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Research Briefs Series

The HERStory Series

"We can't share things with our teachers":
narratives of mistrust and disconnect
between South African female learners
and their teachers

SUMMARY

- Teacher connectedness – the level of connectedness between students and their teachers – can have a strong impact on the learning experience, and the health of students
- The support that teachers can provide is not only academic, but can also be psychosocial or emotional support, with positive effects on students' self-confidence and self-esteem, educational attainment, mental health and wellbeing.
- Student-teacher relationships and connectedness can also impact the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in South Africa.
- Support from teachers can reduce learners' engagement in high-risk health behaviours, thereby decreasing negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes such as teenage pregnancy.
- Although teachers are in a position to provide critical psychosocial and emotional support, there is a disconnect between South African AGYW and their teachers, which negatively impacts the mental health, SRH and school performance of AGYW
- South African adolescent girls and young women want and need better support from teachers, both academic and

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September 2022

Paper that this brief is based on:

Duby, Z, Maruping K, Jonas K,
McClinton Appollis T, Vanleeuw L and
Mathews C. (2022) "We can't share
things with our teachers": Narratives
of mistrust and disconnect between
South African female learners and
their teachers. *Frontiers in Education*
7:882959. [https://doi.org/10.3389/
educ.2022.882959](https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.882959)

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psycho-social. More trusting and supportive relationships between AGYW and teachers would improve the potential of AGYW for educational attainment, have positive impacts on their mental health and general wellbeing, and help to decrease rates of teenage pregnancy.

- Schools can be used to promote adolescent mental health and provide linkages to mental healthcare
- School staff are in a unique position to support positive psychosocial outcomes amongst vulnerable young people
- Teachers can play a critical role in promoting school connectedness through positive relationships with learners, providing mentorship, role modelling healthy behaviours, and building a positive school climate conducive to learning and a culture of well-being
- Interventions and programmes that can enable increased student–teacher communication and bonding, and foster caring relationships in the school setting, could provide an important psychosocial support mechanism for young people, and promote positive emotional, social and educational development

Addressing the disconnect between AGYW and their teachers may go some way to improving AGYW's perceived psychosocial and emotional support, and in turn, lead to reduced engagement in risk behaviours, mitigating their risk of negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes, and reducing the prevalence of teenage pregnancy and HIV amongst AGYW in South Africa.

The Issue / Context / Scope of Problem

- Inconsistent school attendance, poor-quality learning, and low levels of educational attainment undermine health and wellbeing during adolescence, and throughout life course
- South Africa has joint epidemics of HIV and unintended teenage pregnancies
 - a quarter of all new HIV infections occur amongst adolescent girls and young women aged 15–24
- Education is a key structural driver of HIV amongst AGYW, and low levels of educational attainment are associated with higher risks of unintended pregnancies



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- Health impacts of teenage pregnancy for mothers include higher risks of eclampsia, puerperal endometritis, systemic infections, psychological trauma, and postpartum depression; babies born to mothers under 20 years old have higher risks of low birth weight, preterm delivery, and severe neonatal conditions
- Teenage mothers are also more likely to drop out of school threatening gender parity in education and resulting in poor mental health outcomes and low educational achievement amongst AGYW. A third of female learners drop out of school due to pregnancy.
- In addition to educational attainment, supportive relationships with adults, who are not primary caregivers, are beneficial for adolescents
- Positive teacher-student relationships, characterised by feelings of trust and relatedness, are associated with positive academic motivation, successful expectations and self-belief, interest and satisfaction with school, and academic self-efficacy and performance
- The provision of psycho-social and emotional support to students is ideally part of the teaching package, with teachers serving as a primary social and emotional support mechanism for some students
 - However, the delivery of quality teaching and education in the South African state education system is problematic, due to factors such as shortages of teaching staff, low morale, and poor working conditions. In circumstances such as these, it is unlikely that teachers can provide the sufficient academic support to learners, let alone the kinds of psychosocial and emotional support that would help to foster teacher connectedness.



RESEARCH OVERVIEW: THE HERSTORY STUDY

Research activities took place in 5 districts in 6 South African provinces: Klipfontein, Cape Town (Western Cape), Uthungulu (KwaZulu Natal), Gert Sibande (Mpumalanga), Bojanala (North West), and Nelson Mandela Bay (Eastern Cape). All five districts are characterised by high HIV prevalence, and high rates of teenage pregnancy. Between August 2018 and March 2019 we conducted 63 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 24 focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 237 AGYW aged 15–24 years, and interviews with 10 teachers.

