



School of Public Health
Departement Openbare Gesondheid
Isikolo Sempilo Yoluntu



A qualitative exploration of high school dropout and retention among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in South Africa

Student: Crystal Kleinhans (KLNCRY001)¹

Supervisor: Lucia Knight^{1,2}

Co-supervisor: Zoe Duby^{1,3}

1 Division of Social and Behavioural Sciences in the School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town, South Africa

2 University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa

3 Health Systems Research Unit, South African Medical Research Council, Cape Town, South Africa

FEBRUARY 2025

A mini dissertation [PPH 7015W] submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Public Health (Division of Social and Behavioural Sciences) degree, School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

DECLARATION

I,**CRYSTAL KLEINHANS**....., hereby declare that the work on which this dissertation/thesis is based is my original work (except where acknowledgements indicate otherwise) and that neither the whole work nor any part of it has been, is being, or is to be submitted for another degree in this or any other university.

I empower the university to reproduce for the purpose of research either the whole or any portion of the contents in any manner whatsoever.

Signature:

Signed by candidate

Date: ...10 February 2025.....

Table of Contents

DECLARATION.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	5
PART A: JOURNAL MANUSCRIPT	6
Abstract	6
Introduction.....	7
Materials and methods.....	9
Results.....	12
Discussion.....	20
Conflict of Interest.....	25
Author Contributions	25
Funding.....	25
Acknowledgments	25
References:.....	25
PART B: RESEARCH PROTOCOL.....	30
Introduction.....	30
Rationale.....	31
Research question and objectives	32
Literature review.....	32
Theoretical Framework	35
Methodology	36
Study design.....	37
Study sites.....	37
Study population.....	37
Sample.....	37
Recruitment.....	38
Data collection procedures.....	38
Secondary data analysis.....	39
Rigour.....	39
Data Management and data access	40
Ethical consideration and approval.....	40
Reimbursement.....	41
Referrals	41
Budget and costs of current study (Secondary Analysis)	41
References.....	42
PART C: APPENDICES	46
APPENDIX 1: HREC approval.....	46

APPENDIX 2: HREC approval.....	47
APPENDIX 3: Adapted socio-ecological model.....	48
APPENDIX 4: Confidentiality Agreement.....	49
APPENDIX 5: Signed Turnitin Report	50
APPENDIX 6: Author Guidelines – Frontiers in Education	52

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Lucia Knight, for her support and guidance throughout this research process. To my co-supervisor, Dr. Zoe DUBY from the SAMRC, not only for her input but also for entrusting me to analyse the transcripts of these young women.

To Meredith, Joel and Levi, I could never have done this without your love, grace and support, thank you for always believing in me. To the community of women who have always supported me, to my mother and all my sisters, thank you.

Caleb, this one's for you.

A qualitative exploration of high school dropout and retention among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in South Africa

Student: Crystal Kleinhans (KLNCRY001)¹

Supervisor: *Lucia Knight*^{1,2}

Co-supervisor: *Zoe Duby*^{1,3}

¹Division of Social and Behavioural Sciences in the School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town, South Africa

²University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa

^{1,3}Health Systems Research Unit, South African Medical Research Council, Cape Town, South Africa

Correspondence: Crystal Kleinhans, KLNCRY001@myuct.ac.za

Key words

Adolescent girls and young women; high school; completion; dropout; retention; South Africa

Abstract

In South Africa high school attrition and disengagement rates have been problematic for the past decade with adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) more likely to dropout of school than their male counterparts, especially those AGYW from socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Increased levels of education, a social determinant of health, strongly correlates with better health outcomes for youth. The disengagement and dropout of AGYW in high school is a public health concern. AGYW are at a greater risk of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted infection (STI) due to biological, cultural, religious, socio-economic and structural factors, and efforts to increase their retention and completion of high school, a protective factor, will increase the likelihood of better health outcomes in this population group. This study was a qualitative analysis of AGYW and stakeholders across five provinces from urban, semi-urban and rural districts. The transcripts were thematically analysed to explore the perceptions of and attitudes to high school completion and dropout and the factors which may contribute to either. Findings revealed that AGYW valued their high school education and associated it with future success and independence but several context specific factors on the individual, interpersonal and institutional levels influenced their retention and likelihood of dropping out of high school. An understanding of the multiple factors which influence high school dropout and retention, as

indicated on the different levels of the socio-ecological model, may inform more target specific interventions to increase the retention and completion of high school of AGYW in South Africa.

Introduction

School dropout results in poor economic, social, psychological and physical health for adolescents worldwide (Weybright et al., 2017). Globally, education is the strongest predictor of positive health outcomes, yet it was estimated that more than 200 million adolescents were not in high school in 2018 (Lansford et al., 2016; Roman et al., 2022; Santelli et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2023; Weybright et al., 2017). Research indicates that individuals who dropout of high school are four times more likely to have poorer health outcomes later in life (Lansford et al., 2016). Research revealed a strong correlation between greater school enrolment with a significant decrease in HIV prevalence and pregnancy of youth, as well as better socio-economic status in adulthood (Santelli et al., 2015). School dropout is considered a slow, incremental process of disengagement caused by the convergence of several factors at an individual, family, school and community level (Cham et al., 2014; Hartnack, 2017; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021; Runhare et al., 2021). A greater understanding is needed about how these risk factors interact and when they converge because the process of disengagement does not occur in isolation from other factors, making identification complex (Hartnack, 2017). To date, there is a paucity of research to assist in understanding the factors which facilitate both high school retention and completion among adolescents in South Africa.

In this study the term ‘learner’, individuals who acquire knowledge, will be used, as it is more commonly utilized within the South African context (Oxford University Press, 2025). School dropout refers to learners who withdraw from school, more specifically those who leave school without obtaining the minimum qualification (Hartnack, 2017). In South Africa this qualification is known as ‘Matric’, the national senior certificate, written at the end of Grade 12 (Hartnack, 2017). South African law stipulates compulsory education for a learner from the age of seven years to fifteen years or grade nine and research indicates a significant increase in school dropout after the age of 16 years, grade 10 (Hartnack, 2017; Stoner et al., 2019). Dropout rates in South Africa differ significantly by ‘race’ or population group, due to the injustices of apartheid, resulting in severe inequality and poor standards of education (Hartnack, 2017; Sing & Maringe, 2020). High school completion in South Africa is significantly lower in the ‘black’ population when compared to other racial groups (Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). To date, ‘black’ schools are less resourced with high numbers of learners per classroom with less access to digital resources, when compared to better resourced ‘white’ schools in South Africa (Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025; Stoner et al., 2019). There are also significant differences in dropout by gender (Shahidul and Karim, 2015). While some research studies indicate boys are more likely to dropout of school, in South Africa adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) are more likely to do so, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged communities (UNESCO, 2023, Mokoena and van Breda, 2021). Girls also dropout of school earlier when compared to boys, which suggests that unique

factors impact AGYW differently (Shahidul and Karim, 2015). Their disengagement and dropout from school is a serious public health concern, particularly in a country like South Africa where 25 percent of its AGYW, aged 15-24 years are HIV infected (Yah et al., 2020).

There are several negative health outcomes for AGYW who dropout of school, including but not limited to, increased sexual risk behaviours, early unwanted or unintended pregnancy, increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STI) including HIV, which could result in morbidity or premature mortality (George et al., 2020; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021; Roman et al., 2022; SAMRC, 2022; Stoner et al., 2019). AGYW are at a greater risk of HIV infection and other STIs due to biological, cultural, religious, socio-economic and structural factors which make them more susceptible to infection than their male counterparts (George et al., 2020; Murewanhema et al., 2022). Higher levels of education, decreased leisure time to engage in sexual activity, social support at school, information and health education received at school, fosters risk reduction and avoidance and is known to greatly reduce the risk of HIV in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Lewis et al., 2022; Santelli et al., 2015; Stoner et al., 2017; Zulaika et al., 2019). Therefore, the retention and the completion of high school can have a significant impact on health outcomes of AGYW (Stoner et al., 2017).

Studies in Africa revealed several, multileveled factors, biological (menses and pregnancy), social (parental views of marriage and gender norms versus AGYW's education), economic (financial status and decreased financial access to tertiary educational institutions), school (teacher attitudes and school environments), cultural (educating sons to secure future parental care), which appeared to influence both retention and dropout of AGYW in high school (Chaponda, 2016; Duby et al., 2022; Kamwendo, 2014; Karabo & Ayiga, 2013; Karondo, 2018; Mason et al., 2022; Mnguni, 2014; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021; Shahidul & Karim, 2015; Uche, 2013).

Due to these complex, multidirectional influences, the socio-ecological theory provided a framework best suited to analyse these multileveled factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The theory centres on the individual, nested within concentric circles of different systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Kilanowski, 2017). It posits that environmental factors influence an individual's identity development (bi-directional) and life choices (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Wood et al., 2017). At the core of this theory is the individual, characterised by factors such as self-identity, ability, attitudes and behaviours (McLeroy et al., 1988). In the first concentric circle is the microsystem which focuses on the direct interactions the individual has with significant people in different settings, in school, at home and the wider community (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; McLeroy et al., 1988). The second circle speaks to the interactions and influences of these different interactions and their influence on AGYW's schooling (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; McLeroy et al., 1988). The outer circle, the exosystem, indirectly affects the individual from an institutional or organisational level (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Wood et al., 2017). For the purposes of this study all characteristics relating to the individual will be grouped under individual factors, factors

relating to the microsystem and mesosystem, will be grouped under interpersonal factors and finally the exosystem, highlights the perceptions of AGYW's understanding of the institutional factors which may have an impact on their retention completion and potential dropout of high school (please see Appendix 3).

Due to the increased risk of school dropout in AGYW and their predisposed vulnerability to poor health outcomes as a result, qualitative research is needed to understand their subjective experiences and the factors which influence school retention and dropout in South Africa (George et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2022; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021). Previous studies in South Africa have largely focused on learner performance and the school system excluding the broader factors which intersect and contribute to school dropout (Hartnack, 2017). Factors which relate to both school dropout and retention in this demographic, has not been explored and a greater understanding of the mitigating factors, which may increase high school retention on an individual, family, social and wider community level is required. Knowledge gaps are also revealed in the interventions and strategies to address school dropout which are predominantly international (Hartnack, 2017). This qualitative research study seeks to understand the perceptions of high school retention, completion and dropout among AGYW across South Africa. It also seeks to understand the multiple context specific factors which contribute to the retention and or dropout of AGYW within the South African context.

Materials and methods

Study design

This qualitative research study is nested within a larger mixed-methods study titled HERStory, which was an evaluation of a South African HIV prevention intervention for AGYW between August 2018 and March 2019 (SAMRC, 2023). Funded by the Global Fund, this multi-model intervention aimed to reduce HIV incidence, teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence, increase economic opportunities and retention of AGYW attending and not attending school. The multimodal intervention included biomedical, structural and socio-behavioural components (SAMRC, 2023). The HERStory qualitative component provided in-depth knowledge of the intervention's successes and failures as well as the social contexts and lived experiences of AGYW between 15 and 24 years of age (Duby et al., 2020).

Study setting

The qualitative data of the primary study was collected in five purposively selected South African districts, characterised by HIV prevalence and high rates of pregnancy, based on the geospatial mapping of HIV hot spots and antenatal statistics in South Africa. The provinces included the Western Cape Province (City of Cape Town), Mpumalanga (Gert Sibanda), North West (Bojanala), Eastern Cape (Nelson Mandela Bay) and KwaZulu Natal (Uthungulu) (Duby et al., 2020). Districts selected were a mix of urban, semi-urban and rural (Duby et al., 2022). This study sought to conduct a secondary

analysis of the qualitative data of the national study, with reference to the retention, completion and or school dropout of AGYW.

Population and sampling

The qualitative study activities were conducted in five purposively selected districts, to ensure that there was a district from each of the Principal Recipients (PRs) of the Global Fund grant. Within each district, of the primary study, two schools were purposively selected from a list of schools with Clubs and the Keeping Girls in School (KGIS) programme, as well as one out-of-school Rise Club, from lists of Clubs provided by the PRs. Participants of the sampled Clubs and KGIS programme were invited to participate in focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs). The study population (of the primary study) consisted of AGYW intervention participants and non-participants, aged 15-24 years (Duby et al., 2020; Duby et al., 2022). Inclusive of parents and caregivers of the AGYW, teachers in school which implemented the interventions, club facilitators of both Keeping Girls in School and Rise Clubs, community leaders, male peers of AGYW (aged 18 – 24 years), implementers of the intervention and programme designers (Duby et al., 2020; Duby et al., 2022). The final qualitative sample of the primary study consisted of 237 AGYW aged 15-24 years, 177 were in the 15-19 years age group and 60 were in the 20 – 24 years age group (Duby et al., 2022). Key informants interviewed included 7 parents, 10 teachers, 38 male peers, 6 community leaders, 14 intervention club facilitators and 12 intervention implementers (Duby et al., 2020).

Data collection

Data collection of the primary study included in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with AGYW and key informants (Duby et al., 2020). Trained female researchers collected the data, conducting interviews in English, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Setswana or siSwati (Duby et al., 2022). IDIs and FGDs were semi-structured, followed topic guides and used open ended questioning to explore respondent subjective experiences (Duby et al., 2020). Key points in the topic guide, relating to AGYW's school experiences and future plans, were discussed. All IDIs and FGDs were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim into their original language, then translated into English. This 3-step process was reviewed, by the original interviewer, at each stage to ensure accuracy. The original language transcript remained the primary data source for cross-referencing and checking to ensure meaning and translation was correct, once translated into English (Duby et al., 2020).

Data analysis

The primary study had a specific focus on questions which explored the perceived obstacles and or benefits to school achievement, attendance and retention, including required and recognised support (Duby et al., 2022).

