

Adolescents in southern Africa: Interdisciplinary research findings

Adolescent development in sub-Saharan Africa is relevant because this population will transition into the region's future leaders and parents. However, adolescents face a number of challenges, including social, economic and health difficulties, which prohibit their successful transition to adulthood. Also, given the transitional nature of this age group, there is a need to understand a labyrinth of determinants, influences and outcomes, and to address all possible challenges and inhibitors to their development.

This special issue contains 15 research papers on adolescent health and development across sub-Saharan Africa from various disciplines within the social sciences. This interdisciplinary approach offers fresh perspectives from multiple disciplinary paradigms. The contributors to this special issue are leading researchers in their respective fields, and more importantly, some are early career academics, including Master of Arts and doctoral students. We specifically sought to include young scholars because for emerging African scholars, learning to make connections between theory, concepts and methods across disciplines enables them to apply their discipline-specific knowledge, and also to gain a deeper understanding of other disciplines, which strengthens the overall learning experience and skills development.

There are four main themes presented in this special issue: schooling; sexual and reproductive health knowledge; sexual and reproductive health outcomes; and other health and social challenges. Under the theme of 'schooling', three South African (SA) papers have identified major challenges for adolescents. Fotso *et al.*^[1] found that progression to the next grade was low among adolescents who had HIV, and that HIV-positive pupils struggled to complete school. Mabetha and De Wet^[2] found that experiences of peer- and teacher-perpetrated school-based sexual harassment are associated with non-condom use among 10 - 19-year-olds, and Pillay^[3] argues that school incompletion for recent adolescent mothers is due to financial and childcare constraints.

Four papers in this special issue identified areas of concern in relation to sexual and reproductive health knowledge among young people in SA. First, Evans *et al.*^[4] found that more than half of university students lack accurate and sufficient TB and HIV knowledge, while Tolla *et al.*^[5] found that young adolescents were not naive, and had knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases, but struggled to navigate sexual relationships on their own. Essop *et al.*^[6] argue that both formal and informal sexual education are advantageous to young adolescents, and Brown *et al.*^[7] are promoting the testing and implementation of cultural consensus modelling to better understand the reproductive needs of young girls.

Related to knowledge is the theme of 'sexual and reproductive health outcomes'. Odimegwu *et al.*^[8] found that low levels of education increased the odds of young men (aged 12 - 22 years) becoming adolescent fathers. Furthermore, Odimegwu and Frade^[9] have identified a pathway that exists between early age at cohabitation and increased risk of intimate partner violence among young women in Uganda. Groenewald *et al.*^[10] identified risky sexual behaviours among adolescents using a photovoice methodology that allows adolescents to speak through pictures of their experiences.

However, adolescents do not only face sexual and reproductive health challenges, but are also dealing with other diseases including cancer, respiratory-tract infections and mental-health conditions, including depression. Under the final theme of the articles, Letuka and De Wet's^[11] results show that young women in Lesotho are

screening for cervical cancer at much younger ages than prescribed by the World Health Organization. De Wet and Frade^[12] found that episodes of disease, including respiratory-tract infections and asthma, are contributing to grade repetition among schoolgoing adolescents. The paper by Ajaero *et al.*^[13] shows that urban-based adolescents are more likely to suffer depression than their rural counterparts. The paper by Moroe and de Andrade^[14] speaks to the challenges that adolescents with disabled parents face in attempting to assist them with various interactions. Finally, Olawole-Isaac *et al.*^[15] conducted a systematic review of recent publications and found that substance abuse was high among adolescents across sub-Saharan Africa.

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