

## Peer Counselling in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools

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**ABSTRACT** The study sought to establish the status of peer counselling in some Zimbabwean secondary schools as perceived by school teachers. A qualitative design was used. An open-ended questionnaire was completed by 26 secondary school teachers who were then enrolled for a Bachelor's degree in secondary education at a state university in Zimbabwe. Data were thematically analysed. The results revealed that most of the secondary schools from which the respondents came from, did not have peer counsellors. Some participants mentioned peer counsellors in the form of peer educators from HIV and AIDS related organisations or Non Governmental Organisations who sometimes visited secondary schools. The few teachers whose schools had peer counsellors revealed that the peer counsellors were selected on the basis of their good characters. The peer counsellors were involved in HIV and AIDS and related issues such as unwanted pregnancy, sexual abuse, drug abuse, problem solving and overcoming peer pressure. They entertained other students through dramas, poems and presentations. Although the peer counsellors had some HIV and AIDS training, they were reported to be lacking in peer helping training. The peer counsellors faced challenges including peer counselling underrating, resistance and discouragement from other students, lack of faith by other students and shortage of time. The teachers wished the peer counsellors could receive training in managing depression, study and listening skills, ethical issues and managing disputes among students. Recommendations were made.

### INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, students experience social, personal and academic problems at school, at home and in their communities (Nziramanga 1999; Chireshe and Mapfumo 2005; Chireshe 2006). There are rapid sociological changes emanating from modernisation and urbanisation that generally stress students (Chireshe 2006, 2011; Mudhovozi and Chireshe 2012). Migration and urbanisation have resulted in a sense of isolation among the youth who have lost traditional family-social networks (Chireshe 2012) leading to social isolation which may lead to health damaging behaviours such as substance abuse (Caspi et al. 2006). In relation to the above, continued disintegration of the indigenous social support system (Stockton et al. 2010) has resulted in unstable homes (Mogbo et al. 2011) which themselves have led to feelings of insecurity among children and adolescents. Such homes can severely stress the intellectual functioning of a child. The social disintegration has resulted in an increase in the divorce rate or separation and in the number of single-parent

families all over the world which are also stress factors for students (Yuk Yee and Brennan 2004; Chireshe 2006). Similarly, the number of orphaned children has increased (Stockton et al. 2010). These orphans find themselves surrounded by fragmented extended families.

A number of scholars, for example, Adelman and Taylor (2002), DeMato and Curcio (2004), Hernandez and Seem (2004), Rayburn (2004) and Tambuwal (2009) argue that violence is prevalent in schools worldwide. Family violence/conflict is also widespread. In Zimbabwe for example, (Chireshe 2006), South Africa (Bock-Jonathan 2008) such violence/conflict results in emotional and psychological trauma on children and adolescents.

More to the challenge of violence is the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The pandemic is viewed as creating a host of social problems in Sub-Saharan African countries such as Botswana, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe (Chireshe 2006; Kasayira and Chireshe 2010; Stockton et al. 2010; Pillay 2012). This is exacerbated by age-discrepant and intergenerational sexual partnerships, as well as transactional sexual relationships (Shumba et al. 2011). Many students are affected by HIV and AIDS because their parents and relatives are suffering from HIV and AIDS. Their lives are full of stress and distress as they care for their ailing and dying parents or relatives (Nziramanga 1999).

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Despite the above problems, today's parents tend to have little time with their children to give them the necessary guidance (Nziramasanga 1999). The parents expect the school to attend to the students' problems (Chireshe 2011). Thus, the students have nowhere to turn to with their challenges except the school where they spend the greater part of their time and life. Schools are thus ideally positioned to initiate and maintain activities and services to enhance the psychological development and well-being of youth (Rice and Leffert 1997). Schools can achieve this through the implementation of School Guidance and Counselling (SGC) services as Learner Support Services (LSS). Learner Support Services comprise a broad range of services often provided through the guidance and counselling programmes or other pastoral care services. They are services geared towards assisting individuals to understand themselves, their problems, their school environment and their world and also to develop adequate capacity for making wise choices and decisions (Eyo et al. 2010; Chireshe 2011). In the context of School Guidance and Counselling, LSSs are aimed at assisting students develop the ability to understand themselves, to solve their problems and to make appropriate adjustments to their environment (Chireshe and Mapfumo 2005; Egbochuku 2008; Chireshe 2006, 2012).