The secondary data analysis process sought to further analyse and answer the research question and objectives using thematic analysis. This flexible and iterative process allowed for a richer description

and organisation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using a deductive and inductive approach in the development of a codebook (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019). Twenty-eight transcripts were extracted from the larger qualitative sample by utilising the guided code reports from the primary data analysis process (guided code reports list select transcripts from the larger sample which indicate data relating to 'education', 'school', 'pregnancy', 'educators', 'teachers' and so forth). From these twenty-eight transcripts, twenty transcripts were extracted from the sample based on word/phrase searches within the data item, which spoke to the research question and the objectives of the secondary data analysis process such as 'dropout', 'matriculate', 'stay in school', 'go to school', 'leave school', 'finish school' etc. These transcripts were coded further as new codes emerged and were further delineated according to factors which either increased or decreased retention, dropout or high school completion. Utilising these deductive and inductive approaches, data guided by the socio-ecological model emerged on an individual, intrapersonal and institutional level. The socio-ecological framework provided structure for the interpretation of these codes, subthemes and broader themes, which were continually added, removed or refined until no new data was generated in the process.

NVivo 14 software was used to upload the selected transcripts, to ensure systematic coding and data organisation in the analysis process (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019).

Ethical considerations

All participants were informed of the purpose and process of the study and provided written consent. Informed consent was obtained from all participants 18 years and older. All participants 18 years and older were informed of the purpose and methodical steps of the research before being asked to give their informed, written consent. For those younger than 18 years, written assent with written guardian consent was obtained before getting assent from the AGYW (Duby et al., 2020). An agreement of confidentiality was signed between the principal investigator and researcher, in order to ensure the confidentiality and protection of identifying information of participants, study sites and procedures. All interviewers including the researchers (primary and secondary analysis) were trained in qualitative research methods. Participants were anonymised and at low risk of being identified in this secondary data analysis process (Duby et al., 2020). Ethics approval was received from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC approval REF: 771/2023, Appendix 1) at the University of Cape Town and the South African Medical Research Council (Protocol ID: EC036-11/2016; Protocol title: Impact evaluation of the Global Fund Young Women and Girls (YW&G) Intervention in ten South African districts, Appendix 2).

A systematic and detailed audit trail was kept of the analysis process to increase the dependability and transparency of the research study, inclusive of a reflexive diary to record the researcher's thoughts to reduce researcher bias (Szabo & Strang, 1997). The analysis process was documented, logical and traceable and any changes made were noted (Nowell et al., 2017).

Results

The findings are structured according to individual, interpersonal and institutional factors which highlighted AGYW's perception of and attitudes toward high school completion, retention and potential dropout. Direct quotations from respondents have been extracted from the transcripts and language has been corrected to ensure understanding.

Individual factors

AGYW shared multiple factors on an individual level, factors which related specifically to the individual respondent's cognitive characteristics and personal experiences which either facilitated or hindered high school retention, completion or dropout. The findings revealed sub-themes of personal trauma, future oriented identities, education or knowledge acquired, poor academic performance and individual financial circumstances.

Personal trauma

At an individual level AGYW shared personal experiences of abuse outside of the school environment which indirectly impacted their learning and retention in high school. These individual experiences of trauma appeared to hinder their ability to concentrate and focus when in the classroom thus decreasing the likelihood of academic success and high school completion.

...you will grow up a traumatised child and you won't even concentrate at school. When they teach, you won't concentrate because you will be thinking about what is happening at home. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, MP).

Respondents explained how these individual traumatic experiences impacted their ability to learn and caused personal distress with their peers which increased the likelihood of their absenteeism and poor attendance at high school.

You see, the thing that can stop a girl child from going to school is a girl who grew up being abused, you see growing up abused maybe you were raped when you were younger, you're stressed because other learners know about your ordeal, and they talk about you at school, you know your mind just ends up... even at school you end up just confused, you feel like they know everything about you at you school, and you end up not going anymore. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN).

Although AGYWs' traumatic experiences made learning difficult, respondents shared the importance of staying in school to complete their high school education, as they envisioned a better future. Another subtheme which innately motivated AGYW on the individual level was a future directed identity, one of individual improvement and success.

A future directed identity

A future directed identity, based on high school completion, was reconciled with independence and broader job prospects, which seemed to increase the attendance of AGYW.

...with what I have seen is from the community, where I live, that school, is not an option, if you leave school tomorrow you want to be a cleaner you need to have a matric there's no way you can stay at home. (15-24 years, AGYW, NW)

AGYW equated high school education with future success and the fulfillment of personal goals, which appeared to motivate respondents to stay in school.

Acquiring knowledge

Another subtheme which respondents highlighted on the individual level was the need to acquire knowledge as it was expressed as a personal driving force to success.

...We are hungry for education... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, WC)

Respondents also perceived education as a means to independence.

...You need to be educated as a woman, you need to be independent. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

It also inspired respondents to strive to do better in the future.

...that must push you to study so that you can be there yourself and do better... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, WC).

Knowledge acquired through the multi-modal HERStory intervention also appeared to shift individual attitudes of respondents as they shared observations of pregnant AGYW who still attended high school.

...Okay, keeping girls in school has taught me that girls should not give up because we sometimes have pregnant girls here at school but they keep coming to school even though they are pregnant... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, EC)

This internal dialogue highlighted that they no longer regarded adolescent pregnancy as a reason to drop out of school.

...it taught us that even if you fall pregnant while you are still young or at school that doesn't mean that your life is over; but you can go give birth and raise the baby for a while there is also a possibility that you can go back to school and continue with your studies. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

Knowledge acquired and its links to a better future may have motivated the personal choices of AGYW to stay in school. Respondents shared an attitude of taking ownership of their lives and reflected on other AGYW who stayed out of school, which they felt could not be blamed on external circumstances.

...that person knew that she was suppose to be in school, there was no gun or knife pointed at her– but it is out of her own choice... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

Yet, other AGYW felt that factors beyond their control influenced high school retention and completion.

Poor academic performance

Poor academic performance, another subtheme at an individual level, seemed to steer subject choice and future job prospects as some performed poorly academically. Their subject choice was not based on personal preference but rather on poor grades, as subjects were assigned to specific classes (categorized alphabetically).

The subjects that I'm also doing I do not like them, the reason I chose them was because where I was in C I failed. So I changed and went to E and did Geography and Tourism, in actual fact I liked Accounting so I can be a CA (e.g., Chartered Accountant) but because I failed accounting it was hard so I changed and went to E. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

As a result, poor academic performance steered AGYW's subject choice and appeared to increase a disinterest in the school curriculum and a despondency in future job prospects which did not align with their personal goals.

...it's just that when I aspire to be a doctor then I look at my results then I see that I'll never make it, then you look at a another career like social work then lack in subjects again, so it's challenging... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, WC)

The challenge appeared to not be a lack of goals for the future but feeling curtailed by poor academic performance and a limited choice in subjects as a result.

Financial circumstances

Respondents reflected on their own and other AGYW's individual financial circumstances, compounded with poor academic results, which may result in increased levels of learner despondency to stay in high school.

Yes because others give up hope and say that at home we are poor and I myself am not clever to get a lot of distinctions. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

AGYW shared that they wanted to study at tertiary level after high school completion but realized that their daily living expenses and family financial circumstances could prevent them from doing so, even with financial support in the form of bursaries.

...when I want to go to the University or College, even when they say it is free education, I still need clothes to wear, I have to eat, and where will my parent get the money for all this when they don't have this. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN).

AGYW felt they were better off entering the workforce immediately once they completed their high school careers.

...I have decided that when I finish Matric, I will take my certificate, go and look for a job... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

Multiple, multidirectional factors at an individual level appeared to influence AGYW's perception of and attitudes toward high school retention, completion and potential dropout. Individual factors of trauma (incidents which occurred beyond the walls of the school environment) were revealed to be one of many factors which impacted learning and academic performance. Poor grades appeared to decrease subject choice and increased disinterest in schooling. It appeared to limit their future job prospects with no financial support for tertiary level education, fostering even greater disinterest and despondency. These factors were also influenced by the relationships and interpersonal interactions that AGYW had with individuals in their respective homes, schools and communities, which either facilitated high school retention, completion or dropout.

Interpersonal Factors

Engagement with teachers

Interpersonal interactions with significant people in the lives of AGYW either facilitated or hindered high school attendance and completion. A subtheme reflected within the school environment indicated negative interactions with teachers which fostered thoughts of staying out of school.

Sometimes the teachers will be like, why you sit and do nothing, you should have stayed at home and not come to school, and the next thing, the next following morning you will be like why [am I] going to school, the teacher said I might as well stay at home... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, WC)

Repeated negative interactions with teachers appeared to foster absenteeism.

I'm always absent, I'm absent because of the teacher coz I already know what they're going to say... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

Derogatory remarks from teachers about AGYW's poor academic performance also appeared to demotivate learners.

...it will make you feel like not going to school like when a teacher will say to you "this thing that keeps on failing" that happens and you end up hating to go to school, ... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

Teachers also appeared to openly mock AGYW's dual role and responsibilities of being both mothers and learners.

...they will make joke out of that, tell you that yes it's because you have a child... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, WC)

Yet not all interactions were negative. Another subtheme within the school environment emerged which highlighted AGYW's positive experiences with their teachers, which appeared to nurture and foster goals of high school attendance and completion.

...like there are some teachers who wish for a better life for us and would like us to work hard at school and pass... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, NW)

Teachers were also proactive in garnering parental support for their learners.

...they organize a meeting with parents in order to help you... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

The shared responses from AGYW indicated the strong influence teacher interactions had, both positive and negative, to their high school retention, completion and potential dropout.

Engagement with Peers

Peers appeared to be a beneficial factor which influenced high school attendance and retention. AGYW expressed concern when peers were absent from school.

...We go ourselves to check up on each other when we don't see you at school... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, WC)

AGYW also highlighted the importance of the emotional support provided by fellow peers when at school, which appeared to foster high school attendance.

...then here at school, there will be people around you, and at least I trust my friend so I can talk to her about what I went through... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, WC)

AGYW felt that peers could also influence negative class behaviour and school attendance.

...through peer pressure did all things such as bunking and skipping class and not going to school... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, EC)

AGYW also shared how peer misbehavior impacted learning but also recognized that they also had a role to play in their own learning.

...we must put all the blame to the teacher; we also play our part, some other students will come to school high, and they will make a noise and disturbed us ... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, WC)

AGYW also shared that both peer and romantic relationships, whilst at school, impacted their high school careers.

Engagement with boyfriends

AGYW felt that having a boyfriend could affect high school attendance, both positively and negatively.

...you leave going to school, and you don't arrive because you went to your boyfriend... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

AGYW expressed that a boyfriend could persuade one not to attend school.

...a boyfriend says “baby can you come home with me” it is up to you to take your uniform along so that when you wake up in the morning, you can go to school... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

References made of these sleepovers at boyfriends' homes were not only associated with poor high school attendance but was also linked to high rates of pregnancy in AGYW.

...things that contribute to the high level of pregnancy is that when we leave our homes we are expected to be at school but we end up not reaching school... (19 – 24 years, AGYW, MP)

Yet like peer relationships, not all romantic relationships negatively impacted high school attendance and school dropout, a boyfriend could also be a source of support and encouragement to complete one's secondary education.

...my boyfriend is focused and he like encouraging me because we are doing the same subjects at school... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, EC)

Another important relationship which respondents felt influenced AGYW's perception of and attitudes toward high school attendance and completion was AGYW's interactions with their biological children.

Engagement with AGYW's biological children

AGYW's shared experiences of their parental responsibilities at home, which made attendance at school difficult. AGYW shared the difficulty in preparing for examinations, whilst raising a child.

...it is difficult to have a child whilst you are still a student I saw it with myself. It's difficult Miss, because you will find that you have an exam the following day, but your child was crying the whole night maybe from 00:00 to 04:00 and you have to wake up and go to school... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

The dual roles and responsibilities of being both mother and learner were experienced by some AGYW.

...the reason for my absenteeism, I, I have 2 children, on Friday I was absent, on Monday I was absent and even yesterday I was absent... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

This dual role and responsibility may also result in embarrassment and may have been a barrier for them to return to school.

...They will tell you now you are a woman. You have to go to school and finish your education, but as a girl, it's more embarrassing to go to school. You looking at your peers, they not pregnant, they don't have kids now when you are pregnant at a young age, you got to know there is a responsibility... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, EC)

AGYW with children were also reported to dropout of high school to financially support their children, as a programme facilitator in the Eastern Cape noted:

...some of them are grade 12 and they've got children and they are supporting their families and they don't wanna further their education because what they really need is to get money... (Programme Implementer, EC)

However, the support provided by family members to AGYW, who were young mothers, may improve the retention and attendance of AGYW in high school, as some attested to.

Engagement with family members

AGYW shared positive experiences of childcare provided by family members which appeared to foster high school completion and retention.

...for me what made it easy is when they took my child, they took the child to the grandmother so that I could come to school and further my education... (15 – 24 years, FGD, AGYW, NW)

Parents and siblings also provided motivational support to younger siblings and daughters to stay in school, to complete their high school careers. Respondents shared how parents referred to siblings who dropped out of school as disappointments and that this motivated them not to follow suit.

...so she encourages me to study and not be like my sisters and brothers as they did not finish school they dropped out early... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

Respondents also shared examples of siblings providing this advice.

my sister always tells me “don't be like me because I didn't want to be in a place like this, I still want to live my youth but I can't now because I have to think what are my kids going to do, where am I going to stay and what is my future at... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, EC)

Learners also shared the importance of parental supervision and support to ensure AGYW were monitored and supervised to ensure high school completion and future success.

