



Uncovering the Roots of Substance Abuse: Teachers' insights into Precipitating Factors Among Secondary School Learners in Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract

Globalisation has brought the world closer. As a result, most goods including drugs from one continent to another have increased. Every drug available in the world is within reach and thus has led to the early access of drugs in South African schools. This study aimed to explore and describe the teacher's perceptions of precipitating factors of substance abuse by learners at Selected Schools in the Capricorn district of Limpopo Province, South Africa. A qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual research design was utilised. The schools were purposively selected based on the high percentage of learners who abuse substances and learners were conveniently sampled used to select teachers to participate in the study. The sample of 23 participants was determined by data saturation. Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews using audiotape, field notes were also taken. Data were analysed employing thematic, Tesch's method. Measures of trustworthiness were ensured. Results indicate that learners abuse substances because of peer pressure, and lack of or inadequate role models; learners feel more wise and courageous to deal with personal issues when they are under the influence and feel that substances can enhance confidence and performance. Learners who abuse drugs mostly live in households that are headed by elder brothers and sisters; parents stay away from them. Alcohol, cigarettes, inhalants and marijuana are drugs mostly used by learners at the selected high schools. The study recommends that Schools should implement substance/drug abuse policies that are easily communicated to and understood by learners. It was also recommended that the community should make sure that it deals with those adults who sell alcohol and tobacco to learners during school hours and the laws should also take its course.

Keywords

Teacher perceptions, Precipitating factors, Selected High Schools, Substance abuse

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has brought the world closer. As a result, most goods including drugs from one continent to another have increased. Every drug available in the world is within reach and thus has led to the early access of drugs in South African schools. Life orientation teachers face the challenge of assisting learners to change this behaviour (Chueng et.al, 2021). This definition concurs with WHO (2013), which also defines substance abuse as using substances continuously even with knowledge of their long-term effects that may lead to addiction and debilitating problems.

In South Africa, the scourge of drug abuse has been recognised. Statically, today, drug use amongst school learners in South Africa is documented as one of the greatest health and social problems facing post-apartheid South Africa (Moleko and Visser, 2008). It is estimated that millions of South African school learners use alcohol, tobacco, cannabis or dagga (commonly known as marijuana and by numerous other names), solvents (like petrol and glue) and other drugs (Parry and Bennets, 1998).

In the Limpopo Province of South Africa, Peltzer (2014) found that among urban secondary school pupils, the majority of boys and girls first used any substance at the age of 16 years or less. The same study also identified that the use of tobacco and inhalants was particularly likely to commence at such an early age. Thirteen years of democracy in South Africa has resulted in policy and legislative reforms that seem to be changing the social and economic circumstances of rural communities, including Capricorn district in the Limpopo province (Peltzer, 1999).

Another study in the area provided data on substance abuse by adolescents in Limpopo was conducted by Madu and Malta (2003). The effect is that Capricorn is becoming more and more urbanized; poverty is being alleviated; more families are being empowered economically; basic infrastructure is improving; more and more adolescents are attending schools; and women and children are becoming aware of their rights. Western cultures seem to be influencing traditional ways of life for the people in Capricorn. If this trend continues, adolescent risk behaviours, including substance abuse, is likely to increase and the current prevalence rates of substance abuse among adolescents in Capricorn may increase in the near future.

In the long run, the consequences of adolescent substance abuse and addiction place an enormous burden on schools health care, criminal justice and social service systems. With these devastating effects, especially on the academic performance of schools, life orientation teachers are left with a challenge to change learner behaviour. It is against this background that the current study seeks to ascertain the teachers' perceptions of precipitating factors of alcohol abuse by learners at selected secondary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

The qualitative exploratory, descriptive and contextual research design were used to explore and describe the teachers' perceptions of precipitating factors of substance abuse by learners (Burns & Groove, 2013). Teachers from Mamolemane and Moshubaba high school, Bahlaloga Circuit, Capricorn District, Limpopo Province formed the population from which the sample was selected (De Vos et al., 2011). Purposive sampling method was used to select the school based on its high percentage of learners who abuse alcohol (Brink, 2012). Convenience sampling technique was used to select 23 participants and was determined by data saturation (Collen, 2014).

