-AIDS that will protect and promote health.

The primary school level has been identified as a crucial access point for HIV-AIDS prevention education programmes because most children attend these schools, and because of the importance of improving the knowledge of children about HIV-AIDS before they become sexually active and/or involved in high-risk behaviours and before they develop negative attitudes towards HIV infected peers.

The essential message of this policy brief is that a significant number of South African Learners stigmatize their HIV/AIDS-infected peers.

## The SACMEQ Research Programme

The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) is a network of 15 Ministries of Education: Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania (Mainland), Tanzania (Zanzibar), Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. SACMEQ's main mission is to undertake integrated research and training activities that: (a) provide educational planners with the technical skills required to monitor and evaluate the quality of their own education systems, and (b) generate information that can be used by decision-makers to plan and improve the quality of education.

The SACMEQ Consortium has undertaken three large-scale cross-national studies of the quality of education in Southern and Eastern Africa: the SACMEQ I Project (1995-1999), the SACMEQ II Project (2000-2004) and the SACMEQ III project (2006-2010). The SACMEQ III Project included an additional data collection concerned with a detailed assessment of pupil and teacher knowledge about HIV-AIDS.

[1] Statistics are available from the National HIV and Syphilis Antenatal Sero-prevalance Survey in South Africa, 2006, Department of Health

## The SACMEQ HIV-AIDS Knowledge questionnaire

The SACMEQ HIV-AIDS Knowledge questionnaire was to provide valid information on pupil knowledge and attitudes about HIV-AIDS with respect to the topics specified in official school curriculum frameworks, textbooks, and teaching materials used by the SACMEQ countries.

The questionnaire compliments and contextualised learner scores achieved on the HIV/AIDS Knowledge Test (HAKT). The HAKT test had 86 items covering 43 curriculum topics, and they were focused on an assessment of "the basic knowledge about HIV-AIDS that is required for protecting and promoting health".

While the HAKT deals with learner test scores the questionnaire gave an indication of learners' attitudes (in terms of stigma and discrimination) towards HIV infected peers. Topics in the questionnaire covered five main areas: definitions and terminology; transmission mechanisms; avoidance behaviours; diagnosis and treatment; and myths and misconceptions.

The questionnaire was administered in late 2007 to 61,396 Grade 6 pupils and 8,026 teachers in 2779 schools across the 15 SACMEQ countries In South Africa HAKT was administered in October 2007 to a national representative sample of 9 082 grade 6 learners and their teachers from a random sample of 392 public mainstream schools distributed the nine provinces. From an expected sample of 9666 learners, the achieved sample reflected 94% participation.

## The implications of stigmatization

The high prevalence of HIV/AIDS levels across different age groups in South Africa presents an almost certain reality of learners in primary schools being exposed to peers infected with the pandemic. It is important for learner well being and broader social cohesion for teachers, principals, parents and education officials to minimize (or remove altogether) possible attitudes/fears of stigmatization and discrimination among learners against HIV/AIDS-infected peers. This implies that the attitudes learners display (in terms of stigma and discrimination) need to be assessed through credible studies and understood by education officials.

## Attitudes about HIV/AIDS relating to stigma

**Table 1** contains the percentages and the corresponding standard errors of learners who indicated responses on the possibility of a learner infected with HIV to continue to attend school. Mean scores and corresponding standard errors have been shown for the nine provinces and South Africa. For example the percentage of learners in the Eastern Cape who indicated a negative response (no) and the corresponding standard errors were 22.5% and 2.66 respectively. The percentage of learners who indicated a positive response (yes) was 53.5% with a standard error of 4.18.

**Table 1 Percentages of learners expressing fear of casual contact with a learner infected with HIV *(stigma)***

| | RESPONSES ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A LEARNER INFECTED WITH HIV TO COTNINUE TO ATTEND SCHOOL | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No | | Not Sure | | Yes | |
| | % | SE | % | SE | % | SE |
| Eastern Cape | 22.5 | 2.66 | 24.0 | 2.93 | 53.5 | 4.18 |
| Free State | 22.3 | 2.55 | 24.0 | 2.65 | 53.7 | 4.08 |
| Gauteng | 10.8 | 1.66 | 18.3 | 2.18 | 70.9 | 3.02 |
| Kwazulu-Natal | 24.7 | 2.29 | 23.1 | 2.13 | 52.2 | 3.21 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mpumalanga | 28.2 | 4.23 | 18.5 | 2.30 | 53.4 | 4.99 |
| Northern Cape | 22.9 | 3.38 | 18.5 | 2.65 | 58.6 | 3.99 |
| Limpopo | 30.9 | 3.78 | 22.9 | 2.24 | 46.1 | 4.01 |
| North West | 23.2 | 3.06 | 19.4 | 2.68 | 57.4 | 4.57 |
| Western Cape | 18.8 | 2.04 | 25.0 | 2.67 | 56.2 | 2.76 |
| **SOUTH AFRICA** | **21.7** | **1.02** | **21.4** | **0.93** | **56.9** | **1.44** |

In **Table 1** the overall percentage of South African grade 6 learners who indicated a negative response to learners infected with HIV continuing to attend school was 21.7%. Twenty one percent indicated they were not sure while 56.9% had a positive response. In eight of the nine provinces 50% of learners indicated a positive response. In Limpopo, 46% of learners indicated a positive response.