...I think parents must know the child's whereabouts, what are they doing, did they go to school, check their schoolbooks, work that was done at school.... (19 – 24 years, AGYW, MP)

A lack of support from family members was noted by some as demotivating them from study, AGYW seemed to want their supervision, motivation and support.

...they don't care about studying I can be busy on my phone until I go to bed and no one encourages me. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

The interactions that AGYW have with their respective teachers, peers, boyfriends, parents, siblings and biological children impacted their retention, completion or potential dropout from high school. These engagements showcased the significant influence the interaction and bi-directional influences of both the micro and mesosystems on AGYW's schooling.

Institutional factors

Institutional support

AGYW shared their perceptions of institutional level factors relating to the school, education and the government institutions inclusive of business organizations in the wider community, which they felt could potentially influence young women's high school retention, completion and dropout. At an institutional level respondents highlighted the need for increased access to educational resources, financial support, academic support and skills development programmes to enter the work force after completing high school.

...they must make the computer labs available for everyone, not just for the students that does computer studies, we also need access to these facilities for research about health and our studies and etcetera because data is expensive for us to do this at home... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, EC)

Respondents also shared the need for additional academic support from tutors.

...They must also make tutors available for everyone, not just for those that does computer studies. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, EC)

Computers and financial assistance from local business organizations were seen as factors that could motivate AGYW to complete their high school education and even tertiary studies

...the Richards Bay Mall was able to help a child who was in Matric and was given a laptop so she knew that after matric she is covered with a bursary to further her studies. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

AGYW shared that increased access to bursaries may potentially influence high school completion.

...guarantee bursaries when they finish school, so they are motivated knowing that at the end they will further their studies... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

AGYW were also influenced by their current family financial circumstances.

...the parent that I stay with is unemployed, they might not have money for me to go to the University, but we have passed that stage now because there are bursaries that you can apply for and get help... (15 – 18 years, AGYW, KZN)

Respondents also shared that the government may be better suited to invest in skills development programmes to equip AGYW to enter the workforce.

...introduce programmes for the youth. Like sports, and youth skills development centres, where they will use their skills to work. (15 – 18 years, AGYW, MP)

At an institutional level, AGYW speak of greater access to resources and financial support at policy levels, within the educational system and beyond (with the economic sector). As well as the development of educational pathways of employment (post matric) for those less academically strong and from lower socio-economic circumstances. These AGYW's responses also highlight context specific factors which either foster their retention, completion and or dropout of high school, on an individual, intrapersonal and institutional level.

Discussion

This qualitative research study seeks to understand the perceptions of high school retention, completion and dropout among AGYW across South Africa. The findings revealed multiple interrelated factors reported above at the individual, interpersonal and institutional levels and the subsequent interactions between levels.

On an individual level AGYW spoke of their individual agency and intrinsic motivation to stay in school. Respondents shared the choice to stay away or dropout of high school came down to the individual. Yet, one cannot underestimate the contextual, systemic issues nationally, which may influence AGYW's choices every day, whether to stay in school or not. Having a future oriented identity and the inherent need to acquire knowledge in an education system weakened by poor infrastructure, restricted resources and inferior levels of education, many respondents shared the broader systemic issues at play (Hartnack, 2017; SSACI, 2024). These individual level factors to stay in school are comparative to studies conducted in Kenya and Ghana of AGYW, when faced with multiple context specific barriers to high school attendance (Oppong et al., 2022; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012).

This study highlighted that trauma experienced at home may have had detrimental consequences on AGYW's learning experiences in the classroom. Childhood trauma is associated with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress syndrome and behavioural issues such as attention-deficit disorder or hyperactivity disorder which negatively impacts academic achievement and has been shown by prior research to impact on school absences (Judeel & Ramhurry, 2018; Pieterse, 2015). AGYW reflected on

the impact of trauma on AGYW's ability to learn and concentrate when in the classroom. Consistent with studies conducted in South Africa, Tanzania and Kenya of learner dropout, household conflict, physical and sexual assault, outside of the school environment, proved to be factors which could hinder high school retention and completion and academic achievement (Inglis, 2009; Rugimbana & Mwila, 2023; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). The increased vulnerability of AGYW to violence and trauma is consistent with national statistics on crime in 2019/2020 in South Africa, which indicated high rates of rape and assault committed against children and girls 17 years and younger (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2024). This study highlights the need for increased psychosocial support for AGYW and not only academic support within the school environment, which may increase the likelihood of high school completion.

Poor academic performance was perceived to increase the risk of high school dropout in AGYW as poor academic results steered subject choice at high school and not personal interest. Studies in South Africa have highlighted the increased risk in school absences and eventual school dropout when learners lose interest in the curriculum (Desai et al., 2024; Ismail, Mda & Mashiyi, 2022). Research indicates that learners who find subjects interesting were likely to study and apply themselves to their work than those who were not, which influences their decision to stay in school (Ismail, Mda & Mashiyi, 2022; Runhare et al., 2021). Subjects which also increased employability after high school graduation have also been found to increase the retention of AGYW in Tanzania, an avenue which needs to be explored to not only increase the retention of AGYW in South Africa but also increase their motivation to complete their high school careers to enter the workforce (Dejaeghere, 2018).

Respondents communicated an understanding of the future benefits of completing one's secondary education which included greater job prospects and goals of financial independence. Findings which were similar in qualitative studies of AGYW in Namibia and Tanzania (Karondo, 2018; Mason et al., 2022). AGYW shared similar sentiments of wanting to improve their lives and wanting a better future, with education as the conduit (Karondo, 2018; Mason et al., 2022). Respondents also shared suggestions of sport and skills development programmes to be offered at school to those who were not academically strong, which could prepare AGYW to enter the work force once they completed their high school education. Worryingly, South Africa has the highest unemployment rate in the world of which 63.9% of the population fall within the same demographic as this study (15 – 24 years), it may be a strong motivating factor to advocate for alternate educational pathways for AGYW to enter the workforce after high school graduation (Desai et al., 2024). However, literature points to a need for a greater understanding of the widening skills gap in South Africa (the gap between skills training provided and skills required in the employment sector) (Mvunabandi et al., 2023; SSACI, 2024). Literature highlights that research is needed of the local labour market in South Africa to inform alternative employment

pathways for AGYW (Mvunabandi et al., 2023). Which will not only contextualise training and narrow the skills gap but increase the employability of these young women (Mvunabandi et al., 2023).

Beneficiaries of the HERStory intervention also shared their observations of fellow AGYW, the knowledge acquired by their participation in the multimodal intervention saw pregnant AGYW choose to stay in school. Authors Mason (2022), Santelli et. al (2015) and Lewis et.al (2022) highlighted the benefits of the school environment when AGYW have increased access to health information and education as it provides a protective barrier to sexually transmitted disease and pregnancy and empowered young women with knowledge. Similar to pregnant learners in the Eastern Cape in South Africa, who returned to school after childbirth due to a greater awareness of their right to education which may have motivated high school return and completion (Jochim et al., 2023).

Some respondents also shared their demotivation when reflecting on their individual financial circumstances and the lack of opportunity to study further at tertiary level, once their high school education was completed. In previous studies, poverty was highlighted as a major factor which increased the likelihood of school dropout of young women (Chaponda, 2016; Karondo, 2018). This study may also highlight that the lack of money to study further may also be a contributing factor to school absences and potential school dropout in high school, as it could increase levels of despondency whilst at school, if tertiary level education was not a viable option for them. As several barriers to education intersect (gender, family socio-economic status and an urban/rural geographical bias), AGYW face greater barriers to high-school retention and completion, especially young women who live in rural areas who may struggle to access well-resourced schools, better learning environments and tertiary level education (Baxter, Novy-Marx & D'Angelo, 2022).

Parental support and involvement strengthen learner engagement and academic performance (Inglis, 2009; Mnguni, 2014; Robertson, Cassity & Kunkwenzu, 2017). Studies in South Africa have highlighted the importance of supportive parent-adolescent relationships which fosters high school retention of both male and female adolescent learners, referencing a lack of supervision and parental involvement as neglect, which lead to increased despondency of learners with a greater likelihood of school dropout (Desai et al., 2024; Ismail, Mda & Mashiyi, 2022; Judeel & Ramhurry, 2018). Consistent with respondents in this study, parental emotional support and involvement, inclusive of siblings, may deter AGYW from dropping out of school. As corroborated in other developing countries such as Uganda and Tanzania which highlighted the importance of family support as it not only increased learner motivation but also parent-teacher involvement (Rugimbana & Mwila, 2023; Santelli et al., 2015). As shared in this study teachers inspired AGYW to stay in school and sought ways to support them, which is indicative of having a greater understanding of AGYW's challenges outside of the classroom environment, as other studies in Africa of positive learner-teacher experiences have indicated

(Oppong et al., 2022; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). This study therefore highlights the importance of teachers not solely focusing on academic performance alone but to be informed and to find ways to support AGYW to overcome multiple barriers to high school retention and completion.

As research indicates peer support and acceptance becomes increasingly strong in this developmental stage (Martinot et al., 2022). Not surprisingly peers of AGYW in this study appeared to provide a much needed social and emotional safety-net when fellow learners were absent from school, which they would not otherwise access outside of the school environment, which may foster high school retention. However, the negative aspects of peer influence cannot be dismissed as mentioned by respondents, which could lead to increased school absences and or dropping out of school, similar to studies in Namibia, South Africa and Tanzania (Karondo, 2018; Mnguni, 2014; Shoo, 2024). Encouraging established peer relationships which encourage, and foster school retention and completion should be harnessed to mitigate and decrease school absences and dropout of AGYW.

As in Kenya, respondents shared the double-edged sword of romantic relationships which either facilitated high school retention or hindered it (Oruko et al., 2015). Respondents shared that romantic relationships increased the risk of pregnancy, which is well documented as a significant cause of AGYW high school dropout (Amina, 2015; Karondo, 2018; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021; Weybright et al., 2017). As a result of pregnancy and childbirth respondents in this study shared the difficulty of attending high school due to the dual role and responsibilities of being both a young mother and learner. Shedding light on the multiple barriers and responsibilities of these young mothers which may not be recognised and neither supported and which only perpetuates increased school absences and potential dropout. This study also highlighted the importance of family support when raising a child whilst still at high school which may foster high school retention and attendance.

At an institutional level, AGYW shared the need for greater access to computers and academic support to increase high school retention and completion, inferences made by respondents were that only a select group of learners accessed these resources based on subject choice and academic performance. Poorly resourced schools not only increase barriers of retention and completion of AGYW but future employability, as the employment landscape changes due to digitization (Baxter, Novy-Marx & D'Angelo, 2022). Literature suggests that a lack of resources does negatively impact the retention and completion of AGYW in high school and therefore strategies to overcome these shortfalls, to decrease school absences and the potential dropout of AGYW is needed (Mackatiani, Mackatiani & Owino, 2022). It also highlights how institutional constraints impact the individual's employability, if they are forced to enter the workforce immediately after high school completion. Greater collaboration and investment, in both the education (infrastructure, resources, improved levels of teacher training, increased access to digital resources) and economic sectors (increased job market analysis) are required

to streamline and increase AGYW retention and completion of high school and employment post matric (SSACI, 2024). In the interim, a policy suggestion at this level may be resource sharing and homework support for AGYW at different high schools in a context specific geographical area, which was shown to improve the academic performance (and consequent retention) of AGYW in Limpopo (Nuamah, 2020). However, greater flexibility within the education system and educational policy must be explored, recognising the complexity of the multiple barriers of retaining AGYW in school, to those who are often forced to leave, find employment but are eager to return (Baxter, Novy-Marx & D'Angelo, 2022).

This study sought to provide insight into the perceptions and understanding of AGYW's high school retention and dropout and the factors which influence both, yet it does not come without its limitations. Secondary data analysis reduces the control of researcher bias in the collection, generation, transcribing and recording of information in the primary data set. Questions posed in the primary collection of data may not have been specific enough to answer the research question and its objectives of the secondary data investigation. It may have curtailed a deeper level of secondary data collection, analysis and application of the broader theoretical framework. This may also indicate the reduced number of inputs for the secondary data analysis from key stakeholders, which may have added a richer exploration of the dataset and strengthened triangulation from different data sources. Another limitation may be the scope of the secondary study; qualitative data was only collected from five purposively selected South African districts, researchers and policy makers should be cautioned to not generalise the findings to a national level. However, these limitations were decreased by discussion and engagement with the primary researcher and co-supervisor of this secondary study (Szabo & Strang, 1997).

The findings of this research study provide insight into AGYW's understanding and perception of high school retention and dropout. What was clearly revealed is that AGYW value their high school education and expressed an understanding of the benefits of completing and graduating from high school for future success. Greater exploration and understanding are needed of alternate educational pathways for AGYW who are not academically strong but who are keen to complete their high school careers with goals to enter the work force. Several factors on the individual, interpersonal and institutional levels both hinder and facilitate AGYW's retention and potential dropout which may motivate for more holistic approaches to support AGYW to stay in school and to achieve academic success and high school completion. Factors which increase the likelihood of increased absences and potential dropout require additional support beyond mere academic support. This study may add to the conceptualisation of multi-modal interventions in South Africa, which may be streamlined at an individual, interpersonal and institutional level, not only to increase the attendance, retention and

completion of AGYW at high school but to also increase the likelihood of better sexual health outcomes, as the school environment provides a protective barrier in this population group.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest was identified.

Author Contributions

CK performed secondary data analysis of the transcripts from the primary research study, which led to the journal article.

LK provided input, guidance and administrative support as the principal supervisor.

ZD was the co-principal investigator of the primary research study, as well providing input and guidance as a co-supervisor.

Funding

There are no personal costs incurred for the purpose of this study.

Acknowledgments

AGYW who participated in the HERStory multi-modal intervention and research study.