Data was collected through indepth individual interviews using 23 participants who were teachers from Mamolemane and Moshubaba High School and the size of the sample was determined by data saturation. Data were collected through in-depth individual interview. An audiotape was used to capture information, field notes were also taken. The method was used because it provides a clear set of instructions for interviewers and provide reliable, comparable qualitative data (Bernard, 2006). It has assisted in attaining high response rate and also to give the researcher chance to make important observations aside from the responses given to the questions asked. Since the study was qualitative in nature, qualitative data analysis was used. This was done through classifying the data into logical thematic categories based on the objectives of the research. The researcher read through all scrpts and got a sence of the ideas emanating from data, similar information was cluster into categories and various categories were grouped to for themes and sub-themes according to Tesch's method (Creswell 2009).

Measures to ensure trustworthiness

Four criteria for developing trustworthiness were used; namely, credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability. Credibility was ensured through, prolonged engagement, reflexivity, triangulation, member checking, peer review and structural coherence. Transferability was ensured through purposive selection of the schools, a description of the demographics of the participants, and a dense description of the results with supporting direct quotations from participants. Consistency was ensured code and re- code data analysis, a dense description of the research methodology and peer examination, An audit trail and reflexive notes were used to establish conformability of the study .

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct a study was obtained from the the University of Venda ethics committee (*Ethics no: SHS/14/PH/01/1605*). Head of the Department of Education Limpopo Province and also from the selected school in Capricorn District, Bahlaloga Circuit; namely, Mamolemane and Moshubaba High School. The aspects applied to ensure that ethical considerations were adhered to were informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and the right to self-determination

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers outlined the perceptions of precipitating factors of substance abuse by learners at selected secondary schools. This theme emerged from the data analysis. Sub-themes, that emerged from precipitating factors of substance abuse by learners, were psycho-social problems experiences by learners, primary socialization in disorganized families, need for social acceptance by peers, substance abuse perceived as a problem-solving tool, stated benefits of substance abuse and parent-child conflict as a cause of learners' substance abuse and behaviour (Table 1).

Table 1 Theme and sub-themes reflecting the teacher's perceptions of precipitating factors of substance abuse by learners at selected secondary schools in the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province

Main Theme	Sub-Themes
Precipitating factors of substance abuse by learners	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Psycho-social problems experienced by learners 2. primary socialization in disorganized families 3. need for social acceptance by peers 4. substance abuse perceived as a problem- solving tool 5. stated benefits of substance abuse 6. parent- child conflict as a cause of learners' substance abuse and behaviour

Theme: Precipitating factors of substance abuse by learners

Teachers mentioned the precipitating factors leading to substance abuse. This theme emerged from the data analysis. Sub-themes that emerged from the precipitating factors leading to substance abuse are psycho-social problems experienced by learners, primary socialization in disorganized families, need of social acceptance to peers, substance abuse perceived as problem-solving tool, stated benefits for substance abuse, and parent-child conflict as a cause of learners' substance abuse and behavior.

Psycho-Social Problems Experienced by Learners

During interviews, teachers explained the psycho-social problems experienced by learners. The teachers responded that sometimes learners abuse substances because their friends are doing it. This section presents the factors or the reasons behind the students' use of drugs. The teachers cited factors that contribute to student's use of substances.

"At times they come to school with a hangover and find it hard to concentrate. More often they are absent, dodge, and have no homework or classwork done when they should submit. They lose concentration in the classroom. They also bully others." (Participant 0020)

"When some learners are stressed and need something to get them past their problems they may take drugs/alcohol." (Participant 0010)

"They said drinking or substance abuse helps them to relieve stress or helps them to forget their problems that they have." (Participant 0018)

Learners who abuse substances may have difficulty in establishing their identity, developing relationships or skills, gaining physical and emotional independence and preparing for the future responsible adulthood. Substance abuse impedes learners' maturity causing them to continue immature behaviour into adulthood (Much, 2002). Physical development concerns the growth of the body, changes in the proportions between different parts of the body and changes in the internal structure and functioning of the body (Gouws and Kruger, 2003). Vary (1996) indicates that substance abuse has, among others, the following effects on the physical development of the secondary school learner - smoking drugs such as dagga, cigarettes and opium causes various respiratory problems and diseases such as bronchitis, pneumonia, cancer of the mouth, throat, larynx, oesophagus, bladder, pancreas and kidney. Furthermore, smoking can aggravate asthma and prevent enough oxygen and nutrients from nourishing the skin, giving rise to bad skin and a disease called psoriasis (Life Scope, 2004).

