

154

“You Are the Tutor, You Are the Counselor, You Are the School Nurse, You Are Everything”: Secondary School Teacher Experience Managing HIV and Chronic Illness in Schools

Njuguna ^{1,2}, Moraa ^{H^{1,2}}, Mbwayo ^{A³}, Nyapara ^{F¹}, Aballa ^{C¹}, Mugo ^{C¹}, John-Stewart ^{G²}, Inwani ^{I¹}, Wamalwa ^{D³}, O'Malley ^{G²}

¹Kenyatta National Hospital, Nairobi, Kenya, ²University of Washington, Seattle, USA, ³University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya

Background: Optimized treatment regimens have dramatically improved the survival of children and youth living with HIV (YLH) allowing them to pursue life and career goals. More YLH are now spending time in the schools, which remain highly stigmatizing but understudied environments. We explored teacher and school health staff experiences managing YLH in the school environment.

Methods: Four focus group discussions with 32 teachers or health staff from 32 high/secondary schools in Nairobi and Homa Bay counties in Nairobi, Kenya. Inclusion criteria included having health responsibilities in the school. Interview data were analyzed using directed content analysis.

Results: The median age of participants was 35 (IQR:31, 45) years, a majority were female (56%). A majority (97%) had both teaching and health roles. There was an equal distribution of participants representing day and boarding schools.

Participants reported observing mental health challenges among YLH that threatened their academic success. These included YLH expressing feelings of hopelessness that resulted in medication non-adherence and demotivation to excel in school. In some cases, YLH HIV status was only disclosed when YLH were referred for disciplinary action due to behavioral problems. Parent/caregiver psychological challenges and difficult home environments compounded YLH

mental health issues and made it difficult for schools to work with them to support YLH. Participants reported they often stepped in to offer psychological support to YLH, but this created significant demands on their time and impacted their own mental health. Participants felt they were not adequately trained in HIV or in counseling skills to provide the services that YLH needed and advocated for school wide staff training on HIV and management of common mental health problems.

At school level, participants felt that schools overly prioritized academic success over health skills. In addition, schools did not provide private space for storing HIV medicine or counseling, and they lacked medical information confidentiality policies.

Conclusion: To support YLH to achieve their full potential, there is a need to support school staff to gain the skills needed to support YLH health. Future work on addressing mental health challenges in schools is warranted.