South African Medical Research Council

References:

Amina, J.A. (2015). Challenges Faced by Girls who Dropout from Senior High School: the Voices of Sixty Dropout Girls in the Upper West Region of Ghana. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. 5(6):150 - 160. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Amina-Jangu-Alhassan/publication/341279188_Challenges_Faced_by_Girls_who_Dropout_from_Senior_High_School_The_Voices_of_Sixty_Dropout_Girls_in_the_Upper_West_Region_of_Ghana/links/5eb80424a6fdcc1f1dcb3c50/Challenges-Faced-by-Girls-who-Dropout-from-Senior-High-School-The-Voices-of-Sixty-Dropout-Girls-in-the-Upper-West-Region-of-Ghana.pdf.

Baxter, M., Novy-Marx, M. & D'Angelo, S. (2022). Improving pathways for girls and disadvantaged youth through secondary education and into work: Evidence and reflections from practice: Special Issue Youth & Adolescent Skills Development: Preparing young people for diverse global challenges. *Development Policy Review*. 40:e12651. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/dpr.12651>

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 3(2):77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American psychologist*. 32(7):513. <https://research-ebSCO-com.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/c/mcwibl/viewer/pdf/xatl347aw5?route=details>

Cham, H., Hughes, J.N., West, S.G. & Im, M.H. (2014). Assessment of adolescents' motivation for educational attainment. *Psychological Assessment*. 26(2):642. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260483340_Assessment_of_Adolescents'_Motivation_for_Educational_Attainment.

Chaponda, C. (2016). Persistent School Drop-outs Among Girls in Selected Secondary Schools of Nakonde District in Zambia. [dissertation/master's thesis]. [Zambia(Lusaka): The University of Zambia]. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Persistent-School-drop-outs-among-Girls-in-selected-Chaponda/91c7268c9d572813db8ca7f087084341096d3621>.

Dejaeghere, J. (2018). Girls' educational aspirations and agency: imagining alternative futures through schooling in a low-resourced Tanzanian community. *Critical Studies in Education*. 59(2):237-255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2016.1188835>

- Desai, R., Magan, A., Ruiter, R.A.C., Reddy, P.S. & Mercken, L.A.G. (2024). Understanding Why Youth Drop Out of School in South Africa. *SAGE Open*. 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231219080>
- Duby, Z., Maruping, K., Jonas, K., Appollis McClinton, T., Vanleeuw, L. & 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>
- Duby, Z., Mathews, C., Jonas, K., Maruping, K., Appollis McClinton, T., Dietrich, J., Harries, J. & Lovette, A. (2020). An evaluation of a South African combination HIV prevention intervention for adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). South African Medical Research Council. <https://www.samrc.ac.za/research-reports/herstory-evaluation-south-african-combination-hiv-prevention-intervention>
- George, G., Cawood, C., Puren, A., Khanyile, D., Gerritsen, A., Govender, K., Beckett, S., Glenshaw, M. et al. (2020). Evaluating DREAMS HIV prevention interventions targeting adolescent girls and young women in high HIV prevalence districts in South Africa: protocol for a cross-sectional study. *BMC women's health*. 20(1):1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-019-0875-2>
- Hartnack, A. (2017). Background document and review of key South African and international literature on school dropout. Cape Town. <https://dgmt.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/School-Dropout-Background-Paper-Final.pdf>.
- Inglis, D. (2009). Exploring the dropout phenomenon in a secondary school situated in a high-risk community. [thesis/master’s dissertation]. [Cape Town(Stellenbosch):University of Stellenbosch]. <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/items/4780e725-edfe-40de-964f-664ce0e5e95d>
- Ismail, T., Mda, T. & Mashiyi, N. (2022). Motivating Grade 12 learners at a quintile 3 secondary school in South Africa. *The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning*. 17(1):106-120. <https://journals.assaf.org.za/index.php/ijtl/article/view/18135>
- Jochim, J., Meinck, F., Toska, E., Roberts, K., Wittesaele, C., Langwenya, N. & Cluver, L. (2023). Who goes back to school after birth? Factors associated with postpartum school return among adolescent mothers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. *Global Public Health*. 18(1):1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2022.2049846>
- Judeel, L. & Ramhurry, C. (2018). Perceptions regarding the role of social support in academic achievement of adolescents exposed to violence. *The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning*. 13(1):97-114. <https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC-eeb020073>
- Kamwendo, M. (2014). Malawian teachers' perceptions of gender and achievement in the context of girls' underachievement. *Girlhood Studies*. 7(2):79-96. <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/girlhood-studies/7/2/ghs070206.xml>.
- Karabo, M. & Ayiga, N. (2013). Factors influencing high dropout rates of girl child from education: A case study of black women in North West Province, South Africa. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jsda/article/view/90253>
- Karondo, J. (2018). Improving the retention of girls in Schools: A case study of piloted senior secondary schools in the Kavango West region. [thesis/master’s dissertation]. [Namibia: University of Namibia]. <https://repository.unam.edu.na/server/api/core/bitstreams/63e1bc5a-aaac-4563-bb99-9aaab3029ea6/content>
- Kilanowski, J.F. (2017). Breadth of the socio-ecological model. *Journal of Agromedicine*. 22(4):295-297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2017.1358971>
- Lansford, J.E., Dodge, K.A., Pettit, G.S. & Bates, J.E. (2016). A public health perspective on school dropout and adult outcomes: A prospective study of risk and protective factors from age 5 to 27 years. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 58(6):652-658. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.01.014>
- Lewis, L., Kharsany, A.B., Humphries, H., Maughan-Brown, B., Beckett, S., Govender, K., Cawood, C., Khanyile, D. et al. (2022). HIV incidence and associated risk factors in adolescent girls and young women in South Africa: A population-based cohort study. *PLoS One*. 17(12):e0279289. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0279289>

- Mackatiani, C.I., Mackatiani, N.I. & Owino, M.A. (2022). Transition in education: Perspectives on girls' drop-out rates in secondary schools in Kenya. *London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*. 22(1):41-51. https://journalspress.com/LJRHSS_Volume22/Transition-in-Education-Perspectives-on-Girls-Drop-Out-Rates-in-Secondary-Schools-in-Kenya.pdf
- Martinot, D., Sicard, A., Gul, B., Yakimova, S., Taillandier-Schmitt, A. & Maintenant, C. (2022). Peers and teachers as the best source of social support for school engagement for both advantaged and priority education area students. *Frontiers in Psychology*.13:958286.<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.958286>
- Mason, L., Zulaika, G., van Eijk, A.M., Fwaya, E., Obor, D., Phillips-Howard, P. & Nyothach, E. (2022). 'You don't have to sleep with a man to get how to survive': Girl's perceptions of an intervention study aimed at improving sexual and reproductive health and schooling outcomes. *PLOS Global Public Health*. 2(10):e0000987.<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000987>
- McLeroy, K.R., Bibeau, D., Steckler, A. & Glanz, K. (1988). An Ecological Perspective on Health Promotion Programs. *Health Education Quarterly*. 15(4):351-377.<https://doi.org/10.1177/109019818801500401>
- Mnguni, B.I. (2014). Investigating the causes of learner dropout at secondary schools in Johannesburg South, Gauteng. [thesis/master's dissertation]. [South Africa: University of South Africa]. https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/18722/dissertation_mnguni_ib.pdf;sequence=1
- Mokoena, P. & van Breda, A.D. (2021). School dropout among female learners in rural Mpumalanga, South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*. 41(3).<https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v41n3a1842>
- Murewanhema, G., Musuka, G., Moyo, P., Moyo, E. & Dzinamarira, T. (2022). HIV and adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa: A call for expedited action to reduce new infections. *International Journal of Infectious Diseases Regions*. 5:30-32.<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijregi.2022.08.009>
- Muyambi, G.C. & Ahiaku, P.K.A. (2025). Inequalities and education in South Africa: A scoping review. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*. 8:100408. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386720067_Inequalities_and_education_in_South_Africa_A_scoping_review
- Mvunabandi, J.D., Mkhize, M., Marimuthu, F., Nomlala, B.C. & Gadzikwa, L. (2023). Can training in employability skills help adolescent girls and young women in South Africa increase their employment opportunities? *Jurnal Maksipreneur: Manajemen, Koperasi, dan Entrepreneurship*. 12(2):430-447. <https://ejournal.up45.ac.id/index.php/maksipreneur/article/view/1229>
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. & Moules, N.J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International journal of qualitative methods*. 16(1):1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Nuamah, S.A. (2020). The Limits of Individual-Level Factors for Ghanaian and South African Girls' Learning. Springer International Publishing. 171-184.https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21092-2_8
- Oppong, J.D., Tsotovor, L.A., Danquah, J. & Bintu, I. (2022). Factors that influence the academic motivation of female students. *Open Journal of Educational Research*.82-92.<https://doi.org/10.31586/ojer.2022.270>
- Oruko, K., Nyothach, E., Zielinski-Gutierrez, E., Mason, L., Alexander, K., Vulule, J., Laserson, K.F. & Phillips-Howard, P.A. (2015). 'He is the one who is providing you with everything so whatever he says is what you do': A Qualitative Study on Factors Affecting Secondary Schoolgirls' Dropout in Rural Western Kenya. *PLoS One*. 10(12):e0144321.<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0144321>
- Oxford University Press. 2025. Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/learner> [Accessed January 12, 2025]
- Pieterse, D. (2015). Childhood Maltreatment and Educational Outcomes: Evidence from South Africa. *Health Economics*. 24(7):876-894.<https://doi.org/10.1002/hec.3065>

- Roberts, K., Dowell, A. & Nie, J.-B. (2019). Attempting rigour and replicability in thematic analysis of qualitative research data; a case study of codebook development. *BMC medical research methodology*. 19:1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0707-y>
- Robertson, S., Cassity, E. & Kunkwenzu, E. (2017). Girls' primary and secondary education in Malawi: Sector review. https://research.acer.edu.au/monitoring_learning/31/
- Roman, N.V., Davidse, P.E., Human-Hendricks, A., Butler-Kruger, L. & Sonn, I.K. (2022). School Dropout: Intentions, Motivations and Self-Efficacy of a Sample of South Africa Youth. *Youth*. 2(2):126-137. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth2020010>
- Rugimbana, C.E. & Mwila, P.M. (2023). School Dropout among Girls: Reasons and Measures in Community Secondary Schools in Temeke Municipality, Tanzania. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*. 43(3):47-61. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2023/v43i3943>
- Runhare, T., Ouda, J.B., Vele, M.T. & Mudzielwana, N. (2021). School–community interventions to curb learner dropout: The perceptions of key education stakeholders in a rural South African school neighbourhood. *International Review of Education*. 67:591-610. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09910-0>
- South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). (2022). “We can’t share things with our teachers”: narratives of mistrust and disconnect between South African female learners and their teachers. <https://www.samrc.ac.za/sites/default/files/attachments/2022-11/HSRUTeachersBrief.pdf> [Accessed June 23, 2023]
- South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). (2023). HERStory: An evaluation of a South African combination HIV prevention intervention for adolescent girls and young women. https://www.samrc.ac.za/research-reports/herstory-evaluation-south-african-combination-hiv-prevention-intervention?type=research-report&menu=intramural-research-units&menu-item=health_systems [Accessed June 23, 2023]
- Santelli, J.S., Mathur, S., Song, X., Huang, T.J., Wei, Y., Lutalo, T., Nalugoda, F., Gray, R. et al. (2015). Rising school enrollment and declining HIV and pregnancy risk among adolescents in Rakai District, Uganda, 1994–2013. *Global Social Welfare*. 2:87-103. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-015-0029-x>
- Shahidul, S. & Karim, A. (2015). Factors contributing to school dropout among the girls: A review of literature. *European Journal of research and reflection in educational sciences*. 3(2):25-36. <https://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/FACTORS-CONTRIBUTING-TO-SCHOOL-DROPOUT-AMONG-THE-GIRLS.pdf>
- Shoo, A.A. (2024). Examining Dropout Among Girl Students: Influence of Peer Group and Measures in Public Secondary Schools in Kondo Town Council. *East African Journal of Education Studies*. 7(3):206-217. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.7.3.2092>
- Sing, N. & Maringe, F. (2020). “Learner dropout in South African schools: Epistemological and management challenges,” In *The education systems of Africa*. K.S. Adeyemo, ed. 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43042-9_22-1
- Stanger, N.R. (2011). Moving "eco" back into socio-ecological models: A proposal to reorient ecological literacy into human developmental models and school systems. *Human Ecology Review*. 167-173. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24707472>
- Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). (2025). Lifting the veil on violence against children in South Africa. Available: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=17023> [Accessed November 11, 2024]
- Stoner, M.C., Pettifor, A., Edwards, J.K., Aiello, A.E., T Halpern, C., Julien, A., Selin, A., Twine, R. et al. (2017). The effect of school attendance and school dropout on incident HIV and HSV-2 among young women in rural South Africa enrolled in HPTN 068. *AIDS (London, England)*. 31(15): 2127–2134. <https://doi.org/10.1097/QAD.0000000000001584>

Stoner, M.C., Rucinski, K.B., Edwards, J.K., Selin, A., Hughes, J.P., Wang, J., Agyei, Y., Gomez-Olive, F.X. et al. (2019). The relationship between school dropout and pregnancy among adolescent girls and young women in South Africa: A HPTN 068 analysis. *Health Education & Behavior*. 46(4):559-568. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198119831755>

Swiss South African Cooperation Initiative (SSACI). (2024). Identification of Skills Gaps in South Africa: A Popular Research Report. Produced for the Department of Higher Education and Training as part of the Labour Market Intelligence research programme. <https://lmi-research.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/LMI-1-11-C2B-Popular-ID-SkillGapSA-WEB.pdf>

Szabo, V. & Strang, V.R. (1997). Secondary analysis of qualitative data. *Advances in nursing science*. 20(2):66-74. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00012272-199712000-00008>

Uche, R.D. (2013). Dropout Syndrome among girls in secondary schools and human resources development in Nigeria. *Journal of Education and Practice*. 4(2):25-30. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/234633906.pdf>

UNESCO. (2023). Out-of-School Children and Youth. <https://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/out-school-children-and-youth> [Accessed January 26, 2023].

