

YouthNet Brief: Zambia

Peer Educators Bring RH/HIV Messages to the Classroom in Zambia

In a country where one out of every five adults is HIV-positive, and where every woman has an average of five births, yet desires fewer, reaching young people with HIV and reproductive health information in the schools is a critical task in order to protect the nation's future. Yet traditional classroom instruction taught by teachers has often proven ineffective in Zambia and elsewhere. Teachers are often not adequately trained in reproductive health (RH)/HIV issues, lack classroom materials, are embarrassed to discuss issues related to sexuality, or are not held accountable for teaching what often amount to optional subjects.

To respond to these types of challenges, Students Partnership Worldwide (SPW) has pioneered a program of using peer educators in the classroom in eight countries in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In Zambia, SPW was invited by the Ministry of Education in 2003 to work in schools in the Central Province. The program began by placing 40 volunteers in an equal number of schools



SPW peer educators in the Youth Resource Center

in 2004. After the first year of implementation, USAID/ Zambia provided funds to YouthNet to help expand the program, as well as to provide some technical assistance in monitoring and evaluation. With this YouthNet funding, SPW expanded the school-based peer education program by recruiting 120 peer educators and assigning them to 150 rural schools across the Central Province. The schools include both Basic (grades 1-7, Upper Basic (grades 1-9), and High School (grades 10-12) and have a combined enrollment of some 70,000 pupils.

Key characteristics of the SPW peer education program include:

- High degree of involvement by the Ministry of Education and beneficiary schools, including assignment of Support Teacher – someone who looks after the peer educators, assists in finding them living arrangements, and making sure their needs are met during the eight months the volunteers are assigned to the school
- Length of service (full-time for eight months)
- Volunteer work with a modest stipend, with volunteers living near the school and in proximity to other teachers
- Age of peer educators (between 18 and 25) – though the age difference suggests they are technically not student “peers,” a prior evaluation identified that students

still relate to them while also looking up to them because of their slightly older age

- Capacity building component, including building capacity within the school, and within the Ministry of Education at the district, provincial, and national levels

In March 2006, YouthNet and SPW jointly undertook a rapid appraisal of the program in Zambia. The appraisal included interviews with school directors, teachers, the peer educators themselves, students, the parent teachers association (PTA), and other community members. The team also observed the peer educators giving talks to the students and asked the various stakeholders about each of the five program components, namely:

1. *Classroom instruction.* Peer educators, working in pairs, provide weekly lessons to students on topics such as reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, alcohol and drug abuse, and self-esteem and assertiveness.
2. *Youth Resource Center.* This is usually a room provided by the school that is stocked with materials and pamphlets about reproductive health and HIV and open to the students for individual study, for private talks with the peer educators, or to have small group discussions with other students.
3. *Awareness raising events and festivals.* Events include sports competitions, dances, marches, and singing, generally in a celebratory atmosphere.
4. *Extra-curricular activities and clubs.* These include so-called “anti-AIDS clubs” (organized around prevention activities) and sporting clubs.
5. *Capacity building activities.* Peer educators carry out activities for the other teachers in the school that are designed to build their capacity to address HIV and reproductive health topics, including stigma and discrimination, and care for people living with HIV/AIDS.



SPW peer educator leading a classroom session on teen pregnancy

Overall, the rapid appraisal team found that the program was operating as designed, was highly valued by the stakeholders involved (students, parents, teachers, administrators, and PTA and community members), and the instruction given by the peer educators that the team observed was of high quality. Anecdotal evidence about the impact of the program on students' behaviors was also encouraging.

Respondents in several schools noted that the major contribution of the peer educator program was to reduce the number of pregnancies among girls in the school. “Before there were many girls getting pregnant,” said a ninth grade teacher at Ilume Basic School. “Since they [the peer educators] came, there’s only been one.” When asked what was causing the drop in pregnancies, the teacher replied, “Students are now learning to be assertive, to say ‘no’, and to understand the consequences of getting pregnant. Also, the kids who are sexually active are now using condoms.” The peer educators themselves do not have condoms to distribute but do have some for demonstration purposes in the classroom. If sexually active students ask them for condoms, the peer educators refer them to a health center or other location where they can be obtained.

Another example of the impact that the peer educators are having is in the area of HIV stigma and health seeking behavior. Last year, after teaching a lesson on HIV counseling and testing, the peer educators escorted 15 students and several teachers to the local hospital in order to be tested, the appraisal team learned. In the past this was never done, but the HIV lessons emboldened the students and teachers. The school director praised the peer educators for raising their consciousness and desire to be tested.

Teachers queried as part of the rapid appraisal were enthusiastic about the peer educators and their impact. While they acknowledged that they themselves are now better equipped to teach RH/HIV subjects in their classes thanks to the in-service workshops taught by the peer educators, they want the peer education program to continue because they feel that students are more likely to respond positively to messages heard from their peers, and more likely to approach their peers with a question or problem. Finally, former peer educators also reported to the appraisal team benefits from participating in the program, especially in terms of helping them get into the university or obtaining a job, .

SPW hopes to continue and even expand the peer education program in Zambia when YouthNet funding concludes, though other sources of funding need to be secured. At the same time, it is working on a sustainability strategy that includes greater investment by the Ministry of Education and eventual absorption of all or parts of the program within the Ministry.