Reviewer’s report

Title: Limited effectiveness of a peer-led HIV prevention intervention in secondary schools in Rwanda: results from a non-randomized controlled trial

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Reviewer: Maretha Visser

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Review of paper: Limited effectiveness of a peer-led HIV prevention intervention in secondary schools in Rwanda

This is a thought-provoking paper on the evaluation of a peer education programme for school-going young people in Rwanda. The implementation of the programme (which is often flawed) was done well. The evaluation was well planned and many confounding variables were taken into account. Still, the peer-led intervention had limited effectiveness – when effectiveness was measured using the conventional indicators: knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

The paper was written in a critical style. The procedures used were described as it happened, and critically reviewed. The evaluation was well-planned. The sample was determined through careful calculations. The evaluation included three measurements and various variables. The inclusion of a participation score is a benefit – since previous research often blamed non-effectiveness to low levels of participation. This was also true in this research, but level of participation did not determine the outcomes.

The results were described well and the discussion raised many issues that need to be taken into account when planning, implementing and evaluating peer-led interventions, as well as other HIV prevention interventions. I think this paper provides a good evaluation and a summary of thoughts about peer-led HIV interventions that could influence future HIV prevention planning. I would really like to see this published.

Minor essential revisions

Some attention can be given to the following:

• Is it standard practice or ethical to give the names of the participating schools?
• The alpha of severity is described as relative low – it is very low and actually not acceptable to use in research (0.28!!). There are two other scales with scores round about 0.5 which is also relatively low.
• A more extensive explanation of propensity score can help the reader to understand how that was used to deal with differences at baseline.
• Comment on the complexity of data – such a differences at baseline, change in both groups and how levels of change can be compared.
Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests