

Effects of Students' Sexual Relationship on Academic Performance among Secondary School Students in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Sexual relationship among students in schools is found to be common. However, studies in Tanzania have not dealt much with the contribution of students' sexual relationship on academic performance. This study attempts to highlight associations which students' sexual relationship has on academic performance. Using 172 respondents drawn from eight secondary schools in two regions of Tanzania, using a pragmatic approach; it was found that, the existence of students' sexual relationship, which is fuelled by self-sexual desire and/or coercion through sexual exploitation is a commonplace practice in Tanzanian schools. Students' involvement in sexual relationship puts them into lots of relational and social problems, which adversely affect their social as well as academic lives. It is opined that, in order to help young people in schools, establishing bonds between parents and teachers in bringing up the youth is a necessary step; strengthening help and support systems in schools is another way of helping the youths; school-based sexual and reproductive health education, which will give students relevant and age appropriate sexual information is another strategy to help young people. The study discusses the findings in relation to existing literature and current Tanzania education practice; and lastly, limitations and recommendation for further studies are offered.

Keywords: Sexual relationship; academic performance; students; sex education

INTRODUCTION

Studies reveal that students' sexual relationship is on increase and common in most of Africa schools (Jones & Espey, 2008; Mgalla, et al., 1998). The trend is gradually changing and the incidence of student-adolescents' or youths' engaging in sexual relationship is high and may constitute problems (Ngalinda, 1998) including social, health and academic. Students' sexual activity has resulted into increased cases of unplanned pregnancies, poor academic performance, and eventually school dropouts (Mlyakado, 2013; 2013a). However, studies in Tanzania have not seriously investigated the effects of sexual relationship on students' academic performance. Most of previous studies in Tanzania have invested in studying factors affecting academic performance in general. Factors studied include such as teachers' incompetence, student's low motivation, teachers' low morale, the level of sexual activity of students, etc. summarised in Timothy (2010).

Evidences from other countries may help to understand the existing relationship between students' sexual relationship and academic performance. In the United States, a number of studies have shown that, teenagers who abstain from sex are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college than their sexually active peers (Sabia & Rees, 2009). Although American context is not comparable to Tanzania due to great differences of the two countries in socio-economic, educational and technological development, still this study lays a good foundation to understanding sexual behaviours and academic performance of adolescents in different contexts including Tanzania.

Good academic performance is imperative in learning school materials (Timothy, 2010). However, this has not been the case in Tanzania. The quality of education in Tanzania has deteriorated overtime (Mlyakado, 2012). Tanzania has experienced students' poor academic performance signalled by mass failures of secondary school leavers, which sparked concern of the public especially parents. The 'Certificate of Secondary Education' (CSE) results have posed a frustrating indicator to the education wellbeing in Tanzania. CSE mass failure can be exemplified by the results in 2010, when 49 percent of form four leavers failed at division zero; in 2011, when about 47 percent failed at division zero and in 2012 when about 65.5 percent students got division zero. The 2012 CSE results compelled the government to form a special committee to investigate and come up with solutions to prevent CSE mass failures. After the committee's investigation, it was advised to standardising the former results and then the performance records were changed.

This study, however, does not aim at explaining mass failures in Tanzania rather ascertaining the existence and effects of students' sexual relationship on their academic performance. Studies reveal that, there is relationship between students' sexual relationship and their academic performance (Sabia & Rees, 2009). It was found that, high school students who were dating exhibited consistently and significantly lower levels of academic achievement and academic motivation (Quatman, et al., 2001). Another study on teenage sexual abstinence and academic achievement revealed that, teens who abstained from sex during high school years were substantially less likely to be expelled from school by 60 percent, 50 percent less likely to drop out of high school and almost twice as likely to graduate from college (Rector & Johnson, 2005). In support of these findings, the following arguments were offered: (1) when greater energy and interest were invested in sexual activity the drive for academic performance was likely to diminish; (2) sexually active teens may become preoccupied with the present—sexual activity, then, long-term—academic goals may have diminished importance; and (3) teenage sexual relationships are inherently short-term and unstable, therefore, the collapse of intimate relationships is likely to result in emotional turmoil and depression, which, in turn, affect individual's academic performance (Ibid.).

