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Implementation of the National HIV/AIDS Policy in Schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

Teachers' Perspectives and Challenges

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Abstract

This qualitative research investigates teachers' perceptions regarding implementing South Africa's National HIV/AIDS Policy within primary schools, focusing on the O.R. Tambo Inland Education District in the Eastern Cape. Guided by an interpretive paradigm and a case study methodology, data collection entailed document review, semi-structured interviews, and field observations involving twelve teachers, five school managers, two union representatives, and five Life Orientation (LO) educators. Findings reveal substantial gaps in teachers' knowledge, inadequate training, and limited commitment towards effective policy implementation, further exacerbated by the unavailability of a comprehensive, accessible national HIV/AIDS policy document within schools. The study advocates for increased stakeholder engagement, participatory policy development, and continuous professional development to foster ownership and enhance implementation efficacy. The findings underscore the importance of collaborative efforts, ongoing training, and contextually relevant policies to address HIV/AIDS effectively in school settings.

Keywords

national HIV/AIDS, education sector, policy, policy implementation

INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of South Africa's National HIV/AIDS Policy in 1996, the education sector has been viewed as a critical arena for HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention. The policy, introduced by then Minister of Education Professor Kader Asmal, aimed to integrate HIV/AIDS education into the school curriculum, promote awareness, and mitigate the epidemic's impact on learners and teachers (Department of Education, 1999). Despite these initiatives, South Africa continues to grapple with alarmingly high HIV prevalence rates, particularly among youths aged 15 to 24 (Payne et al., 2023). The persistent rise in infection rates indicates systemic challenges in policy implementation, especially at the school level, where teachers serve as frontline agents in disseminating vital health information and shaping attitudes.

The significance of effective policy implementation in schools is underscored by the substantial social, health, and economic repercussions of HIV/AIDS. Schools are vital for preventive education, reducing stigma, and supporting affected learners. However, numerous studies indicate that teachers often lack adequate knowledge, training, and resources to effectively implement the HIV/AIDS policies (Bantwini, 2019; Butler et al., 2023). Furthermore, the policy's success depends on the active involvement of teachers in its formulation and execution, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability.

This paper seeks to explore teachers' perceptions, levels of awareness, and challenges faced in implementing the National HIV/AIDS Policy in schools in the Eastern Cape, a region with some of the highest HIV prevalence rates in South Africa. By highlighting these perspectives, the study aims to contribute to policy refinement and capacity-building

initiatives that enhance HIV/AIDS education and intervention efforts. The primary objective of this research is to examine teachers' understanding and experiences concerning implementing the National HIV/AIDS Policy in primary schools within the O. R. Tambo Inland Education District.

1. Policy in their schools?
2. What barriers hinder the effective implementation of the policy?
3. How does teachers' involvement in policy development influence their commitment and efficacy in implementation?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research offers valuable insights into the operational realities of HIV/AIDS policy implementation at the school level, especially in rural and under-resourced settings. Its findings are intended to inform policymakers, curriculum developers, and educational administrators about the critical need for teacher capacity enhancement, participatory policy development, and stakeholder collaboration. Moreover, by identifying gaps in knowledge and practice, the study underscores the importance of continuous professional development tailored to the contextual needs of teachers, especially in high-burden regions such as the Eastern Cape.

Globally, the effective implementation of HIV/AIDS policies in educational settings is acknowledged as a fundamental component of comprehensive epidemic control strategies (Wanjiru, 2021; Ssenyonjo et al., 2024). In South Africa, where the epidemic exerts profound social and economic tolls, enhancing teachers' capacity and engagement is essential for sustainable health promotion and stigma reduction (Naidoo et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The implementation of HIV/AIDS policies in educational settings has garnered considerable scholarly attention, emphasising the importance of teachers' roles in effecting change. Research indicates that teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and preparedness significantly influence the success of HIV/AIDS education programs (Bantwini, 2019; Butler et al., 2023). For example, Bantwini (2019) highlights that many teachers in South Africa lack comprehensive training, which hampers their confidence and effectiveness in delivering HIV/AIDS education. Similarly, Butler et al. (2023) found that insufficient resource allocation and lack of ongoing professional development contribute to inconsistent policy implementation across schools.

Studies also underscore teachers' contextual challenges in rural and under-resourced areas like the Eastern Cape. These include infrastructural deficiencies, cultural barriers, stigma, and limited access to relevant training materials (Naidoo et al., 2024; Wanjiru, 2021). Such factors create a gap between policy intentions and practical realities. Furthermore, stakeholder involvement, especially teachers' engagement in policy formulation, has been linked to increased ownership and motivation to implement HIV/AIDS initiatives (Ssenyonjo et al., 2024). This aligns with Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, which advocates for collaborative efforts across families, schools, and communities.

Recent research also emphasises the importance of continuous professional development tailored to local contexts. For example, Mekgwe and Maseko (2023) argue that capacity-building programs should incorporate participatory approaches that empower teachers and foster shared responsibility. This is particularly vital in high HIV prevalence regions, where tailored interventions can address specific community needs and cultural sensitivities (Purtell et al., 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Epstein's (1987) Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence, which emphasises the interconnected roles of families, schools, and communities in fostering student development. Epstein's model underscores the importance of collaborative interactions among these sectors to achieve positive educational and health outcomes. Applying this framework to HIV/AIDS policy implementation suggests that effective intervention requires coordinated efforts among teachers, school management, parents, health practitioners, and community stakeholders. Such collaboration facilitates shared responsibility, resource sharing, and consistent messaging, increasing the likelihood of successful policy execution (Mekgwe & Maseko, 2023; Purtell et al., 2023).