Warrington, M. & Kiragu, S. (2012). "It makes more sense to educate a boy": Girls 'against the odds' in Kajiado, Kenya. *International journal of educational development*. 32(2):301-309. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.05.004>

Weybright, E.H., Caldwell, L.L., Xie, H., Wegner, L. & Smith, E.A. (2017). Predicting secondary school dropout among South African adolescents: A survival analysis approach. *South African Journal of Education*. 37(2):1-11. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v37n2a1353>

Wood, L., Kiperman, S., Esch, R.C., Leroux, A.J. & Truscott, S.D. (2017). Predicting dropout using student-and school-level factors: An ecological perspective. *School Psychology Quarterly*. 32(1):35-49. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000152>

Yah, C.S., Ndlovu, S., Kutuywayo, A., Naidoo, N., Mahuma, T. & Mullick, S. (2020). The prevalence of pregnancy among adolescent girls and young women across the Southern African development community economic hub: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Health promotion perspectives*. 10(4):325-337. <https://doi.org/10.34172/hpp.2020.51>

Zulaika, G., Kwaro, D., Nyothach, E., Wang, D., Zielinski-Gutierrez, E., Mason, L., Eleveld, A., Chen, T. et al. (2019). Menstrual cups and cash transfer to reduce sexual and reproductive harm and school dropout in adolescent schoolgirls: study protocol of a cluster-randomised controlled trial in western Kenya. *BMC Public Health*. 19:1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7594-3>

PART B: RESEARCH PROTOCOL

A qualitative study exploring attitudes and perceptions of high school retention and dropout in adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in South Africa

Introduction

Education is the strongest predictor of positive health outcomes for youth worldwide (Lansford et al., 2016; Roman et al., 2022; Santelli et al., 2015; Weybright et al., 2017). Yet globally it was estimated that 200 million adolescents were not in school in 2018 (UNESCO, 2023). Although there are significant differences in school dropout rates internationally, in general, school dropout results in poor economic, social, psychological and physical health (Weybright et al., 2017). To date, there is a paucity of research to assist in the understanding of the factors which facilitate the school retention and completion of adolescents.

School dropout is considered a long, incremental process of disengagement from schooling (Cham et al., 2014; Hartnack, 2017; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021; Runhare et al., 2021). Research reports that school dropout is not a once off event, nor the cause of a single risk factor but a multidimensional process caused by the convergence of several factors (Hartnack, 2017; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021; Runhare et al., 2021). Research findings show more than forty different risk factors, at the individual, family, school, and community levels for poor retention, which makes the process of identification and tracking of multiple, concurrent risk factors difficult (Hartnack, 2017). A greater understanding is needed about how these risk factors interact and when they converge because the process of disengagement does not occur in isolation (Hartnack, 2017).

School dropout may be referred to as withdrawal from school or attrition, but simply it is those who have left school without obtaining the minimum qualification. In South Africa this qualification is the national senior certificate, written at the end of Grade 12 (Hartnack, 2017). In 2015, it was estimated that only 52% of the age-appropriate Grade 12 learners in South Africa remained enrolled. Most of those who dropped out did so in Grades 10 and 11 (Hartnack, 2017). In South Africa school dropout rates increase sharply after the age of 16 years (Stoner et al., 2019). High school retention and dropout rates have been problematic for the past decade, with statistics indicating a 50% drop in retention rates in South African high schools (Roman et al., 2022).

Levels of dropout in South Africa differ significantly by race, due to the injustices of apartheid, resulting in severe inequality and poor standards of education (Hartnack, 2017; Sing & Maringe, 2020). There are also significant differences in dropout by gender (Shahidul and Karim, 2015). While some research studies indicate boys are more likely to dropout of school, in South Africa adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) are more likely to do so, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged communities (UNESCO, 2023, Mokoena and van Breda, 2021). Girls also dropout of school earlier when compared to boys, which highlights unique factors which impact AGYW differently (Shahidul and Karim, 2015).

Their disengagement and dropout from school is a public health concern, particularly in a country like South Africa where 25 percent of its AGYW, aged 15-24 years are HIV infected (Yah et al., 2020).

School dropout poses several complex long-term challenges for female adolescents (Mokoena & van Breda, 2021). Literature reports several negative health outcomes for AGYW who dropout of school, including but not limited to, increased sexual risk behaviours, adolescent unwanted or unintended pregnancy, increased risk of sexually transmitted infections and HIV infections, which could result in morbidity or premature mortality (George et al., 2020; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021; Roman et al., 2022; SAMRC, 2022; Stoner et al., 2019). AGYW are at a greater risk of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted infection (STI) due to biological, cultural, religious, socio-economic and structural factors which make them more susceptible to infection than their male counterparts (George et al., 2020; Murewanhema et al., 2022). Retention and the completion of high school will improve general health outcomes by reducing the risk of HIV and STI acquisition in AGYW (Stoner et al., 2017).

Higher levels of education have shown to greatly reduce the prevalence and incidence of HIV in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Lewis et al., 2022; Santelli et al., 2015; Stoner et al., 2017; Zulaika et al., 2019). As a result of decreased leisure time to engage in sexual activity (Stoner et al., 2017). Information and health education also received in school increased AGYW knowledge about HIV, STIs and the risk of pregnancy. The school environment also provides a protective barrier of social support which fosters risk reduction and avoidance (Lewis et al., 2022; Santelli et al., 2015). Therefore, the importance of fostering school retention and completion in AGYW to decrease poor health outcomes in this vulnerable population group is key (Lewis et al., 2022; Stoner et al., 2017).

Rationale

Historical South African research on school dropout has predominantly focused on learner performance and the school system at the expense of a more holistic focus on the factors which converge and contribute to school dropout (Hartnack, 2017). Due to the different causes of school dropout and the mediating factors which may increase school retention on individual, family, school and community levels, context specific research is required.

Literature also revealed that recommendations are predominantly based on strategies and interventions from international studies which highlighted the need for a greater understanding of both phenomena within the South African context (Hartnack, 2017). The knowledge gap is also reflected in the lack of understanding of the causes of school dropout specifically in AGYW, which qualitative data may illuminate (Mokoena & van Breda, 2021).

This study aims to provide a holistic understanding of the complexity of reasons of school dropout and retention within a small sample. Due to the increased risk of school dropout in AGYW and their predisposed vulnerability to poor health outcomes as a result, qualitative research is needed to understand their subjective experiences and the factors which influence school retention and dropout in

South Africa. This qualitative analysis, using a national research study, hopes to contribute to the knowledge gap within the South African context.

Research question and objectives

Aim: To understand and explore high school dropout and retention among AGYW in 5 South African communities.

- To explore AGYW's perception of and attitudes towards high school completion and dropout
- To understand the factors that may contribute to high school retention or dropout among AGYW
- To explore key stakeholder perceptions of factors which influence high school completion or dropout among AGYW

Literature review

The literature review below is structured according to the research aim and objectives of this study. It will focus on research exploring both school dropout and retention of AGYW in Africa. Although there is a dearth of literature on school dropout regardless of gender internationally, there is a scarcity of qualitative research which specifically focuses on exploring the factors that may cause school dropout or those facilitating school retention and completion, particularly in AGYW in Africa (Mokoena & van Breda, 2021). Historical literature noted the lack of qualitative data which explore and seek to understand the factors which foster the retention of learners in school (Hunt, 2008). The knowledge gap remains, qualitatively little is known of why AGYW stay in school in Africa. Yet studies reviewed have revealed several interrelated social, economic, school and cultural factors which converge and influence both retention and dropout in AGYW.

Qualitative and quantitative research studies in Africa have reported that AGYW did not see the value or lacked an interest in completing their schooling, based on a subjective disconnect between student life and the real world (Chaponda, 2016; Oruko et al., 2015; Uche, 2013). Findings in Zambia and Nigeria indicated that AGYW revealed a lack of interest or found no value in completing their education, as they experienced a lack of access to tertiary institutions or trade schools (Chaponda, 2016; Uche, 2013). They saw themselves to be most likely at home even if they were academically strong (Chaponda, 2016). This was also indicated by parents and teachers in Malawi and Zambia who expressed that AGYW lost interest in their education because there were no job prospects for them to strive toward (Chaponda, 2016; Kamwendo, 2014). Teachers in Namibia and Zambia expressed the need for AGYW to be exposed to educated women in their local communities which they felt would motivate, inspire and retain AGYW in school for future generations and development (Chaponda, 2016; Karondo, 2018).

In Kenya and Zambia, negative parental views of AGYW's education influenced their daughters' outlook and perceived value of secondary schooling, as parents placed greater value on marriage and viewed the education of their daughters as a waste of time and resources (Chaponda, 2016; Oruko et

al., 2015). This was corroborated by the AGYW, who expressed that parental views of marriage were more important than their education (Chaponda, 2016; Oruko et al., 2015). Yet qualitative studies conducted in rural Kenya with AGYW reported contradictory findings (Mason et al., 2022). There seemed to be a shift in attitude in recently published literature from one which was negative to a more positive stance on the value of education when compared to previous generations of AGYW (Mason et al., 2022; Oruko et al., 2015).

Qualitative findings in Ghana and Namibia of AGYW who had dropped out regretted the decision (Amina, 2015; Karondo, 2018). Retrospectively they understood the value of completing their secondary schooling when they compared themselves to their peers, who were now employed in reputable professions and were able to provide for their families (Amina, 2015). AGYW felt they had disappointed parents, who would only provide and financially support siblings who were still in school, which they shared increased the retention of AGYW in school or motivated those who dropped out to return (Karondo, 2018).

Qualitative and quantitative literature has revealed that poverty is the key driver of school dropout in AGYW in Africa. Research revealed other common risk factors and experiences of AGYW in different settings in Africa, but poverty seemed to be the significant underlying cause, catalysing a series of events and or behaviours which eventually led to school dropout (Chaponda, 2016; Karondo, 2018; Mason et al., 2022; Oruko et al., 2015; Shahidul & Karim, 2015; Uche, 2013). As qualitative findings of teachers in Namibia and Kenya revealed, the economic status of parents had the greatest influence on the retention of AGYW and that poverty was the leading cause of early marriage, pregnancy and eventual school dropout of AGYW (Karondo, 2018; Mackatiani, Mackatiani & Owino, 2022). Linked to economic factors, school fees played a significant role in school dropout for girls in South Africa when compared to their male peers (Shahidul & Karim, 2015). Consistent with qualitative studies conducted in Kenya, Tanzania and Ghana, which indicated a greater likelihood of female scholars dropping out of high school due to school fees when compared to their male peers (Amina, 2015; Oruko et al., 2015; Rugimbana & Mwila, 2023; Shahidul & Karim, 2015). The impact on attendance was not solely on the cost of school fees but also the added financial burden of school uniforms, books and other essential items which respondents shared, parents could ill afford (Oruko et al., 2015; Rugimbana & Mwila, 2023). AGYW in Zambia and Kenya were vulnerable to becoming dependent on sexual transactional relationships to meet their unmet needs for essential items, namely sanitary pads, face cream or underwear (Chaponda, 2016; Oruko et al., 2015). Which ultimately placed them at a greater risk of HIV infection, pregnancy and eventual school dropout.

Literature revealed that parental investment in education was gender biased, parents weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of educating their daughters, this was particularly evident in socio-economically disadvantaged homes in Africa (Chaponda, 2016; Oruko et al., 2015; Shahidul & Karim,

2015). As an investment into parents' future wellbeing and care, they preferred to educate their sons (Shahidul & Karim, 2015). As indicated in qualitative findings of AGYW in Zambia and Kenya, when resources were limited in households, parents would pay for their sons' education and not their daughters (Chaponda, 2016; Oruko et al., 2015). Research indicated that girls took on more household duties and experienced increased disadvantage due to unequal gender roles which affected their school performance (Chaponda, 2016; Shahidul & Karim, 2015). Girls shared that they take on more household chores and responsibilities than boys the same age and were more likely to dropout of school (Chaponda, 2016).

Qualitative studies in South Africa and Namibia highlighted the barriers to school completion for AGYW after the birth of their children (Karondo, 2018; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021). Studies conducted in South Africa nearly a decade ago revealed the problem of adolescent pregnancy and associated risk of school dropout and the subsequent barriers to school completion, with not much change in recent articles as indicated in the qualitative and quantitative studies conducted in Mpumalanga, Gauteng and the North West provinces of South Africa (Karabo & Ayiga, 2013; Mnguni, 2014; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021).

Female students also revealed other biological factors including menstruation, which increased absenteeism and lead to eventual school dropout in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Kenya, as frequent absences were a precursor to permanent dropout (Mason et al., 2022; Oruko et al., 2015; Rugimbana & Mwila, 2023; Shahidul & Karim, 2015).