Primary Socialization in Disorganized Families

During the interviews, one of the school teachers identified primary socialization in disorganized families as a precipitating factor leading to substance abuse. School teachers indicated that family environment plays a huge disruptive part, especially in the family wherein you find that parents are abusing substances. The children will end up resulting as substance abusers, actually they will copy (substance abusing) the parent's style as a way of normal living. One of the respondents remarked:

"The other thing is that the family environment also may affect the children..." Bana ba batswadi ba bona ba nwang bjala kudu, le bona e ya kgonagala gore le bona banwe bjala kudu bjalo ka batho ba bagolo" (meaning, Children with alcoholic parents are more likely to become alcoholics as adults." (Participant 0016)

The function of a family as a system is to provide shelter as well as emotional, economic and psychological support. But when one member abuses alcohol, the family becomes destabilized or the balance is affected. Alcohol abuse tends to thwart the efforts of a family to maintain its balance. Money that should be used for the family is squandered on alcohol and this could contribute to violence and poverty. Relationships are affected because the perpetrator is under the influence of alcohol and is not able to love and care.

A 1998 cross-sectional study on violence against women was undertaken in three South African Provinces. This study showed how domestic violence was significantly (positively) associated with alcohol use. Lack of parental control due to the fact that parents do not provide clear boundaries could lead to disarray in the family and alcohol abuse. It exposes children to anti-social behaviours, since parents become negative role models. McWhirter et al. (1998) feels that it is pointless for this type of family to remain together, however, there are no other alternatives, but to do so. Unfortunately, this family according to McWhirter (1998) results in children who are unable to form stable relationships outside of the family as they have not learned how to develop a good relationship within the family - this places the child at risk for uncooperative behaviour. Moreover, children are not excluded from the problems caused by alcohol abusers within the family system. Adolescents experience more difficulties in life due to both physical and emotional changes. The findings also show that children growing up in violent families experience problems like emotional triangulation, secrets and isolation, and stressed relationships with their parents (Phakula, 2008).

Need for Social Acceptance by Peers

During interviews, one of the teachers explained that there was a need for social acceptance by peers. Teachers postulated that most learners associate themselves with bad company or they choose role models who are not guiding them. They choose company that will coerce them into engaging in bad behaviours and conduct, e.g., stealing, using abusive substances. One teacher stated:

“What makes our learners to smoke, drink alcohol and use other drugs like dagga is that they mix with others that already use these things, especially those that dropped out of school already.”(Participant 0022)

According to Hawkins and Catalano (1990), the most important reference group for young persons in the community is often their peers. Social interaction with friends and peers may thus provide opportunities for drug use or may encourage or support this type of behaviour. Part of the transition during adolescence involves moving from reliance on the family to individuality. It is at this point that the peer group may start to replace the family as a social support mechanism that can be a turbulent emotional time. Because the peer group is seen as such a vitally important support mechanism for the adolescent, s/he may go to great lengths to maintain acceptance and status in it.

Peer pressure appears to be the focus of most prevention programmes, which encourage young people to “say no” to peer pressure and drug abuse that can be linked to what can be referred to as a popular global culture that includes popular music, movies, celebrities, television, computer games and other forms of recreation and social interaction. When conducting substance abuse intervention programmes it may be useful to be aware of the powerful impact that popular culture has on young people.

Young people may develop a deep affection, even reverence, for artists who openly admit to drug use, giving some young people expectations and misconceptions about the effects of drug use, which influences experimentation and continued abuse. Becoming part of a popular group at school, which represents what is “cool” in terms of popular culture, makes young people feel like they are part of a global pop culture. Although fraught with dangers, this subversion and transgression of mainstream culture’s norms and values seems to play an integral part in an adolescent’s identity development and sense of belonging.

