

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

UNZA students as leaders for abstinence programmes

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To encourage secondary school pupils to abstain from sexual activities and concentrate on their academic activities by using UNZA students as role models.

Method: The study targeted all grade 10 to 12 pupils from the 17 schools that were randomly picked in Lusaka province. To help in the sensitization 100 students were selected from the University of Zambia and trained to be trainers in areas of Abstinence, public speaking tips, assertiveness, careers and HIV/AIDS: These students helped come up with a monitoring and evaluation tool which had a set of questions targeted at raising awareness in abstinence (AB), careers, assertiveness, information on HIV/AIDS. The monitoring and evaluation tool was firstly administered randomly with larger groups then after sensitisation, within smaller groups.

Results: The pupils exhibited high knowledge about HIV and AIDS pandemic and prevention measures. The pupils in nearly all the schools were receptive and showed interest thus calling for continuity of the programme. It was also found that presentations on career options were able to capture the attention of the pupils and engage them into discussions on HIV and AIDS and abstinence.

Conclusion: Combined abstinence and comprehensive sex education should be used to help bring about delayed initiation of sexual activities, address gender inequities and varying cultural norms about acceptable male and female sexual behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Zambia is one of the countries in the Sub-Saharan region along with Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, South Africa and Zimbabwe that account for close to a third (1/3) of the

entire world's HIV incidence and deaths due to AIDS.¹ The national HIV prevalence rate among adults 15-49 years currently stands at 14.3%, which is a decline from 15.6%. The MDG 6 target for Zambia, which aims to keep prevalence below 15.6%, has been met. The challenge remains to halve new HIV infections by 2015. It is also understood that young people comprise over 50% of Zambia's population and it is estimated that those aged 15-24 years account for 17.5% of HIV positive population between ages 15-49. In addition, condom use and HIV testing among young people who are sexually active is low.³

This low usage of condoms and the high rates of HIV/AIDS among young people led to the formation of prevention programmes which include the ABC (Abstinence, Be Faithful and Condom use). According to the Zambia Sexual Behaviour⁴ findings, median age at first sex among young people in the age range 15-24 years in 1998 – 2003 survey, was 16.5 years for both males and females, while in 2005 the same age range indicates a two year increase to 18.5 years. Among the youth, delay in sexual debut or abstinence has been widely promoted.

Since 1981, the United States government through the cultural Centre has been supporting abstinence-only programs to prevent teen pregnancy. Such programmes have since grown to include prevention of HIV and STIs. This expanded internationally with the implementation of President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). PEPFAR mandates that one-third of all prevention dollars allocated to 15 focus countries through the program, must be earmarked for abstinence-until-marriage programs.

Currently, two approaches predominate the abstinence programs: "abstinence-only" (also called "abstinence only- until-marriage") and "abstinence plus" (also called "abstinence-based" or "comprehensive sexuality education"). The primary objective of abstinence only programs is to delay sexual debut by providing

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information, changing attitudes about sex, and improving decision-making skills.⁵

It has been mandated by PEPFAR that all abstinence-only programs adhere to an eight-point definition of "abstinence education." This definition among other things teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity and that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects.⁶

These programs also prohibit discussing contraception or STI prevention methods such as condoms, except in reference to their failure rates.⁷ Further causes for concern are the lack of scientific evidence of the abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula.⁸ Under PEPFAR requirements, international abstinence-until-marriage programs are expected to "encourage unmarried individuals to abstain from sexual activity as the best and only certain way to protect themselves from exposure to HIV" and other STIs.⁹

In Zambia, University of Zambia and the Copperbelt University were funded to address the disease through abstinence programmes. The programme was dubbed "*Abstinence: Be faithful, student leadership programme*". This programme engaged University students to be role models to pupils in High Schools. The University of Zambia embarked on this programme as part of its commitment to playing an active role in mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS. This commitment is both to its community and the society as a whole.¹⁰

AIM

The aim of this programme was to encourage pupils to abstain from sexual activities and concentrate on their academic activities.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the *University of Zambia Abstinence-Be Faithful programme* were:

- a) To sensitize pupils in high schools on abstinence as a primary and secondary method of HIV prevention.
- b) To sensitize pupils in high schools on HIV and STI prevention through abstinence.
- c) To establish UNZA students as positive role models in the eyes of pupils in secondary and high schools.

The programme was carried out from March 5 to March 15, 2007 in nine (9) government high schools in Lusaka's Province. Eight others that had been earmarked, were unable to participate due to prior commitments.