School environments and teacher attitudes also played a vital role in the dropout of AGYW (Duby et al., 2022; Shahidul & Karim, 2015). Research in sub-Saharan Africa indicated a gender bias, teachers believed boys were academically stronger than their female peers, paid more attention to boys and viewed girls as early school leavers, who would exit the school system to marry (Kamwendo, 2014; Shahidul & Karim, 2015). These beliefs and behaviours toward AGYW negatively impacted their educational experience and thus retention and completion of school (Kamwendo, 2014; Shahidul & Karim, 2015). In Zambia, South Africa and Namibia, qualitative findings of AGYW revealed that negative, judgmental teacher attitudes caused AGYW to dropout of school (Chaponda, 2016; Karondo, 2018; Mnguni, 2014; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021). School-related gender-based violence (GBV) also contributed to school dropout of AGYW, physical, verbal, emotional and psychological harassment, whilst at school or travelling to and from school, perpetrated by both peers and teachers in South Africa, Tanzania, Malawi and Kenya (Kavulu, 2013; Robertson, Cassity & Kunkwenzu, 2017; Rugimbana & Mwila, 2023; Tabane, 2014). School environments, a lack of privacy (if toilets were shared or too closely located), basic sanitation and or harassment at school caused a greater likelihood of AGYW dropping out of school (Mackatiani, Mackatiani & Owino, 2022; Shahidul & Karim, 2015).

Qualitative research conducted in South Africa highlighted the positive impact of female teachers on AGYW's schooling (Inglis, 2009). Research conducted in South Africa, Namibia and Kenya revealed consistent findings on the importance of supportive student-teacher relationships in AGYW's educational attainment (Duby et al., 2022; Karondo, 2018; Kavulu, 2013). Female teachers who acted as strong role models, who motivated, inspired and mentored their female scholars had a positive impact on the retention of AGYW in school (Karondo, 2018; Kavulu, 2013).

In Ghana, Namibia and Kenya, AGYW voiced the need for increased awareness on the importance of girls' education, specifically aimed at parents (Amina, 2015; Karondo, 2018; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). AGYW who had dropped out and returned to school in the Kavango West region of Namibia, revealed the important role parents or key individuals played in their retention, consistent with qualitative findings in Kenya (Karondo, 2018; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). These adults motivated AGYW to continue their schooling, even under difficult circumstances. Parents who had higher educational levels and who understood the socio-economic advantage of high school completion, were also found to be more advantageous in the retention of AGYW in school (Karondo, 2018).

Although findings from key stakeholders were varied on the factors which influence the retention and completion of secondary school of AGYW, a common thread was the importance of collaboration, parental engagement and the wider community's support (Kamwendo, 2014; Nuamah, 2020; Rugimbana & Mwila, 2023). As indicated in multiple studies (qualitative and mixed) in South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, and Namibia, key stakeholders expressed the importance of community participation and the positive impact of collaboration with parents to increase AGYWs' retention and completion of school (Chaponda, 2016; Kamwendo, 2014; Karondo, 2018; Nuamah, 2020; Rugimbana & Mwila, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

To explore the attitudes and understanding of school retention, completion and dropout in AGYW, the social ecological theory will be used, as it provides a holistic framework for the analysis of the study. This is a theory which centres on the individual, nested within concentric circles of different systems (Kilanowski, 2017). The theory posits that environmental factors influence an individual's identity development and life choices (Wood et al., 2017). The closest influence on the individual, the microsystem, encompasses the direct interactions and relationships of the individual's immediate surroundings. The second circle indicates the mesosystem which extends beyond immediate interactions but is inclusive of the direct contact the individual has at school, church and with the surrounding community. The outer circles represent the exosystem (of community context and social networks) and the macrosystem (societal, religious and cultural values). Although the outer circles do not have direct contact with the individual, they exert both negative and positive forces on concentric circles within and thus on the individual (Kilanowski, 2017).

The application of the social-ecological theoretical framework to this research question aims to bring a greater understanding of AGYW's subjective experiences within these complex, multi-layered, interactive systems. As literature reports, school dropout (and presumably retention and school completion) is a multidimensional process which the multileveled framework of the social ecological theory may assist in explaining (Wood et al., 2017).

Methodology

This qualitative research study is nested within a larger study titled HERStory, which was an evaluation of a South African HIV prevention intervention for AGYW between August 2018 and March 2019 (SAMRC, 2023). The HERStory qualitative component provided in-depth knowledge of the intervention's successes and failures as well as the social contexts and lived experiences of AGYW between 15 and 24 years of age (Duby et al., 2020). Funded by the Global Fund, this multi-model intervention aimed to reduce HIV incidence, teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence, increase economic opportunities and retention of AGYW attending and not attending school. The comprehensive combination intervention included biomedical, structural and socio-behavioural components (SAMRC, 2023).

The different components of the intervention were aimed at specific cohorts of AGYW. The Keeping Girls in School (KGIS) programme was a school-based intervention directed to support and identify female learners (aged 14 – 18 years) who were at risk of dropping out of school early. The intervention provided homework support, health education, career guidance and home visits encouraging those who had left to return to school (Verwoerd, 2020). The Rise Young Women's Clubs (RYWC) was an intervention aimed at girls aged 15 – 24 years, of AGYW in secondary school, those who had left school or in post-secondary education. Recipients were exposed to behaviour change counselling, life skills and empowerment activities (Duby et al., 2020). As well as a Teen Parenting Program, which was inclusive of the Child Protection Programme, Health and Welfare Jamborees and Community Dialogues on Gender Norms (Verwoerd, 2020). Soul Buddy Clubs, was aimed at both boys and girls aged 10 – 14 years, which provided in school peer education. However, this cohort was not included in the qualitative component of the study as recipients were younger than the stipulated eligibility criteria of 15- 24 years of age (Duby et al., 2020).

These interventions provided supportive environments for AGYW, parents and school governing bodies, including mass media interventions. Including HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), TB (Tuberculosis), SRH (Sexual and Reproductive Health) services for boys at risk of abuse, victims of abuse and perpetrators, were provided in the specific districts too (Duby et al., 2020).

Study design

The HERStory evaluation used a mixed-methods research design. Complementing the quantitative data, the qualitative component provided rich interpretation and understanding of the different respondent experiences (SAMRC, 2023). This study seeks to further analyse the qualitative data of the national study, with reference to the retention, completion and or school dropout of AGYW.

Study sites

The qualitative component was conducted in five purposively selected South African districts, characterised by HIV prevalence and high rates of pregnancy, based on the geospatial mapping of HIV hot spots and antenatal statistics in South Africa. The provinces included the Western Cape Province (City of Cape Town), Mpumalanga (Gert Sibanda), Northwest (Bojanala), Eastern Cape (Nelson Mandela Bay) and KwaZulu Natal (Uthungulu) (Duby et al., 2020). Districts selected were a mix of urban, semi-urban and rural (Duby et al., 2022).

Study population

The study population included AGYW intervention participants and non-participants (aged 15 – 24 years), as well as parents and caregivers of AGYW, teachers in school which implemented the interventions, club facilitators of both KGIS and Rise Clubs, community leaders, male peers of AGYW (aged 18 – 24 years), implementers of the intervention and programme designers (Duby et al., 2020).

Sample

Purposively selected, participants were sampled from selected schools within each study district (Duby et al., 2022). The sample consisted of 237 AGYW aged 15-24 years, 177 were in the 15-19 years age group and 60 were in the 20 – 24 years age group (Duby et al., 2022). Two schools within each district were purposively selected from a list of schools implementing the intervention, the Rise Clubs and KGIS programmes. As well as one out-of-school Rise Club, of AGYW currently not enrolled in schools (Duby et al., 2020). Key informants interviewed included 7 parents, 10 teachers, 38 male peers, 6 community leaders, 14 intervention club facilitators and 12 intervention implementers (Duby et al., 2020).

The sample of teachers included were those who liaised with coordinators in the school-based intervention, as well as teachers involved in both teaching Life Orientation and in non-academic extracurricular activities (Duby et al., 2022). Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were divided according to affiliation/membership of participants to specific clubs. As well as AGYW who were not members of clubs and programmes. FGD groups were also stratified according to age (15- 19 years and 10 – 24 years). Groups were no larger than 6-10 participants and facilitated by a moderator and assistant note taker (Duby et al., 2020).

Transcripts within the larger qualitative sample will be selected by utilising the guided code reports used in the preliminary analysis. Transcripts are to be selected based on word/phrase searches within the data item which speak to the research question and the objectives such as ‘dropout’, ‘matriculate’, ‘stay in school’, ‘go to school’, ‘leave school’, ‘finish school’ etc. These transcripts which mention school related issues will be analysed further.

Recruitment

All eligible participants were recruited by research assistants (RAs) in schools and communities within the respective districts. Formal letters, requesting permission to conduct the study at the school were sent out. Once permission was received, from the school principal, arrangements were made for participants to do the IDIs (In-depth Interviews) and FGDs with the relevant teacher/personnel. In the community, intervention implementers assisted with contact details of eligible participants. Arrangements were also made beforehand by the RA, to conduct the interviews outside of school with invited participants (Duby et al., 2020).

Data collection procedures

Data collection included 110 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 32 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 237 AGYW, 7 parents, 10 teachers, 38 male peers, 6 community leaders, 14 intervention club facilitators and 12 intervention implementers (Duby et al., 2020). Trained female researchers conducted IDIs of 20 – 40min and FGDs, 40 – 90 min in length, with respondents in English, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Setswana or siSwati (Duby et al., 2022). IDIs and FGDs were semi-structured, followed topic guides and used open ended questioning to explore respondent subjective experiences (Duby et al., 2020). Key issues in the topic guide which related to AGYW’s school experiences and future plans, were collected. These questions focused specifically on the hindrances and facilitators of AGYW retention and completion of high school and their perceived support (Duby et al., 2022). These included all AGYW, parents, teachers, male peers, implementer, community leaders and facilitator perspectives.

All in-depth interviews and FGDs took place in private rooms or classrooms, usually after school or during break times. In the in-depth interviews, the interviewer or research assistant would first confirm the eligibility of the respondent and then complete the written informed consent. A unique participant ID number was then assigned to each enrolled participant before conducting the interview. Demographic forms were either administered before or after interviews (Verwoerd, 2020).

Before FGD discussions began, informed consent and the administration of demographic forms were completed. Participants in the FGDs chose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Rules of conduct were established and discussed with participants, ensuring all participants understood operational guidelines, issues of confidentiality and mutual participant etiquette. FGDs were facilitated in rooms which

comfortably accommodated all participants and ensured that the predominant language of the group was spoken. The facilitator used an ice breaker to start the discussions and then followed the topic guide. The FGD guides were semi-structured, which accommodated rich, meaningful discussions and allowed the facilitator to explore and probe individual responses, which generated themes (Verwoerd, 2020).

All IDIs and FGDs were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim into their original language, then translated into English. This 3-step process was reviewed, by the original interviewer, at each stage to ensure accuracy. The original language transcript remained the primary data source for cross-referencing and checking to ensure meaning and translation was correct, once translated into English (Duby et al., 2020).

Secondary data analysis

The qualitative data will be analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method of analysis used to identify, analyse and report patterns within data. This is a flexible and iterative process which describes and organises data in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A deductive and inductive approach in the development of a codebook will be utilised (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019). Initial codes (applied to pieces of text in the data item) will be used during the process of familiarisation of the transcripts, the initial literature review and interview guides (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019). It is this initial use of preliminary codes (a deductive approach) that provides a more focused and efficient analysis of the data (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019). Similar codes are to be merged into subthemes and then broader themes, which are to be continuously added to, removed or refined, until no new data is generated during this process of reading and re-reading the dataset. The preliminary codebook will undergo several changes, refinement, and expansion, until no new codes and or subthemes/themes are generated into the analytical framework (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019).

Nvivo 14 software will be used to upload the selected transcripts, to ensure systematic coding and data organisation in the analysis process (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019). The software will facilitate the clustering, comparison and sorting of codes into subthemes and eventual broader themes as they emerged from the data. Nvivo 14 will also facilitate the easy retrieval of data in the analysis process (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019).

Rigour

All primary researchers and research assistants were female and had received extensive training on the study protocol, study design and research tools. Both female interviewers were experienced, qualified social science researchers who were fluent in the predominant languages spoken in the study sites (Duby et al., 2020). The secondary data analysis will be conducted by a female researcher, qualified in the social sciences and experienced in working with AGYW.

As cited by Nowell et al., (2017), Lincoln and Guba (1985) report that the trustworthiness of a study is based on the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of a study. Rigour and the dependability of the study will be increased by keeping a systematic and detailed audit trail of the analytic process (Szabo & Strang, 1997). Systematic recording of the analysis process and any changes to it will be recorded to increase its credibility and transparency in the analytical process (Szabo & Strang, 1997). This ensures that the analysis is clearly documented, logical and traceable (Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability will be increased by linking quotations to explanations and meanings made from the primary data/transcripts (Szabo & Strang, 1997). A reflexive diary or journal will be used to record personal bias, thoughts and feelings of the researcher, to ensure researcher bias does not influence the study.

Triangulation of analysts and peer debriefing will take place in consultation with the qualitative principal investigator (who is co-supervisor) and the lead supervisor, to increase the credibility and fit of the research findings (Szabo & Strang, 1997). These sessions will facilitate greater understanding of context and decisions made as part of the primary research process.

Data Management and data access

A confidentiality agreement was signed by the researcher and the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and study sites. All personal identifying codes (assigned to participants and study sites) will be safely stored in a password secure word document by the researcher. The researcher does not have any personal information of the respondents in the study. The only risk to this study is the access and viewing of electronic transcripts. All transcripts and folders require permission to access and or view and is securely stored in a digital google drive. Data will be stored until final analysis and submission of the mini-dissertation is complete.

Ethical consideration and approval

This is a secondary qualitative study of the HERStory study, a large mixed methods evaluative study of a combination HIV prevention intervention for AGYW. The primary data extracted from the HERStory study was approved by the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). Application for ethical approval for the current study will be processed with the University of Cape Town Health Sciences Faculty and the Ethics Committee for the School of Public Health and Family Medicine at the University of Cape Town.

The HERStory study informed all participants of the purpose and process of the study, then requested and facilitated informed, written consent. Those younger than 18 years provided written assent only once their parents/guardians had signed the consent forms (Duby et al., 2020).