Since there is no study in Tanzania, which intensively explored or explained the relationship between students' sexual relationship and its effects on academic performance, this study's attempt to highlight the existing relationships is fundamental. It is noted that, unplanned or premarital pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV, poor academic performance are typical problems students engaging in sexual activity are likely to encounter. However, this study capitalised on the relationship between sexual relationship and academic performance. Good academic performance is a core achievement desired by any educational institution that aims at achieving quality education. It should be noted further that, students are in schools for academic achievement. It is during this time when young people pass through a critical time of their life development including academic and eventually career choices. On the hand, during the same time most adolescents start experimenting with their sexual fantasies (Kelly, 2001; Santrock, 2006), which may compromise with their academic life and in turn adversely affect academic performance.

METHODS

Participants

Data to inform this study were gathered from 172 respondents (n = 113 advanced secondary students, n = 3 discipline masters in Dar es Salaam region, and n = 51 ordinary secondary students and n = 5 heads of schools in Shinyanga region). According to researchers' experience, anecdotal information reporting higher prevalence of students' sexual activity,

and mass failures in the national examination results, three secondary schools purposely sampled from Dar es Salaam region as they had typical features at least 3 years prior to this study. On the other region, Shinyanga, five secondary schools were randomly chosen from one district and students were included on voluntary basis while heads of schools were included by virtue of their positions.

Procedure

Collection of data for this study was done in two successive periods, 2010 and 2011. Research clearance permits for both studies were approved by the University of Dar es Salaam and Regional, District and school authorities. Informed consent was obtained from participants verbally; and, they were assured of confidentiality by the researchers. The first type of data was collected using questionnaire from 113 students and interview of three discipline masters in Dar es Salaam. The questionnaire contained both closed and open ended questions in four parts: part one detailed the socio demographic characteristics (e.g., sex, age, religion, academic performance etc.). The second part patterned information on the factors influencing students involving in sexual relationship (e.g., economic status or poverty, curiosity or self-desire, peer pressure, etc.). Part three covered information on problems students encounter by involving in sexual relationship; and the last part sought other comments or issues related to the study. One researcher administered and collected the questionnaires personally.

The second type of data was obtained from focus group interviews with 51 students and one-on-one interviews with heads of schools in Shinyanga. At first, the other researcher visited the schools, explained the research intentions and sought brief situation of students' sexual activity at each school from the head of school. One group of students from each school was formed each comprised 10 students except one which had 11 students. Group interview arrangement was made and interviews were done in separate room (classroom or laboratory), lasting about one hour each. Interviews focused on guide questions, which highlighted issues of students' sexual activity knowledge, involvement, views or opinions, and problems students encounter when involved in sexual relationship. The interviews were audio recorded for further analyses.

Data Analysis

The study used both qualitative and quantitative data. However, only simple statistics like frequency and percentage were used for the purpose of this study. The intention was to gauge a broad understanding of the existence students' sexual relationship and its effects on academic performance. Therefore, quantitative data were simply computed to determine frequency and percentage of variables. Qualitative data were summarised and where necessary paraphrased and reported in thematic manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher transcribed the recorded voices into texts, translated the texts into target language and used the verbatim into respective themes. In addition, information from documentary review was incorporated to support and clarify the data presented in different themes.

RESULTS

Students' Sexual Relationship

Analyses of students' responses in both study areas showed that, sexual relationship in the studied secondary schools was common. Respondents confirmed that, a majority of students engage in sexual activity. For example, about 80 percent of respondents in Dar es Salaam reported to have been engaged in sexual activity in their life time. In Shinyanga, few respondents confirmed to have had sexual intercourse in their life time; however, they

pointed out that sexual relationship among students in their schools was a commonplace practice. Although sexual relationship in secondary schools seemed to be common, it was learned that, participants are very cautious of being detected by teachers. It was said that:

There are many students who are in sexual relationship... it is not allowed, but you can do secretly... some students, when at school, concentrate on studies, but when out of here, engage in sexual activity... generally, sexual relationship is prohibited in schools, however, if a student can take charge of their relationship they can do [Respondent in focus group interview].