### **Why Peer Counselling?**

A number of challenges and issues have been noted in the implementation of SGC as a learner support service to overcome the challenges students experience. These include lack of training among the implementers, negative attitudes of headmasters, lack of specific policy and work overload (Chireshe 2006; Prinsloo 2007; Egbochuku 2008; Eyo et al. 2010; Choge et al. 2011; Shumba et al. 2011). It has been reported that teacher counsellors have heavy teaching loads and that there are no full-time teacher counsellors in schools (Mapfumo 2001; Waitiku and Khamasi nd; Stocton et al. 2010; Mahlangu 2011). As such, they are hardly available for the students (Arudo 2008).

One way to overcome the shortage of school counsellors has been the introduction of peer counsellors. Peer counselling is the encouraging concerted effort to harness the capacity

which group members sharing common interests may console, appease, befriend, mediate and reconcile those who are alienated from one another informally without resorting to discipline or depending on professionals or those in authority within organisations or institutions (Arudo 2008).

Peer counsellors are para-professionals selected from the group to be served, trained and given on-going supervision to perform some key function generally performed by a professional (Arudo 2008). They are students appointed by their colleagues or the school administration in an effort to open greater link between individual students and are seen to be useful where professional services may be inadequate or not readily available (Arudo 2008).

Literature documents a number of advantages from using peer counsellors. For example, the presence of peer counsellors results in the school counsellors having more time for students with severe problems (Lapan 2001); use of peer helpers reaches a wider audience (Lapan 2001; Chireshe 2006); students do not trust school counsellors enough to talk to them about their personal problems as the teacher-counsellors occupy an authoritarian position (Visser 2001); students are most likely to approach fellow students when they are experiencing problems and concerns before they approach teacher-counsellors especially on issues they consider sensitive such as rape, STIs etc. (Arudo 2008); adolescents identify more easily with their peers and are far more likely to openly discuss sexual practices, drug-taking and emotional reaction with their peers than with adults who are considered to be authority figures (Visser 2005); peer counselling enables adolescents to discuss freely and express personal problems about parents, the authority and themselves in a free and frank manner (Rutondoki 2001); peer counsellors are able to informally interact with their colleagues in class, during sporting games, in the hostels and at any time whenever there is an opportunity (Arudo 2008); peer counsellors provide information that the adults would normally not be prepared to discuss (Chireshe 2006); because of their closeness to their colleagues, peer counsellors can easily notice stress symptoms and refer such cases to the teacher-counsellors before it is too late (Arudo 2008); supportive peer relationships can promote the sharing of knowledge and experiences, provide role models

and enhance healthy coping skills because the young people are all in the same situation (Visser 2005) and students are more likely to respond positively to messages heard from their peers and more likely to approach their peers with a question or a problem (YouthNetBrief: Zambia 2005).

To the knowledge of the researcher, the status of peer counselling in Zimbabwean secondary schools has not been fully investigated.

### Goals of the Study

The study sought to establish the status of peer counselling in Zimbabwean secondary schools as perceived by secondary school teachers. The study sought to provide an answer to the following main research question: What is the status of peer counselling in Zimbabwean secondary schools as perceived by secondary school teachers?

## METHOD

### Design

A qualitative design was used. Qualitative designs are normally used when the study aims at describing and understanding a phenomenon from the participants' point of view (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). Since the present study sought to describe and understand the status of peer counselling in secondary schools as perceived by secondary school teachers, the design was deemed suitable.