An agreement of confidentiality was signed between the principal investigator and researcher. To ensure the confidentiality and protection of identifying information of participants, study sites and procedures. The ethical risk to this study is low because it does not entail primary research and data analysis. Participants were anonymised and therefore at low risk of being identified in this secondary data analysis (Duby et al., 2020).

Secondary data analysis presents a limitation in the lack of control in reducing researcher bias in the collection, generation, transcribing or recording of information in the primary data set. However, this limitation is decreased by engagement with researchers from the primary study as is intended in this secondary data analysis process (Szabo & Strang, 1997).

Reimbursement

The HERStory study provided reimbursement (supermarket voucher worth R50) and refreshments to all participants at interviews. Transport reimbursement was also provided to participants who had to make alternate transport arrangements or for those who had specially travelled in to be interviewed (Duby et al., 2020).

Referrals

If participants requested the need for psychosocial support/health care, referral was made by a private sector social worker, provided by the SAMRC, ensuring appropriate referral and support (Duby et al., 2020).

Budget and costs of current study (Secondary Analysis)

There are no personal costs incurred for the purpose of this study.

References

- Amina, J.A. (2015). Challenges Faced by Girls who Dropout from Senior High School: the Voices of Sixty Dropout Girls in the Upper West Region of Ghana. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. 5(6):150 - 160. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Amina-Jangu-Alhassan/publication/341279188_Challenges_Faced_by_Girls_who_Dropout_from_Senior_High_School_The_Voices_of_Sixty_Dropout_Girls_in_the_Upper_West_Region_of_Ghana/links/5eb80424a6fdcc1f1dcb3c50/Challenges-Faced-by-Girls-who-Dropout-from-Senior-High-School-The-Voices-of-Sixty-Dropout-Girls-in-the-Upper-West-Region-of-Ghana.pdf.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 3(2):77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cham, H., Hughes, J.N., West, S.G. & Im, M.H. (2014). Assessment of adolescents' motivation for educational attainment. *Psychological Assessment*. 26(2):642. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260483340_Assessment_of_Adolescents'_Motivation_for_Educational_Attainment.
- Chaponda, C. (2016). Persistent School Drop-outs Among Girls in Selected Secondary Schools of Nakonde District in Zambia. [dissertation/master's thesis]. [Zambia(Lusaka): The University of Zambia]. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Persistent-School-drop-outs-among-Girls-in-selected-Chaponda/91c7268c9d572813db8ca7f087084341096d3621>.
- Duby, Z., Maruping, K., Jonas, K., Appollis McClinton, T., Vanleeuw, L. & 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>
- Duby, Z., Mathews, C., Jonas, K., Maruping, K., Appollis McClinton, T., Dietrich, J., Harries, J. & Lovette, A. (2020). An evaluation of a South African combination HIV prevention intervention for adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). South African Medical Research Council. <https://www.samrc.ac.za/research-reports/herstory-evaluation-south-african-combination-hiv-prevention-intervention>
- George, G., Cawood, C., Puren, A., Khanyile, D., Gerritsen, A., Govender, K., Beckett, S., Glenshaw, M. et al. (2020). Evaluating DREAMS HIV prevention interventions targeting adolescent girls and young women in high HIV prevalence districts in South Africa: protocol for a cross-sectional study. *BMC women's health*. 20(1):1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-019-0875-2>
- Hartnack, A. (2017). Background document and review of key South African and international literature on school dropout. Cape Town. <https://dgmt.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/School-Dropout-Background-Paper-Final.pdf>.
- Hunt, F. (2008). Dropping out from school: A cross country review of literature. Consortium for Research into Educational Access Transition and Equity (CREATE), Working Paper No. 16. Brighton: University of Sussex. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/44841614_Dropping_out_from_school_a_cross-country_review_of_literature
- Inglis, D. (2009). Exploring the dropout phenomenon in a secondary school situated in a high-risk community. [thesis/master's dissertation]. [Cape Town(Stellenbosch):University of Stellenbosch]. <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/items/4780e725-edfe-40de-964f-664ce0e5e95d>
- Kamwendo, M. (2014). Malawian teachers' perceptions of gender and achievement in the context of girls' underachievement. *Girlhood Studies*. 7(2):79-96. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2014.070206>
- Karabo, M. & Ayiga, N. (2013). Factors influencing high dropout rates of girl child from education: A case study of black women in North West Province, South Africa. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jjsda/article/view/90253>
- Karondo, J. (2018). Improving the retention of girls in Schools: A case study of piloted senior secondary schools in the Kavango West region. [thesis/master's dissertation]. [Namibia: University of Namibia]. <https://repository.unam.edu.na/server/api/core/bitstreams/63e1bc5a-aaac-4563-bb99-9aaab3029ea6/content>

- Kavulu, N.M. (2013). School based factors influencing girls' retention in secondary schools; a case of Dadaab refugee camp Garissa county Kenya.[thesis/master's dissertation]. [Kenya (Nairobi): University of Nairobi]. Available: <http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/handle/11295/56389>
- Kilanowski, J.F. (2017). Breadth of the socio-ecological model. *Journal of Agromedicine*. 22(4):295-297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2017.1358971>
- Lansford, J.E., Dodge, K.A., Pettit, G.S. & Bates, J.E. (2016). A public health perspective on school dropout and adult outcomes: A prospective study of risk and protective factors from age 5 to 27 years. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 58(6):652-658. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.01.014>
- Lewis, L., Kharsany, A.B., Humphries, H., Maughan-Brown, B., Beckett, S., Govender, K., Cawood, C., Khanyile, D. et al. (2022). HIV incidence and associated risk factors in adolescent girls and young women in South Africa: A population-based cohort study. *PLoS One*. 17(12):e0279289. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0279289>
- Mackatiani, C.I., Mackatiani, N.I. & Owino, M.A. (2022). Transition in education: Perspectives on girls' drop-out rates in secondary schools in Kenya. *London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*. 22(1):41-51. https://journalspress.com/LJRHSS_Volume22/Transition-in-Education-Perspectives-on-Girls-Drop-Out-Rates-in-Secondary-Schools-in-Kenya.pdf
- Mason, L., Zulaika, G., van Eijk, A.M., Fwaya, E., Obor, D., Phillips-Howard, P. & Nyothach, E. (2022). 'You don't have to sleep with a man to get how to survive': Girl's perceptions of an intervention study aimed at improving sexual and reproductive health and schooling outcomes. *PLoS Global Public Health*. 2(10):e0000987. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000987>
- Mnguni, B.I. (2014). Investigating the causes of learner dropout at secondary schools in Johannesburg South, Gauteng. [thesis/master's dissertation]. [South Africa: University of South Africa]. https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/18722/dissertation_mnguni_ib.pdf;sequence=1
- Mokoena, P. & van Breda, A.D. (2021). School dropout among female learners in rural Mpumalanga, South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*. 41(3). <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v41n3a1842>
- Murewanhema, G., Musuka, G., Moyo, P., Moyo, E. & Dzinamarira, T. (2022). HIV and adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa: A call for expedited action to reduce new infections. *International Journal of Infectious Diseases Regions*. 5:30-32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijregi.2022.08.009>
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. & Moules, N.J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International journal of qualitative methods*. 16(1):1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Nuamah, S.A. (2020). *The Limits of Individual-Level Factors for Ghanaian and South African Girls' Learning*. Springer International Publishing, 171-184. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21092-2_8
- Oruko, K., Nyothach, E., Zielinski-Gutierrez, E., Mason, L., Alexander, K., Vulule, J., Laserson, K.F. & Phillips-Howard, P.A. (2015). 'He is the one who is providing you with everything so whatever he says is what you do': A Qualitative Study on Factors Affecting Secondary Schoolgirls' Dropout in Rural Western Kenya. *PLoS One*. 10(12):e0144321. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0144321>
- Roberts, K., Dowell, A. & Nie, J.-B. (2019). Attempting rigour and replicability in thematic analysis of qualitative research data; a case study of codebook development. *BMC medical research methodology*. 19:1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0707-y>
- Robertson, S., Cassity, E. & Kunkwenzu, E. (2017). Girls' primary and secondary education in Malawi: Sector review. https://research.acer.edu.au/monitoring_learning/31/
- Roman, N.V., Davidse, P.E., Human-Hendricks, A., Butler-Kruger, L. & Sonn, I.K. (2022). School Dropout: Intentions, Motivations and Self-Efficacy of a Sample of South Africa Youth. *Youth*. 2(2):126-137. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth2020010>

Rugimbana, C.E. & Mwila, P.M. (2023). School Dropout among Girls: Reasons and Measures in Community Secondary Schools in Temeke Municipality, Tanzania. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*. 43(3):47-61.<https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2023/v43i3943>

Runhare, T., Ouda, J.B., Vele, M.T. & Mudzielwana, N. (2021). School–community interventions to curb learner dropout: The perceptions of key education stakeholders in a rural South African school neighbourhood. *International Review of Education*. 67:591-610.<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09910-0>

South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). (2022). “We can’t share things with our teachers”: narratives of mistrust and disconnect between South African female learners and their teachers. <https://www.samrc.ac.za/sites/default/files/attachments/2022-11/HSRUTeachersBrief.pdf> [Accessed June 23, 2023]

South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). (2023). HERStory: An evaluation of a South African combination HIV prevention intervention for adolescent girls and young women.https://www.samrc.ac.za/research-reports/herstory-evaluation-south-african-combination-hiv-prevention-intervention?type=research-report&menu=intramural-research-units&menu-item=health_systems [Accessed June 23, 2023]

Santelli, J.S., Mathur, S., Song, X., Huang, T.J., Wei, Y., Lutalo, T., Nalugoda, F., Gray, R. et al. (2015). Rising school enrollment and declining HIV and pregnancy risk among adolescents in Rakai District, Uganda, 1994–2013. *Global Social Welfare*. 2:87-103.<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-015-0029-x>

Shahidul, S. & Karim, A. (2015). Factors contributing to school dropout among the girls: A review of literature. *European Journal of research and reflection in educational sciences*. 3(2):25-36. <https://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/FACTORS-CONTRIBUTING-TO-SCHOOL-DROPOUT-AMONG-THE-GIRLS.pdf>

Sing, N. & Maringe, F. (2020). “Learner dropout in South African schools: Epistemological and management challenges,” In *The education systems of Africa*. K.S. Adeyemo, ed. 1-15.https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43042-9_22-1

Stoner, M.C., Pettifor, A., Edwards, J.K., Aiello, A.E., HALPERN, C., Julien, A., Selin, A., Twine, R. et al. (2017). The effect of school attendance and school dropout on incident HIV and HSV-2 among young women in rural South Africa enrolled in HPTN 068. *AIDS (London, England)*. 31(15): 2127–2134.<https://doi.org/10.1097/QAD.0000000000001584>

Stoner, M.C., Rucinski, K.B., Edwards, J.K., Selin, A., Hughes, J.P., Wang, J., Agyei, Y., Gomez-Olive, F.X. et al. (2019). The relationship between school dropout and pregnancy among adolescent girls and young women in South Africa: A HPTN 068 analysis. *Health Education & Behavior*. 46(4):559-568. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198119831755>

Szabo, V. & Strang, V.R. (1997). Secondary analysis of qualitative data. *Advances in nursing science*. 20(2):66-74.<https://doi.org/10.1097/00012272-199712000-00008>

Tabane, R. (2014). School Violence and the Adolescent Girl Learners’ Academic Progress in South African Schools. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. 5(10):511-515. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n10p511>

Uche, R.D. (2013). Dropout Syndrome among girls in secondary schools and human resources development in Nigeria. *Journal of Education and Practice*. 4(2):25-30. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/234633906.pdf>

UNESCO. (2023). Out-of-School Children and Youth. <https://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/out-school-children-and-youth> [Accessed January 26, 2023].

Verwoerd, W. (2020). Adolescent girls and young womens' perspectives of how their lives were impacted by participating in a combination HIV-prevention intervention in South Africa: a qualitative study.[thesis/master’s dissertation].[Cape Town: University of Cape Town]. https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11427/33031/thesis_hsf_2020_verwoerd%20wilm.pdf?sequence=4

Warrington, M. & Kiragu, S. (2012). "It makes more sense to educate a boy": Girls 'against the odds' in Kajiado, Kenya. *International journal of educational development*. 32(2):301-309.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.05.004>

Weybright, E.H., Caldwell, L.L., Xie, H., Wegner, L. & Smith, E.A. (2017). Predicting secondary school dropout among South African adolescents: A survival analysis approach. *South African Journal of Education*. 37(2):1-11. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v37n2a1353>

Wood, L., Kiperman, S., Esch, R.C., Leroux, A.J. & Truscott, S.D. (2017). Predicting dropout using student-and school-level factors: An ecological perspective. *School Psychology Quarterly*. 32(1):35-49.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000152>

Yah, C.S., Ndlovu, S., Kutwayo, A., Naidoo, N., Mahuma, T. & Mullick, S. (2020). The prevalence of pregnancy among adolescent girls and young women across the Southern African development community economic hub: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Health promotion perspectives*. 10(4):325-337.
<https://doi.org/10.34172/hpp.2020.51>

Zulaika, G., Kwaro, D., Nyothach, E., Wang, D., Zielinski-Gutierrez, E., Mason, L., Eleveld, A., Chen, T. et al. (2019). Menstrual cups and cash transfer to reduce sexual and reproductive harm and school dropout in adolescent schoolgirls: study protocol of a cluster-randomised controlled trial in western Kenya. *BMC Public Health*. 19:1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7594-3>

PART C: APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: HREC approval



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
Faculty of Health Sciences
Human Research Ethics Committee



Room 45, E-52 Old Main Building
Groote Schuur Hospital
Observatory 7925
Tel:0214066492

Email: hrec-submissions@uct.ac.za
Website: www.health.uct.ac.za/home/human-research-ethics

24 October 2023

HREC REF: 771/2023

Prof L Knight

School of Public Health & Family Medicine
Falmouth Building
Email: lucia.knight@uct.ac.za
Student: kleinhanscf@gmail.com

Dear Prof Knight

PROJECT TITLE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH-SCHOOL RETENTION AND DROPOUT IN ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN (AGYW) IN SOUTH AFRICA-SUB-STUDY LINKED TO 302/2023- (MASTERS CANDIDATE-MRS CRYSTAL KLEINHANS)

Thank you for submitting your study to the Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for review.