This theoretical lens highlights the multifaceted nature of policy implementation, emphasising that teachers alone cannot effect change without support from broader social and institutional systems.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

A qualitative case study approach was adopted to gain in-depth insights into teachers' perceptions and experiences. This method allows for a detailed exploration of contextual factors, beliefs, and attitudes influencing policy implementation. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field notes, providing triangulation and a comprehensive understanding.

Population and Sampling

Participants included twelve teachers, five School Managers, two Teacher Union representatives, and five Life Orientation teachers from five rural schools in the O. R. Tambo Inland Education District. Purposive sampling ensured

the selection of individuals with relevant knowledge and direct involvement in HIV/AIDS education and policy implementation.

Ethical Consideration

Approval was obtained from the Provincial Department of Education and participating schools. Participants provided informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Pseudonyms protect identities, aligning with ethical research standards.

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, review of relevant policy documents, and field notes. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Coding and categorisation revealed key themes related to knowledge gaps, training deficiencies, policy awareness, stakeholder involvement, and institutional support (Baykal, Memory, & Oksuz, 2023).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis to interpret qualitative data systematically. The process involved familiarising the data, coding significant segments related to teachers' perceptions, challenges, and stakeholder involvement, and organising codes with NVivo software to identify patterns. These codes were then grouped into broader themes such as 'Knowledge Gaps,' 'Policy Awareness,' 'Institutional Support,' and 'Stakeholder Engagement,' which were reviewed and refined to ensure consistency and validity. Member checking was employed to enhance credibility, and triangulation of interviews, policy documents, and field notes strengthened the findings. This approach aligns with current scholarship emphasising thematic analysis's capacity to interpret complex social phenomena and contextual nuances (Nowell et al., 2017).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' Knowledge and Perceptions of the HIV/AIDS Policy

The study indicates that teachers possess limited understanding of the National HIV/AIDS Policy, with many unaware of specific policy content or their roles in its implementation. Teachers expressed that they received minimal training, often limited to brief workshops or informal discussions, which were insufficient for confident and effective delivery of HIV/AIDS education (Mariani et al., 2023; Mpunzana, 2017). Several teachers reported feeling ill-equipped to address sensitive issues surrounding HIV/AIDS, leading to avoidance or superficial discussions in classrooms. Teachers responded as follows:

"We attended a two-day workshop years ago, and nothing since then. I do not feel confident discussing HIV/AIDS with learners." (Teacher A1)

"Most of us do not know what the policy entails, and we are left to figure things out on our own." (Teacher B1)

Such limited knowledge hampers the quality of education and undermines efforts to reduce stigma and promote healthy behaviours.

Absence and Accessibility of the Policy Document

Many schools lack copies of the formal HIV/AIDS policy, with some teachers unaware of its existence altogether. Several participants reported that the policy was either never disseminated or kept in school offices inaccessible to staff. This disconnect indicates a failure in policy communication and dissemination at the school level (Department of Education, 2020). Teachers emphasised the need for clear, user-friendly, and readily accessible policies to guide their practice. One teacher responded as follows:

"I have never seen the official policy. I only hear about it during briefings, but I do not have a copy to refer to". (Teacher C1)

Training and Capacity Building

Participants unanimously agreed that training on HIV/AIDS was inadequate and often superficial. Workshops conducted by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) or NGOs were sometimes brief, theory-based, and lacked practical components. Many teachers expressed a desire for ongoing, comprehensive training that would equip them with skills in counselling, stigma reduction, and curriculum delivery related to HIV/AIDS. Another teacher responded as follows:

"We need continuous training; one workshop is not enough. We also need to learn how to handle sensitive issues and support learners living with HIV." (Teacher A1)

The lack of trained facilitators, particularly health professionals, was also a barrier to effective capacity building.

Challenges and Barriers to Implementation

The study identified several key barriers:

- **Limited Knowledge and Training:** Insufficient training has led to teacher gaps in understanding and confidence.
- **Lack of Policy Visibility:** Schools often do not have access to official policy documents, leading to inconsistent practices.
- **Insufficient Stakeholder Involvement:** Teachers and learners have minimal participation in policy development, resulting in a disconnect between policy and practice.
- **Inadequate Resources:** Schools lack educational materials, counselling services, and infrastructural support needed for effective HIV/AIDS education.
- **Stigma and Cultural Barriers:** Deep-seated stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS hampers open discussion and support for infected learners.
- **Weak Monitoring and Evaluation:** Systematic monitoring is lacking in assessing policy adherence and effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DBE, PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the findings, several strategic interventions are recommended:

- **Inclusive Policy Development:** Teachers and community stakeholders should actively formulate policies to foster ownership and contextual relevance.
- **Continuous Professional Development:** Implement practical training programs involving health professionals and HIV/AIDS specialists.
- **Policy Dissemination:** Ensure clear, user-friendly policy copies are accessible in all schools.
- **Stakeholder Collaboration:** Foster partnerships among educators, health practitioners, parents, and community leaders to create a supportive environment.
- **Resource Allocation:** Increase funding for educational materials, counselling services, and infrastructural improvements.
- **Addressing Stigma:** Conduct community and school-based awareness campaigns to reduce HIV-related stigma.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish regular oversight mechanisms to assess implementation fidelity and impact.

CONCLUSION

The successful implementation of the National HIV/AIDS Policy in South African schools, particularly in high-prevalence regions like the Eastern Cape, requires a concerted effort involving comprehensive teacher training, stakeholder engagement, resource provisioning, and policy awareness. Teachers' perceptions and experiences reflect systemic gaps that, if addressed, can enhance the efficacy of HIV/AIDS education and intervention strategies. Ensuring teachers are equipped, involved, and supported is critical for reducing infection rates, mitigating stigma, and promoting a health-conscious school environment. Policymakers and educational leaders must prioritise participatory, sustained, and context-specific approaches to translate policy into meaningful action on the ground.

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