This narration indicates the commonplace practice of sexual relationship in secondary schools; and it shows that, although sexual relationship is not allowed in schools, students have their ways to do it without being noticed.

Factors Influencing Students' Sexual Relationship

Students mentioned many reasons for engaging in sexual relationship, which were categorised as fashion to comply with groups (peer pressure), satisfaction of body sexual desire (self-desire), getting gifts in terms of academic favours from teachers or material things in exchange for sex, and economic (poverty) status of students.

Self-desire or need to satisfy one's sexual desire was the most salient factor many student participants mentioned. Quantitative data revealed that, about 42 percent mentioned self-desire as the major factor for students' involvement in sexual relationship. Likewise in data from focus group interviews showed that, students' indulgence in sexual activity was due to their body maturity and the need for emotional (sexual) satisfaction. Therefore, in this sense, students engage in sexual activity consciously as one respondents explained:

As a girl, boys will ask me for sexual relationship; to agree or disagree depends on my personal judgement of that relationship. If I don't like, nobody will force me into it. My friends are in sexual relationship because they liked to be into it [Respondent in focus group interview].

Peer pressure was the second factor mentioned as influencing students' indulgence in sexual relationship. Quantitative data elicited 25 percent of participants pointing to peer pressure as influential factor for students' involvement in sexual activity. Focus group interviews revealed similar points of view that, students take sexual relationship as fashion especially to comply with their peers. Additionally, it was pointed out that, students in day schools, many lived in rent rooms known as 'ghettos'. Ghettos lack parental control as the result, students can use them for sexual activity. One schoolgirl narrated that:

If your friends are in sexual relationships they will convince you to do so. It is possible to help you find a boyfriend for sexual relationship. It is very common especially for boys to help their friends to get girls for sexual relationship and when they bring a girl in a ghetto; they lock the door and leave the two to do it [Respondent in focus group interview]

Further, economic factors and academic favours were mentioned as factors causing students to engage in sexual activity. However, these factors were more associated to female students than their male counterparts. Quantitative data showed that 25 percent mentioned poverty as a factor for students involving into sexual activity and about five percent mentioned academic incentives as influential factor for students' involving in sexual relationship. It was learnt that, more schoolgirls than schoolboys were forced to involve in sexual relationship due to poverty states in order to earn a living. Some girls were sexually exploited by their teachers for academic favour in exchange for sex or they were sexually exploited by well off

sexual predators in their community. In focus group interviews, it was discovered that, the power of money and the pressure from friends or other elder girls in the community were strong instruments used to lure some girls to involve in sexual activity as one girl explained:

There are men who use their money by any means to get girls; they may send some other elder girls to convince you; they tell you 'accept him... he has money... you will enjoy it'. These people live with us in our community. These people in most cases target secondary schoolgirls [Respondent in focus group interview].

On the other hand, even when money would not have such power to lure girls for sexual activity, poverty was observed to be the major factor. Some students come from poor families, the situation that forces them to find an alternative to earn living. If parents are unable to provide money for the student, some schoolgirls resorted into looking for boys or men who can support them financially in exchange for sex. However, in other cases, poverty was not the motive, rather, the lust for money and luxurious things like mobile phones, 'chips'—chopped and fried potatoes, etc. as explained in the following statement:

Most students nowadays cannot abstain because of the economic situation. Young children engage in sexual intercourse in exchange for money so that they may buy 'chips' or get luxury thing like mobile phones and fashionable dresses. Schoolgirls are the worst if you compare with their counterpart-boys [Response from one discipline master].

Effects of Students' Sexual Relationship

Students' sexual relationship does not leave them safe and students are aware of some effects of it. In this study, students were asked to mention the effects of students engaging in sexual relationship. Respondents admitted that, failure in examination, rustications from school, drop out from school, unplanned or premarital pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV were the most perceived and real problems students could encounter for engaging in sexual relationship. All these are likely to adversely affect student's academic performance. Data show that, students who were involved in sexual relationships were likely to perform poorly in academics. For example a sub-sample of student-respondents from Dar es Salaam who were in sexual relationship, most of them indicated to have division three in their continuous assessment results. Division three is not an indication of good student's academic performance at advanced level of secondary education. Take for example, a person with the best division three, the possible combination of scores in letter grades are D+D+E; C+E+E, B+E+S, or A+E+F. Divisions for advanced secondary schools in Tanzania are calculated out scores of three subjects. There are five divisions, division one being the first and division zero the fifth. Therefore, division three is the median, but is not a good indication of academic performance at this level of education.