The percentage of learners who indicated 'not sure' was almost the same as those that indicated 'no'. The percentage of learners that indicated 'no' ranged from the lowest (11%) in Gauteng to the highest (31%) in Limpopo.

The percentage of learners that indicated 'yes' ranged from 46% in Limpopo to 71% in Gauteng.

## Attitudes about HIV/AIDS relating to discrimination

The percentage of learners refusing contact with a person (friend or relative) infected with HIV and AIDS have been summarised in **Table 2**. The summary of results shown in **Table 2** indicated the percentages and the corresponding standard errors of learners' behaviour with a friend (peer) infected with HIV. Mean scores and corresponding standard errors have been shown for the nine provinces and South Africa. For example, the percentage of learners in the Free State who indicated a negative response ('avoid/shun him or her') and the corresponding standard errors on their behaviour towards a friend infected with HIV and AIDS were 10.3% and 1.30 respectively. Thirty six percent of learners with a standard error of 3.04 indicated a 'not sure' response while 53.5% of learners with a standard error of 3.30, indicated a positive attitude.

**Table 2** **Percentages of learners refusing contact with a person living with HIV or AIDS (Discrimination)**

| | LEARNER BEHAVIOUR WITH A PEER INFECTED WITH HIV | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Avoid/ shun him or her | | Not sure | | Positive attitude | |
| | % | SE | % | SE | % | SE |
| Eastern Cape | 10.5 | 1.30 | 33.7 | 3.70 | 55.8 | 3.63 |
| Free State | 10.3 | 1.45 | 36.2 | 3.04 | 53.5 | 3.30 |
| Gauteng | 3.5 | 0.81 | 30.7 | 2.43 | 65.8 | 2.73 |
| Kwazulu-Natal | 10.5 | 1.41 | 28.3 | 2.15 | 61.2 | 2.90 |
| Mpumalanga | 14.4 | 2.24 | 25.1 | 3.35 | 60.5 | 4.17 |
| Northern Cape | 9.5 | 1.75 | 34.3 | 3.10 | 56.1 | 3.41 |
| Limpopo | 7.2 | 1.01 | 35.4 | 3.10 | 57.3 | 3.10 |
| North West | 6.6 | 1.11 | 31.1 | 3.38 | 62.4 | 3.71 |
| Western Cape | 3.3 | 0.73 | 39.6 | 2.61 | 57.1 | 2.69 |
| **SOUTH AFRICA** | **8.9** | **0.55** | **31.3** | **1.08** | **59.9** | **1.25** |

In **Table 2** the overall percentage of South African grade 6 learners who indicated a negative response regarding their attitude toward a friend infected with HIV and AIDS was 8.9%. Thirty one percent indicated they were not sure while 59.9% had a positive attitude. In all nine provinces more than 50% of learners indicated a positive attitude.

A high percentage of learners indicated a positive attitude across all nine provinces but a significant number indicated they were 'not sure'. The percentage of learners that indicated a negative response ranged from the lowest (3%) in the Western Cape to the highest (14.4%) in Limpopo. The percentage of learners that indicated a positive attitude ranged from 54% in the Free State to 66% in Gauteng.

## Main findings relating to stigma and discrimination

1. **A positive observation was that overall (across all nine provinces) the percentage of learners that do not stigmatize was greater than those who do.**

2. **The percentage of learners that do stigmatize HIV infected peers was significantly high (31%) in Limpopo.**

3. **Almost 60% of learners in South Africa would not discriminate against an HIV infected peer.**

4. **While only nine percent of learners indicated they will shun HIV infected peers, a significant 31% indicated they were not sure how they would respond to these peers.**

## Conclusions

The results of this Brief point to an increased significance of strengthening educational programmes and policies in the schooling sector as South Africa strives to reduce not only the prevalence of HIV and AIDS but also to develop positive learner attitudes among children of school going age.

Although South Africa has a national policy on HIV and AIDS for learners and educators in public schools (DoE, 1999), issues around the pandemic are taught in the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) through the Life Orientation learning area and national integrated plans by the ministries of health, social services and education address are in place to combat the HIV and AIDS, clearly more needs to be done within schools and their communities to encourage positive attitudes among learners, particularly at a primary school level. This will have immediate and broader implications for HIV infected learners and society.

The Department of Basic Education addresses schooling matters relating to HIV and AIDS mainly through the Life Orientation learning area and in particular the HIV and AIDS Life Skills Programme that has been instituted since 2000.

To improve the education on HIV and AIDS, existing programmes such the HIV and AIDS Life Skills Education Programme, Peer Education Programme and The Care and Support for Teaching and Learning Programme should take into account the findings of the SACMEQ study relating to HIV and AIDS.

The findings of this brief adds further support to our educational planning processes to identify and recognise measurable outcomes in pursuing excellent health knowledge levels and attitudes among learners and set measurable life skills targets that are aligned and contribute to the system-wide goals of the Schooling 2025 sector plan.

South Africa Ministry of Education

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