METHODOLOGY

Setting and Participants

The participants for this project were selected in two stages. Firstly 100 students were recruited on the programme from Ridgeway and Great East Road Campuses. These students were trained to be trainers and role models for the targeted high school students. Of the 100 students selected, 10 were further selected to act as monitors within the group. A student leadership program training manual and information package was designed and produced for the students. These students were trained to help in the sensitization campaign. Secondly 17 schools were randomly selected in Lusaka province. In these schools grade 10 to 12 pupils were targeted.

Instrumentation

A monitoring and evaluation tool was developed which had a set of questions targeted at raising awareness in AB, careers, assertiveness, information on HIV/AIDS.

Procedure

A training manual was firstly produced for the 100 selected students. The students were trained and received an information package on Abstinence, public speaking tips, Assertiveness, and careers. Later these students were put into 5 groups' and 2 monitors were chosen for each group. Appointments were later done in the target schools through the School heads. The UNZA students travelled to the schools and administered The Monitoring and evaluation tool randomly with larger groups then after sensitisation within smaller groups. Lastly, evaluation was done to assess change in the level of knowledge. The following activities were also carried out; career talks, HIV/AIDS sensitization, establishing Ab clubs.

Data Processing and Analysis

The data collected was compiled, evaluated and analysed.

RESULTS

A total of 3,017 pupils (1,740 males and 1,277 females) were sensitized. To encourage abstinence, not only as desirable but also a viable choice, emphasis was placed on

the benefits of abstinence including, freedom from worrying about contracting HIV and AIDS or other sexually transmitted infection (STI), becoming pregnant or causing pregnancy, and emotional stress associated with failed sexual relationships.

Two central themes emerged: (1) usefulness of the programme and the (2) benefit of the programme. The first theme describes the importance the programme from the pupils' perspective and therefore individualised. The second theme reflects the impact the programme had on the pupils as a group.

Usefulness of the programme

Empowering

The usefulness of the program was viewed differently by pupils. Some of them saw it as empowering;

“We have learnt about the danger and prevention of HIV and AIDS. We have also been told about courses offered at UNZA for career. We were encouraged to work hard and abstain in order to further our career.”

Role models

Others saw and identified role models among the university students who were conducting the abstinence campaign. This helped them have a clear picture of their goals and aspirations after interacting with the university students;

“I think the effort by UNZA to educate us has been very helpful, it has helped us to build our self-esteem and we have clearer picture of where we are going and aims in life.”

Leadership

The abstinence programme offered the opportunity for the pupils to show leaderships in their own lives by taking charge of their lives and live healthy lives through making the right decisions;

“To begin with I would love to thank the University of Zambia for having initiated this program. We as youths are always the victims of HIV and AIDS so it's great and important that this program should continue so that we can fight HIV and AIDS in Zambia”. “This has been an interesting and encouraging discussion. It has taught me enough to know how to help friends to avoid sex and handle peer pressure”.

Benefits of the programme

Educative

A number of benefits were realized through this ABC campaign. This was important because it would have lasting effect in the pupils' lives on what kind of personal decisions they make after. A number of students appreciated that they had gained new information and found it educative;

“The lesson was interesting and I have learnt how to prevent myself from engaging in sexual activities. We have been taught about Sexually Transmitted Diseases.”

“I have enjoyed the program because it was educative. We have talked about education and the fatal disease which is HIV and AIDS, how to study and care for mental health.”

Priorities

Other pupils were informed on the importance of taking the right priorities in their lives;

“I have learnt that losing friendship is not like losing virginity because you can easily reconcile with your friend, while loss of virginity is forever. Abstinence is the only way to keep safe especially for us pupils and youths”

“I have learned that you don't have to rush for things that you see now because the future adds the better things. We should abstain from sex and give ourselves time. We can again rise after a fall.”

Career knowledge

Other students were more appreciative of the fact that they had more information on career and were better able to make informed decisions after the AB campaign;

“I think with the information rendered to us concerning careers we are able to choose what job opportunities we can have and we have added a lot of HIV information that we didn't know before this.”

Life skills

Another student appreciated the life skills they attained to help them attain their goals;

“I have found this discussion to be very helpful. We have learnt a lot both our careers and how to maintain ourselves to fulfill our ambitions.”

It finally noted that the approach of combining career talk and information on ABC was a favorable idea among the pupils as it was something new to which they were able to embrace;

“It was interesting and fun to talk about a topic we always talk about but in a different way. We were also challenged about career.”