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WHAT WE FOUND

- Adolescent girls and young women in South Africa do not trust their teachers, fearing judgement, ridicule, breaches in confidentiality, and sexual harassment
- The motivation and willingness of AGYW to attend school is negatively affected by what AGYW perceive to be discouraging, disrespectful and negative attitudes expressed by teachers
- Although teachers are in a position to provide critical psychosocial and emotional support, AGYW feel unable and unwilling to confide in, and seek support from teachers, demonstrating student-teacher disconnect.
- The lack of effective communication and emotional support from teachers makes AGYW feel emotionally isolated, unmotivated, and negatively impacts their self-esteem, self-confidence, mental health, and school performance.
- AGYW desire improved communication with, and increased emotional support from teachers
- Teachers themselves recognise that AGYW need psychosocial support, particularly those learners who are socio-economically disadvantaged. However, teachers often feel overwhelmed and lack the capacity to provide learners with the support they need.
- Compounded by difficult working conditions in government schools, teachers feel overwhelmed with the multiple roles and responsibilities they have to fulfil, in order to provide the psychosocial support that AGYW need in addition to academic support. This is even more the case in situations where teachers identify learners who face circumstances of poverty, abuse or neglect



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IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Interventions and programmes that can help to foster a sense of school connectedness and teacher connectedness amongst students are critical in order to harness the potential of schools as a context through which to provide necessary psychosocial support, and promote the well-being and mental health of young people in South Africa.

Support for and from teachers

- Support from teachers can be an effective form of social support which helps to reduce risk behaviours amongst adolescents
- The ability of South African teachers to engage and connect with their students may be improved by addressing poor working conditions
- Teachers need to be supported in order to experience more meaning in their work, which would then enable them to make a positive difference in learners' lives through building positive, trusting relationships
- Special consideration needs to be given towards providing teachers with professional development in order to equip them with the skills with which to provide support to pregnant learners, teenage parents, and those learners living with HIV

Training and capacity building for teachers

- Efforts need to be made to build teachers' interpersonal skills and competence, enabling them to foster positive relationships with students
- Teacher training should help to enrich teachers' understanding of how school connectedness and school climate can influence learners' academic achievement, positive peer interactions, social acceptance, and overall emotional well-being, particularly in contexts where young people may lack positive parental role models or familial support



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- Evidence based interventions to address school connectedness and promote mental health amongst students include the provision of training and enhanced staff education to improve the mental health literacy of teachers and equip them with the skills to identify common presentations of mental health issues, and pick up on early warning signs indicative of stress, anxiety, trauma, abuse, depression
- Standard teacher training and professional development programmes need to include components on social and emotional developmental processes during childhood and adolescence, and incorporate curricula targeted at the most common mental health issues likely to be present in schools, and those which may affect school attendance and performance
- Training teachers on how to identify a learner who is showing signs of disengagement and disconnectedness, and how and when to refer them for psychosocial support would also help to increase connectedness
- The capacity of teachers to connect their learners to appropriate mental health support should also be enhanced, alongside instruction on how best to approach learners in a way that encourages them to discuss their concerns and feelings
- Equipping teachers with skills to assist in the identification and referral of mental health issues amongst learners may also help to address their own sense of feeling overwhelmed by the emotional and behavioural challenges in their classrooms
- Providing teachers with skills training on how to respond to students using strategies such as supportive listening and praise, would help to improve the quality of student-teacher relationships
- There is a need for on-going training and consultation to ensure teacher buy-in, and support teachers' adoption, delivery, and sustained use of these practices
- Interventions that have shown success in improving student-teacher relationships and building students' trust in teachers include mentorship or internship programmes and relationship-focused reflection



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The combination HIV prevention interventions were funded by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, and implemented in 10 districts in South Africa by a range of government departments and civil society organisations that were appointed by the organisations responsible for the management of the AGYW programme. The programme was aligned with the She Conquers campaign and was implemented with support from the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) through the Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM) and the CCM Secretariat.

Development of the published paper was supported by the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention under the terms of Cooperative Agreement 1U2GGH001150, and the Office of Aids and TB Research at the South African Medical Research Council funded by the Global Fund.

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