This will require initial SAMRC approval as the HREC approved via reciprocal process.

Please note that no research may occur without formal written HREC approval.

Please quote the HREC REF 771/2023 in all your correspondence.

Yours sincerely

PROFESSOR M BLOCKMAN
CHAIRPERSON, FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

HREC/REF:771.2023

APPENDIX 2: HREC approval



HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

18 June 2018

Prof Cathy Mathews
Health Systems Research Unit
SAMRC Cape Town

Dear Prof Mathews

Protocol ID: EC036-11/2016
Protocol title: Impact evaluation of the Global Fund Young Women and Girls (YW&G)
Intervention in ten South African districts
Meeting date: 28 May 2018

Thank you for your application to the Committee for an amendment, dated 11 May 2018 and your response dated 13 June 2018. I am pleased to inform that ethics approval is now granted for the amendment.

Wishing you well with your research.

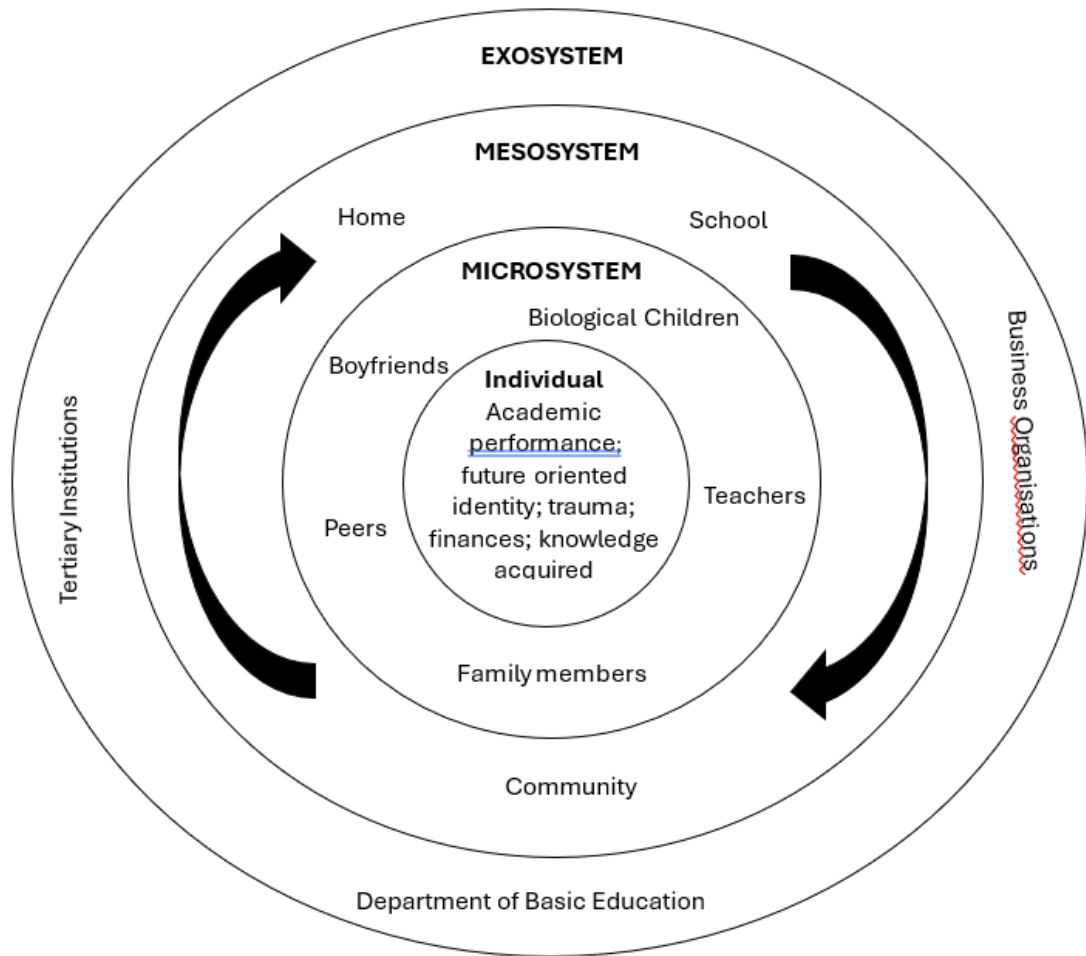
Yours sincerely

Prof Danie du Toit
Chairperson: SAMRC Human Research Ethics Committee

Members present at the meeting: Prof D du Toit (Chairperson), Adv J Early, Dr H Etheredge, Prof A Kengne, Ms M Ledwaba, Prof C Lombard, Dr AG Loxton, Mr G Makanda, Dr E Nicol, Prof C Wiysonge



APPENDIX 3: Adapted socio-ecological model



Adapted from Stanger (2011, pg.169)

APPENDIX 4: Confidentiality Agreement

HERStory Qualitative study

Confidentiality Agreement

Oct 2020

Confidentiality Agreement

Title of Research Project: HERStory 2 Process Evaluation

Overall HERStory 2 Principal Investigator: Catherine Mathews

HERStory 2 Qualitative Study Component Principal Investigator: Zoe Duby

I understand that I may obtain confidential information about the study, organisations involved, procedures, findings and study instruments. By signing this statement, I am indicating my understanding of my responsibilities to maintain confidentiality and agree to the following:

- I understand that names and any other identifying information about study sites and study procedures are completely confidential.
- I agree not to divulge, publish, or otherwise make known to unauthorized persons or to the public any information obtained in the course of this research study (forms, findings, procedures etc.) that could identify the persons who participated in the study.
- I understand that all information about study sites, procedures, type of participants enrolled is confidential. I agree not to divulge or otherwise make known to unauthorized persons any of this information.
- I understand that I am not to read information about study sites or participants, or any other confidential documents, nor ask questions of study participants for my own personal information but only to the extent and for the purpose of performing my assigned duties.
- I agree to notify the study coordinator or principal investigator immediately should I become aware of an actual breach of confidentiality or a situation, which could potentially result in a breach, whether this be on my part or on the part of another person.
- I agree to respect all members on the study team and will not divulge any information they share during meetings to any unauthorized persons (public, family, friends)

CRYSTAL KLEINHANS

Name and surname of staff member

25/11/2022

Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

Signature

Zoe Duby

Name and surname of Study Coordinator

29 Nov 2022

Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

Signature

APPENDIX 5: Signed Turnitin Report

Draft mini-thesis Crystal
Kleinhans.docx
by Crystal Kleinhans

L.Knight 10.2.2025 Approved

Submission date: 10-Feb-2025 12:28PM (UTC+0200)
Submission ID: 2584557374
File name: Draft_mini-thesis_Crystal_Kleinhans.docx (1.16M)
Word count: 17197
Character count: 103105

Draft mini-thesis Crystal Kleinhans.docx

ORIGINALITY REPORT

19% SIMILARITY INDEX	17% INTERNET SOURCES	13% PUBLICATIONS	10% STUDENT PAPERS
--------------------------------	--------------------------------	----------------------------	------------------------------

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	Submitted to Queen's University of Belfast Student Paper	6%
2	hdl.handle.net Internet Source	2%
3	open.uct.ac.za Internet Source	2%
4	stacks.cdc.gov Internet Source	1%
5	Submitted to University of Stellenbosch, South Africa Student Paper	1%
6	www.researchsquare.com Internet Source	<1%
7	Zoe Duby, Wilmé Verwoerd, Katja Isaksen, Kim Jonas et al. "I can't go to her when I have a problem': sexuality communication between South African adolescent girls and young women and their mothers", SAHARA-J: Journal of Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS, 2022 Publication	<1%
8	www.frontiersin.org Internet Source	<1%
9	repository.uwc.ac.za Internet Source	<1%
10	www.samrc.ac.za Internet Source	<1%



Article Title

First Author¹, Second Author^{2*}, Third Author^{1,2}

¹Laboratory X, Institute X, Department X, Organization X, City X, State XX (only USA, Canada and Australia), Country

²Laboratory X, Institute X, Department X, Organization X, City X, State XX (only USA, Canada and Australia), Country

*** Correspondence:**

Corresponding Author
email@uni.edu

Keywords: keyword₁, keyword₂, keyword₃, keyword₄, keyword₅. (Min.5-Max. 8)

Abstract

For full guidelines please refer to [Author Guidelines](#)

As a primary goal, the abstract should render the general significance and conceptual advance of the work clearly accessible to a broad readership. References should not be cited in the abstract. Leave the Abstract empty if your article does not require one – please see the “Article types” on every Frontiers journal page for full details.

Introduction

For **Original Research Articles**, **Clinical Trial Articles**, and **Technology Reports** the introduction should be succinct, with no subheadings. For **Case Reports** the Introduction should include symptoms at presentation, physical exams and lab results.

Article types

For requirements for a specific article type please refer to the Article Types on any Frontiers journal page. Please also refer to [Author Guidelines](#) for further information on how to organize your manuscript in the required sections or their equivalents for your field¹.

Manuscript Formatting

Headings

You may insert up to 5 heading levels into your manuscript as can be seen in “Styles” tab of this template. These formatting styles are meant as a guide, as long as the heading levels are clear, Frontiers style will be applied during typesetting.

Equations

¹ For Original Research articles, please note that the Material and Methods section can be placed in any of the following ways: before Results, before Discussion or after Discussion.

The equations should be inserted in editable format from the equation editor.

$$f(x) = a_0 + \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \left(a_n \cos \frac{n\pi x}{L} + b_n \sin \frac{n\pi x}{L} \right)$$

Figures

Frontiers requires figures to be submitted individually, in the same order as they are referred to in the manuscript. Figures will then be automatically embedded at the bottom of the submitted manuscript. Kindly ensure that each table and figure is mentioned in the text and in numerical order. Figures must be of sufficient resolution for publication. Figures which are not according to the guidelines will cause substantial delay during the production process. Figure legends should be placed at the end of the manuscript. Please see [here](#) for full Figure guidelines

Permission to reuse and Copyright

Permission must be obtained for use of copyrighted material from other sources (including the web). Please note that it is compulsory to follow figure instructions.

Tables

Tables should be inserted at the end of the manuscript. Tables must be provided in an editable format e.g., Word, Excel. Tables provided as jpeg/tiff files will **not be accepted**. Please note that very large tables (covering several pages) cannot be included in the final PDF for reasons of space. **These tables will be published as [Supplementary Material](#) on the online article page at the time of acceptance. The author will be notified during the typesetting of the final article if this is the case.**

1 Nomenclature

Resource Identification Initiative

To take part in the Resource Identification Initiative, please use the corresponding catalog number and RRID in your current manuscript. For more information about the project and for steps on how to search for an RRID, please click [here](#).

Life Science Identifiers

Life Science Identifiers (LSIDs) for ZOOBANK registered names or nomenclatural acts should be listed in the manuscript before the keywords with the following format:

urn:lsid:<Authority>:<Namespace>:<ObjectID>[:<Version>]

Additional Requirements

For additional requirements for specific article types and further information please refer to “Article types” on every Frontiers journal page.

Conflict of Interest

All financial, commercial or other relationships that might be perceived by the academic community as representing a potential conflict of interest must be disclosed. If no such relationship exists, authors will be asked to confirm the following statement:

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

The Author Contributions section is mandatory for all articles, including articles by sole authors. If an appropriate statement is not provided on submission, a standard one will be inserted during the production process. The Author Contributions statement must describe the contributions of individual authors referred to by their initials and, in doing so, all authors agree to be accountable for the content of the work. Please see [here](#) for full authorship criteria.

Funding

Details of all funding sources should be provided, including grant numbers if applicable. Please ensure to add all necessary funding information, as after publication this is no longer possible.

Acknowledgments

This is a short text to acknowledge the contributions of specific colleagues, institutions, or agencies that aided the efforts of the authors.

Reference styles

The following formatting styles are meant as a guide, as long as the full citation is complete and clear, Frontiers referencing style will be applied during typesetting.

Science, Engineering and Humanities and Social Sciences references

For articles submitted in the domains of Science, Engineering or Humanities and Social Sciences please apply Author-Year system for in-text citations. For Humanities and Social Sciences articles please include page numbers in the in-text citations

For some examples please click [here](#).

For more examples of citing other documents and general questions regarding reference style, please refer to the [Chicago Manual of Style](#).

Health, Physics and Mathematics references

For articles submitted in the domain of Health or the journals Frontiers in Physics and Frontiers in Applied Mathematics and Statistics please apply the Vancouver system for in-text citations.

In-text citations should be numbered consecutively in order of appearance in the text – identified by Arabic numerals in the parenthesis [square parenthesis for Physics and Mathematics].

For some examples please click [here](#).

For more examples of citing other documents and general questions regarding reference style, please refer to [Citing Medicine](#).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary Material should be uploaded separately on submission, if there are Supplementary Figures, please include the caption in the same file as the figure. Supplementary Material templates can be found in the Frontiers Word Templates file.

Please see the [Supplementary Material section of the Author guidelines](#) for details on the different file types accepted.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets [GENERATED/ANALYZED] for this study can be found in the [NAME OF REPOSITORY] [LINK]. Please see the “Availability of data” section of [Materials and data policies in the Author guidelines](#) for more details.