DISCUSSION

A young girl who claims to be a virgin recently asked Auntie Getrude a columnist in the Education Post if one could have sex whenever they felt they were ready. She also asked if two faithful partners could have sex.¹¹ She further stated that her friends were having sex with their partners and they told her all sorts of stories, however, she doesn't know the truth.

Promoting abstinence among the youth may be a challenge. This is because when you talk about being faithful whom are we talking about? Is it married couples and or just partners in a relationship. If a couple cannot abstain they should be faithful to each other. This is where the issue is. Even if both are faithful in their relationship, one may get infected if the other partner has had multiple partners and contracted the virus.

This shows young people who are not yet engaged in sex are in a dilemma because of the stories told to them by their peers. It is only by moving in providing the correct message on why they should delay their sexual activities in giving her response Auntie Getrude gave reasons for delaying sex: quoting Sizer, Whitney & De Bruyne¹² stating that:

- You could end up pregnant if you are a girl or become a young father if you are a boy.
- You could contract HIV/AIDS at a young age
- A sexual relationship is something intimate and could leave emotional scars in your life, when you don't get what you are expected to get out of the relationship.
- She further added that immature partners might focus

on sexual activity that can lead to neglecting their intellectual, emotional social and spiritual growth. The other argument that she brought out was that early sexual involvement could cause distrust. This is because when a partner becomes sexually involved easily, doubts arose about that person's values and ability to be faithful.

Experiences and Lessons learnt

Students conducted the sensitization training based on a programme outline, which was formulated with their input during the training. The student facilitators training tackled various topics including how to handle difficult questions related to HIV/AIDS and abstinence. This was done to ensure uniformity in the message presented to the high school pupils. Abstinence as it related to HIV and AIDS was highlighted through entertainment performances. These performances attracted the attention of the pupils and were later followed by group discussions.

The pupils in nearly all the schools were receptive and called for continuity of the programme because they found it empowering. Some pupils further declared acceptance for and belief that abstinence is possible and were happy to hear of the several benefits associated with the same.

During the sensitization period it was found, interaction between the pupils and the students during the sessions was effective as they looked at the presenters as peers and academic models. It was found that the presentations on career options were able to capture the attention of the pupils and engage them into discussions on HIV/AIDS and abstinence.

Challenges

Most of the high schools had pupils who have had children and were readmitted for studies. This could be a hindrance or to motivation message delivery on abstinence. The programme needs to be sustainable. Dependency on donor funds limits the issue of sustainability and effectiveness of the program to deliver the required messages.

Girls are allowed back to school based on the policy that allows them to continue with school after giving birth. These girls may therefore not support abstinence. There is need to emphasise that when pupils do not abstain from sex, they may incur the prolonged period of absence

from school, before completion and possibly contract STIs. At one of the schools visited by the students on the programme, a pupil who is a mother of two, was quoted in one of Zambia's tabloids as saying it was important for women to be educated. Such messages should be used to encourage abstinence.

Those pupils who accepted that they made a mistake by having children at an early age, they are a plus to the programme as they can be used to help disseminate the information to others on the importance of delaying their sexual encounters.

From the foregoing it is also important to note that despite an effort to reduce unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease (STD) in adolescents, both abstinence and comprehensive sex and STD/HIV education programs having been proffered. A review carried out on 56 studies that assessed the impact of abstinence curriculum suggests that did not delay initiation of sex and only 3 of 9 had any significant positive effects on any sexual behavior. In contrast, those which combined abstinence and comprehensive sex education, about two thirds showed evidence that they positively affected young people's sexual behavior, including both delaying initiation of sex and increasing condom and contraceptive use among important groups of youth.¹³ Therefore it may seem that abstinence programs have little evidence to show that abstinence program on its own are effective, they work better when offered as a comprehensive program that includes sex education.

CONCLUSION

Though the pupils exhibited high knowledge about HIV and AIDS pandemic and prevention measures, by the end of the session, the pupils appreciated abstinence was the most effective means of HIV/STI prevention. The programme rode on the principles of leadership, use of role models, peer influence and also some life skills were demonstrated in the ability to share on sexual reproductive health, career aspirations and gender. It is believed that this will have a snowballing effect, as they will also pass on the message to others through their Anti-AIDS Clubs. The use of different role models has been seen to be an effective strategy of giving information on HIV and AIDS, and may be an opportunity to carry comprehensive sex education.

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