### Sample

Twenty-six secondary school teachers (14 male and 12 female) enrolled for a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected from a group of B.Ed students who were willing to participate in the study. In purposeful sampling, the knowledgeable people are selected (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). The B.Ed students were qualified teachers who were knowledgeable about school programmes that include SGC.

### Instrumentation

An open-ended questionnaire focusing on the availability of peer counsellors, selection of peer

counsellors, activities of peer counsellors, training of peer counsellors, benefits of peer counselling and challenges peer counsellors face was used. An expert in SGC was asked to check on the relevance and usability of the items on the questionnaire.

### Procedure

Secondary school teachers on a BEd secondary school programme were asked to complete the open ended questionnaire at the end of one of their lectures in their different main subject areas. Participation was voluntary. The participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection exercise.

### Data Analysis

Data were thematically analysed. Data were examined for recurrent instances. These instances were then systematically identified across the data sets and grouped together. Thus, responses were categorised on the basis of the meanings they conveyed in relation to the main focus areas of the questionnaire.

## RESULTS

### Availability of Peer Counsellors

Most of the respondents indicated that there were no peer counsellors in their schools. They mentioned peer counsellor in the form of peer educators from HIV and AIDS related organisations or Non Governmental Organisations who sometimes visited secondary schools.

The following extracts from some of the participating teachers confirm the above:

*'Our school does not have peer counsellors' (Participant 20).*

*'I have not seen any peer counsellor in my school' (Participant 5).*

*'We sometimes have peer educators from NGOs visiting the school' (Participant 2).*

### Selection of Peer Counsellors

The few respondents who came from schools with peer counsellors revealed that the peer counsellors were selected by teachers on the basis of their characters.

The following extracts from some of the participating teachers confirm the above:

*'Teachers select peer counsellors in my school' (Participant 12).*

*'Students who behave well are selected to be peer counsellors' (Participant 3).*

### Activities of Peer Counsellors

The peer counsellors were reported to be involved in the following activities: HIV and AIDS and related issues such as teenage pregnancy; sexual abuse; substance abuse, peer pressure. The activities were sometimes implemented through drama, poems and presentations.

The following extracts from some of the participating teachers confirm the above:

*'They are involved in HIV and AIDS education among peers' (Participant 7).*

*'Peer counsellors assist other students with sexual abuse and substance abuse issues' (Participant 26).*

*'Peer counsellors hold dramas and poems' (Participant 19).*

### Training of Peer Counsellors

The peer counsellors in the few schools had not received any training. They lacked peer helping skills. Some had received basic HIV and AIDS training.

The following extracts from some of the participating teachers confirm the above:

*'Peer counsellors in my school are not trained' (Participant 22).*

*'Last year the peer counsellors received some basic training in HIV and AIDS' (Participant 17).*

*'I think they need to be trained in peer helping' (Participant 11).*

### Benefits of Having Peer Counsellors

The few respondents whose schools had peer counsellors mentioned that the peer counsellors assisted other students with HIV and AIDS, substance abuse, sexual abuse issues. They also helped in socialising isolated students.

The following extracts from some of the participating teachers confirm the above:

*'Students are more aware of substance and sexual abuse issues' (Participant 15).*

*'The majority of our students are informed about HIV and AIDS pandemic because of peer counsellors' (Participant 9).*

*'There is socialisation of isolated students' (Participant 1).*

### Challenges Faced by Peer Counsellors

Respondents revealed that peer counsellors experienced some challenges which include: being underrated by peers, being resisted by other students, other students discouraging them from being peer counsellors, not being trusted by fellow students and little time for peer counselling.

The following extracts from some of the participating teachers confirm the above:

*'Peer counsellors are sometimes looked down upon by other students' (Participant 4).*

*'Students sometimes do not approach peer counsellors or refuse the assistance of peer counsellors' (Participant 8).*

*'It seems other students do not trust some of them' (Participant 21).*

## DISCUSSION

The study revealed that most schools did not have peer counsellors. This may be because that the schools did not understand the importance of peer counsellors. This finding contradicts literature for example, Kiarie (2010) who established that a number of schools in Eastern Kenya had peer counsellors. This could be because in Kenya, organisations such as Embu Youth AIDS Advocates (EYAA) visit schools and train peer counsellors.