There might be several factors that cause students' poor academic performance. However, this study tries to associate students' sexual relationship with poor academic performance by looking at students' academic results in relation to their sexual relationship status. The examination results for most sexually active students in Dar es Salaam, regardless the lack of control of other factors, made researchers believe that, students' sexual relationship adversely affects academic performance. Further discussions with respondents confirm that, students encounter lots of problems due to being in sexual relationship, which compromise with their academic lives. Students can be suspended from studies, and/or punished on-spot or some drop out of school due to sexual relationship. Students know that sexual relationship is not

allowed in schools and if a student is discovered involving in sexual activity will be punished, but they continue doing it. It was explained that:

“...You know, at school if you have a boyfriend; you have to make sure that you are not discovered by the teachers; otherwise your schooling may become a living hell; if you are not expelled, you will be punished severely...” [Respondent in focus group interview]

DISCUSSION

The existence of sexual relationship in schools involving students is not a new phenomenon. Studies show that sexual relationship in schools is common reported in form of sexual exploitation (Jones & Espey, 2008; Mgalla, et al., 1998; Mlyakado, 2013; 2013a; Ngalinda, 1998). Schoolgirls' pregnancy is the salient indicator of the existence of sexual activity in schools. For example dropout in Tanzania caused by pregnancies, in secondary schools, increased from 6.5 percent in 2006 to 20.4 percent in 2009; and it is unfortunate that, the size of dropout in secondary schools is higher in Ordinary Level and low in Advanced Level classes (URT, 2010). This study's findings show that sexual relationship in schools is common, however, students try as much as possible to hide their sexual relationship from teachers or parents as it contradicts the Tanzania Education Act, which prohibits sexual activity in schools. This finding parallels the report, titled *'Kids in Tanzania – “We Want Sex, Not AIDS”*', which studied groups of children in Tanzania between 2004 and 2008 aged 10 to 16 (Reeuwijk, 2009). The report showed that, Tanzanian children viewed sex as something from which they personally benefit, but frequently hide their relationships from parents and health workers; they were more scared of their strict parents than of HIV (Reeuwijk, 2009).

Another finding of this study shows that, several reasons are associated with students' involvement in sexual relationship. Self-desire or satisfaction of sexual urges was the most cited factor among student-participants. This factor can be supported in that, most of the respondents are in adolescence stage of their development, which is a time of sexual exploration and experimentation of sexual fantasies and realities by incorporating sexuality into one's identity (Santrock, 2006). However, on the other hand, peer pressure was also strongly associated with students' involvement in sexual relationship. It can be argued that, in most cases, a young person becomes involved in social relationships with members of both sexes during adolescence (Kelly, 2001) especially their peers. The interactions that exist among students in schools and other members in their neighbourhoods influence them in many life endeavours including engaging in sexual relationship.

It was also found that, most sexually active students perform poorly in their studies and faced several problems, which compromised their academic lives. It is taken that, poor academic performance is an indication of negative effect of students' sexual relationship to academic wellbeing. The logic is that, students who are sexually active may become preoccupied with their sexual activity and have diminished importance academic goals (Rector & Johnson, 2005). Additionally, students who are dating exhibit consistently and significantly lower levels of academic achievement and academic motivation (Quatman, et al., 2001).

Further, several problems were associated with students' sexual relationship including shame and psychological disturbances, which are resulting from handling students' sexual relationship in schools. It is the fact that, students' sexual relationship is inherently short-term and unstable, which means, when it collapses the result is likely to be emotional turmoil and depression (Rector & Johnson, 2005). If students are psychologically disturbed or depressed; these are likely to have negative consequences on academic prospects culminating to undermined academic performance or total loss of education opportunity. For example in

Tanzania, pregnancy leads to total expulsion from schools. Rustications and other punishments or dropping out of schools have direct impact to students' academic life. While rustications cause students to miss classes for some times, other punishments may cause emotional disturbances to students and drop out of school causes students to miss school completely. It is found that teens who abstain from sex during high school studies are substantially less likely to be expelled from school, less likely to drop out of high school; and more likely to attend and graduate from college (Ibid.).