Substance Abuse Perceived as a Problem-Solving Tool

During the interviews and subsequent data analysis, it became apparent that substance abuse is often perceived by learners as a problem-solving tool. Teachers emphasized that when learners are under the influence of substance abuse, they can do everything without getting tired, actually it gives them energy to cope or to recall what they have read during exams. The following are some of the comments from teachers:

“They are saying drinking or using substance abuse make them to cope and perform very well when they are writing tests and exams.” (Participant 0019)

“Learners are saying when they are in the influence of substance abuse they perform well in sports and academically.” (Participant 0023)

The abuse of alcohol and other drugs among high school kids remains a prominent concern for most schools. Problems commonly associated with such abuse include property damage, poor academic performance, impaired relationships, unprotected sexual activity, physical injuries, date rape, and suicide (Wechsler et al., 2003).

The abuse of alcohol and other substances is becoming a considerable health and social problem in the world. The World Drug Report (2005) states that the use of illicit drugs has increased throughout the world in recent years. The report further affirms that a major world trend is the increasing availability of many kinds of drugs to an ever-widening socio-economic spectrum of consumers. The report argues that the main problem drugs at global level continue to be opiates (notably heroine) followed by cocaine. For example, for most of Europe and Asia, opiates continued to be the main problem drugs, accounting for 62% of all treatment in 2003. In the report, statistics indicated that a total of 95 countries indicated that drug seizures increased four-fold in 2003, and more than half of these were caused by cannabis.

Stated Benefits of Substance Abuse

During interviews, teachers mentioned the stated benefits of substance abuse. Teachers indicated that peer influence on behaviour reaches a peak during adolescence. Adolescents are first initiated into the use of marijuana and other illegal substances by their peers. They said that alcohol and cigarettes are gateway drugs because they are usually the first drugs that are used before other drugs are tried out. Marijuana was the most commonly abused. The following are some of the comments from teachers:

“They also use patse (marijuana) when they are about to write tests or exams in the intention that they can memorize what they had prepared and also they use marijuana to be energetic when they study.” (Participant 0019)

“...learners may use drugs as a means of temporarily alleviating discomfort connected to life events which they perceive as being out of control” (Participant 0012)

“The learners use alcohol and other drugs to counteract stress or depression and emotional tension” (Participant 0013).

Morena (2004) pointed out that as part of the human society, learners need to feel good and raise their confidence to be acceptable in their in-groups. For them to attain this ‘feeling good’ status, they indulge in substance abuse. Feeling good after one has taken psychoactive substances is what most substance abusers need. When people first try a drug or alcohol they get a “rush”. They feel powerful, smart and full of energy. They may stay active for days, if that “good” feeling subsides, they feel like having it again and again and it can lead to addiction.

There are life events, man-made or natural, which could cause emotional pains to learners and these are death and bereavement, failure at school and domestic violence. Some people start to take drugs because they are depressed. Loss of a loved one, failing exams or family violence is some of the problems that people try to deal with by using drugs or alcohol. This temporary way of solving problems leads to a permanent way of dealing with pain and leads to addiction (Morena, 2004).

Wegscheider-Cruise (1992) indicates that “children in dysfunctional families learn to repress and deny their feelings”. Negative or painful emotions are particularly seen as “bad” (frame of reference), and these children do not learn healthy to deal with anger, hurt, and other emotions, hence they decide to abuse substances in order to deal with their emotions. Olwagen (2003) also found that people who do not know how to handle their emotions due to parental absence, poor parental role modelling and no opportunity to express emotions, may resort to pretending that feelings do not exist. In this instance, people abuse substances in order to feel connected and to suppress emotions that they could not deal with.

A study conducted by Morena (2004) revealed that one of the most common reasons given by learners who are drug addicts is that all their friends are taking drugs. As such, they want to fit into their peer group by taking drugs. In support of that, Walter (2002) indicates that chemically dependent adolescents gradually change their peer group to include drinking and drug-using friends. Sempe (2007) further says that peer influence on behaviour reaches a peak during adolescence. Peers provide the social context in which drugs are used. Most young people are first initiated into the use of marijuana and other illegal substances by their peers.