It emerged from this study that peer counsellors were selected by teachers. The finding did not mention the involvement of other students in peer counselling selection as is the case in the literature. Robinson et al. (1991) revealed that in effective SGC programmes, teacher-counsellors selected peer counsellors by asking students to give two names of students to whom they would go if they had a personal problem. Students with the highest number of votes would become peer counsellors. The peer counsellors must preferably not be prefects, ought to be sociable, well disciplined, with average or above average academic performance. They must be good speakers, listeners and able to keep secrets and good role models (Arudo 2008).

The findings on activities of peer counsellors confirm what is available in the literature. For example, Kiarie (2010) states that peer counsellors are usually involved in activities such as HIV and AIDS, peer pressure, substance abuse.

Kiarie (2010) revealed that in Kenya, peer counsellors disseminated their messages through plays, poems and songs while United Movement to End Child Soldiering (nd) has the same views for Northern Uganda. Visser (2005) argues that through peer counselling, information about HIV and AIDS and healthy life styles can be circulated in a language understandable to young people.

The study revealed that the few peer counsellors in schools had not been trained in peer counselling. This may contribute to the lack of trust and respect they received from their peers. Elsewhere for example, in Northern Uganda, 2441 peer counsellors were trained to assist other students (United Movement to End Child Soldiering nd). In Kenya, many students have also been trained in peer counselling (Kiarie 2010). A previous study in Zimbabwe (Chireshe 2006) recommended the training of peer counsellors in basic counselling skills. Training of peer counsellors is very helpful as it equips the peer counsellors with the knowledge and skills necessary for peer counselling implementation. In South Africa, the training of peer counsellors focus on communication skills, problem solving skills, information about HIV and AIDS and substance abuse as well as psychosocial issues in the schools (Visser 2005).

The study also revealed that peer counsellors were viewed by teachers as of great help with regards to HIV and AIDS, substance abuse, sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy and socialising isolated students. This confirms an earlier study by Chireshe (2006) who established that Zimbabwean peer counsellors were greatly involved in HIV and AIDS. Peer counselling was also seen to be minimising the cases of unwanted pregnancies and drug abuse among Kenyan students (Kiarie 2010). Similarly in Zambia, peer counsellors were seen to reduce the number of pregnancies among students in schools (Youth Net Brief: Zambia 2005). Literature also reveals that peer counsellors enable teacher-counsellors to have more time with students with severe problems (Lapan 2001) and they are assisted to reach out to many students (Schmidt 1993).

It emerged from this study that peer counsellors in Zimbabwe were viewed to be experiencing a number of challenges. The main challenge was that of lack of training in peer helping. If they had the training, may be the underrating and being resisted by other students would

be overcome. Generally people tend to respect someone who is knowledgeable. The peer counsellors did not also have time for peer counselling probably because they were full-time students.

## CONCLUSION

A number of conclusions on the status of peer counselling in Zimbabwean secondary schools can be drawn from the findings of this study: many secondary schools in Zimbabwe do not have peer counsellors; lack of peer counsellors disadvantages students as they are deprived of the advantages of peer counselling; where the peer counsellors are available, other students do not take part in their selection; the peer counsellors were not trained; the lack of training could have contributed to the underrating and resistance they received from their peers; the peer counsellors also focused more on HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and overcoming peer pressure and peer counselling was implemented through a number of methods which include drama, poems, songs and plays.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made: all secondary schools should have peer counsellors; other students should be involved in the selection of the peer counsellors; the peer counsellors need to be trained in basic peer helping skills and Universities may assist in the training through outreach programmes. There is need for similar future studies involving school counsellors and the peer counsellors.

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