Apart from students' sexual relationship compromising with academic performance, it also observed that, Tanzanian students are involved in risky sexual relationship, which exposes them to sexually transmitted infections including HIV or leading to unplanned premarital pregnancy (Miyakado, 2013; 2013a; Ngalinda, 1998). Some students are sexually exploited by teachers or other adults in schools or neighbourhoods respectively. These, directly or indirectly, affect academic achievements. It is argued that, when greater energy and interest are invested in sexual activity, the drive for academic performance is likely to diminish (Rector & Johnson, 2005) and early initiation of sexual intercourse correlates with poor academic performance (Schvaneveldt, et al, 2001).

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the danger that students are likely to encounter due to their engagement in sexual relationship. It is emphasised that, there is a danger of students contracting infectious diseases like HIV or dropping out of school. However, despite the fact that sexual activity poses threats to students' health and academy, still they are continually involved in. This study appreciates that, many sexually active adolescents in Tanzania lack the basic knowledge about the functioning of their bodies and the risks involved in becoming sexually active at their early age (REPRO/GTZ, 2000). It is therefore contended that sexual and reproductive health education should be given a chance for the young generation in Tanzania. Relevant and appropriate sexual and reproductive health information is necessary for adolescents' physical and intellectual health.

The fact that Tanzania prohibits sexual relationship in schools is not the sole solution for the problem. Many students are in sexual relationship in which some are sexually exploited by sexual predators including teachers. It is noted that, there are many forces like self-desire, poverty, peer pressure, etc. that push students to involve in sexual activity. Promisingly, all the forces can be controlled either through individual students or external interventions. In that sense the following suggestions are recommended:

Teachers, parents, and the community at large have to effectively play their role to bringing up the children to become responsible individuals. Sexual and reproductive health education is necessary in this context, which should be channelled from different angles of human interactional opportunities: home, school, play grounds, churches, etc. The government should support diligently and harmoniously all the initiatives to help young generation in the country especially students.

Counselling and guidance systems in educational institutions should be made strong enough to carry activities that will help learners get the best out of their school lives. Students sometimes get into severe problems because they lack support and help network. They lack services where to seek help when they are stressed, depressed, or confused in making decisions. The current Tanzanian education system gives the discipline masters positions to provide counselling and guidance. This limits students' opportunities to effectively use the help system, as they fear to be considered indisciplined if they talk about involvement in sexual

relationship. Therefore, there should be an independent unit in each school dealing with students' for counselling and guidance.

Moreover, Tanzania needs to rethink on its education system in general, and plan to invest much on human capital. Sexuality education curriculum should be implemented in schools as a matter of urgency. The levels, to which it should be decided according to levels of the learners and each level should have its contents that inform of the basics about sex and sexuality matters. Demystifying sex and sexuality should be the foremost advocated so that the gaps that are held and which hinders discussions of sexual matters between adolescents and adults can be bridged. Provision of adequate and age relevant information about sex and sexuality to adolescents and children should be prioritised. Peer group education in schools should be initiated and where already exist be strengthened to help students share experiences and educate themselves on different matters including sex and sexuality. The peer groups formed in schools should have specific aims and goals to achieve at different times of their operation. Peer groups should be visited by specialists in different walks of life to share experiences with them, and educate group members for their betterment.

Lastly, this study suffers from several limitations including small sample size. The study was conducted using a small sample in relation to Tanzanian students in secondary school. The results cannot be generalised to all students. In addition, the instruments used for data collection did not pass through intensive validation. Therefore validity and reliability of the instruments are questionable. Most of the data based on students' experiences, and did not undergo intensive quantitative analyses. This limited the results to association without statistical significance. Another limitation was the language used for data. Qualitative data were collected in Kiswahili, which required transcribing and translation to English, which may distort the intended meaning. Establishing the existing relationship between students' sexual relationship and academic performance requires intensive studies, valid and reliable instruments. Therefore, further studies can make improvement on the samples, instruments, and approaches to come up with conclusive findings.

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