Young people always want to explore adult ways of behaving and satisfying needs and the challenges and the risk these adult ways entail. One of the reasons why learners indulge in substances of abuse is curiosity. Curiosity normally goes together with copycat behaviour, which usually occurs when young people are continually exposed to drug-related ways of behaviour in a home environment (Twala, 2005). Pama (2008) notes that curiosity among learners is one of the most influential factors that contribute to drug use. It is one of the common reasons to use and abuse substances by learners because they tend to think that by using substances, one would feel good.

Similarly, a young person has a responsibility to prove his/her ability and worth as s/he journeys in life. The adolescent is often accompanied by intermittent periods of stress and tension. The need for high self-confidence creates an artificial sense of well-being, and offers a temporary refuge from the realities of the real world. Whilst young people try to cope with the demands of life, some fail to cope and they start to go astray. Mostly, they survive by taking drugs. They continue to use drugs to suppress their inner conflict, insecurity and anxiety and these result in addiction (Twala, 2005).

Parent-Child Conflict as a Cause of Learners’ Substance Abuse and Behaviour

During interviews, teachers pointed out the parents as the source of learners’ substance abuse and behaviour. Teachers said that parents who do not allow their children time to relax may frustrate them. Such children may end up abusing substances. Parent-child conflicts were also noted as a cause of substance abuse in this study. This conflict often lead to poor communication and strained relations between parents and their children, as borne out by the following participant responses:

“There is no link between teachers and their parents in as for as forming a team of supporting the children is concerned and most parents that were called know that their children abuse drugs, but they cannot do anything, because other children sell drugs for parents.”(Participant 0022)

“What is surprising me is that the parents of learners, they give learners the drugs to sell to the other learners.” (Participant 003).

Alcohol abuse by parents place adolescents or children at greater risk for child abuse. Child abuse is one of the many risk factors associated with parental alcohol abuse. Child abuse manifests itself in various forms that include physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional or psychological abuse (Widom and Hiller-Sturmohofel, 2001). Nicholas and Rasmussen (2006) discovered that undergoing abuse and witnessing parental violence were linked to parental alcohol abuse. This finding is congruent with conclusions of previous studies (Sheridan,1995; Tajima, 2002).Furthermore, the National

Association for Children of Alcoholics (1998) reported that three of four child welfare professional professionals refer to substance abuse as the highest cause for the huge rise in child maltreatment since 1986. They further mentioned that most welfare professionals (79.6%) draw attention to the fact that substance abuse causes at least half of child maltreatment, while 39.7% say it is a factor in over 75% of cases.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Learners in the selected high schools often do not know of or heed schools policies on substance abuse. Furthermore, Learners who use drugs have a problem of not performing well in the class; they repeat the grades and ultimately might drop out of school. They use substances in the hope that it will eliminate their lack of comfort or awkwardness. Alcohol makes them to stay away from school activities. They do not have respect for the teachers and also waste time concentrating on inappropriate or unacceptable activities like going to taverns during breaks to drink beers because their school is close to taverns, and not returning to class. It was recommended that Anti-substance abuse roadshows and campaigns should be organized and hosted in schools on a regular basis.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study only focused on the teachers at two high schools in Capricorn district of Limpopo Province. The study did not include respondents from other schools in Limpopo Province.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the study discussed about the precipitating factors of substance abuse by learners, were psycho-social problems experiences by learners, primary socialization in disorganized families, need for social acceptance by peers, substance abuse perceived as a problem- solving tool, stated benefits of substance abuse and parent- child conflict as a cause of learners' substance abuse and behaviour. The aim of the study was to explored and described explore and describe the teachers perceptions of precipitating factors of alcohol abuse by learners at Selected Schools in Capricorn district of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study revealed that the schools should put together programmes and activities such as drama, poems, debates, etc., in their curriculum that educate and alert learners against drug abuse. The schools should work hand in hand with psychologists or social workers to motivate learners against drug abuse

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