

School-Based Strategies For Addressing Substance Abuse Among Grade 7 Learners: Evidence From High Glen District, Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

Background: Substance abuse among primary school learners is an emerging public health concern in Zimbabwe, with increasing reports of children as young as eight engaging in harmful substance use. While most global and local interventions have focused on adolescents in secondary schools, recent evidence indicates that drug experimentation often begins much earlier. The COVID-19 lockdown period further intensified this problem, with widespread use of substances such as “jolly juice” powder reported among primary school pupils. Despite growing awareness, existing strategies have yet to adequately address the unique needs of younger learners.

Methods and Materials: The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to explore school-based strategies addressing substance abuse among Grade 7 learners. It was conducted at a selected primary school within HighGlen, District in Harare. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals with ten teachers, three guidance and counselling experts and the school head. The aim of study was to contribute to international discourse on primary-level substance abuse prevention within the education system.

Results: Participant responses revealed key themes related to the severity of substance abuse among Grade 7 learners, underlying factors contributing to this behaviour, and the school-based strategies currently in place to address the issue within the educational setting.

Conclusion: The study highlights that while drug and substance abuse among Grade 7 learners in HighGlen District is currently perceived as moderate, it remains a significant concern that requires urgent and proactive attention. The contributing factors, peer influence, family instability, and exposure to community-level drug use, underscore the multifaceted nature of the problem. The school-based strategies currently in place, such as guidance and counselling, disciplinary actions, awareness initiatives, and parental involvement, reflect a commendable effort to address the issue.

Keywords: School based- interventions; Drug and Substance Abuse Grade 7 learners; Contributing factors.

Date of Submission: 05-10-2025

Date of Acceptance: 15-10-2025

I. Introduction

Substance abuse among children in primary schools has increasingly gained attention as a public health and educational challenge globally. While most literature and interventions focus on adolescents in secondary schools, there is growing evidence that drug experimentation often begins in earlier years, raising concerns about the efficacy of existing prevention models at primary level (Koebebe, 2023; NACADA, 2019). In the United States (Johnston et al., 2023) and the UK (NHS Digital, 2022), epidemiological data reveal early initiation into substance use. Pincock (2013) reported increasing levels of binge drinking and experimentation with illicit substances among children as young as 10. Koebebe (2023) noted alarmingly high drug use rates among 11- to 12-year-olds in the US. A study by Andrews et al. (2013) found a steady rise in substance use intention and behaviour from Grade 3 through Grade6, emphasizing the urgency of early intervention in primary school settings.

In the sub-Saharan region, evidence of substance abuse among primary learners is emerging. In Kenya, the National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA, 2019) conducted one of the few studies targeting primary learners, revealing that many pupils had both knowledge and access to substances such as tobacco, prescription drugs and alcohol. Alarmingly, pupils reported peer usage, with 16% identifying classmates abusing tobacco. These figures highlight not only the prevalence but also the normalization of substance use in early adolescence. In South Africa, Mokwena et al. (2020) observed increasing rates of drug use and a declining age of initiation. Children were experimenting with substances earlier than before, leading to academic underperformance, psychosocial distress, and heightened dropout rates. Locally, the Centre for Innovation and Technology (2021) reported a disturbing rise in substance use during and after the COVID-19

lockdown, especially in Victoria Falls, where children as young as eight were found sniffing “jolly juice” powder. Despite this, school responses have been limited or poorly coordinated. Mangwaya (2023) noted that some schools concealed cases of drug abuse to protect their reputation, and government action appeared insufficient. Although the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education acknowledged the problem, its emphasis on parental responsibility rather than systemic intervention left a significant gap in prevention at school level.

School-based interventions are widely acknowledged as critical components in the early prevention of substance use among learners in many developed countries, a range of evidence-based programmes have been implemented to address this issue from multiple angles. Notable among these is the Life Skills Training (LST) programme developed by Gilbert Botvin (1979), which aims to strengthen personal and social competencies, enhance resistance to peer pressure, and challenge misconceptions about substance use. The Good Behaviour Game (Barrish, Saunders & Wolf, 1969) is another widely used classroom management strategy that fosters self-regulation and cooperative behaviour, contributing to reduced long-term risk behaviours. The Unplugged Programme (Faggiano et al., 2008) employs interactive lessons to improve decision-making, peer relationship skills, and drug-related knowledge. Project ALERT (Ellickson et al., 1993) focuses on equipping students with the skills and motivation to resist substance initiation, particularly among non-users. The Health Promoting Schools Framework (WHO, 1998) adopts a whole-school approach, integrating health into the curriculum, school environment, and community partnerships to support learners’ overall well-being, including substance abuse prevention. Additionally, the MindMasters Programme (Prentice.org) supports mental health promotion in secondary schools through teacher training, curriculum support, and school policy development, creating a more supportive environment for addressing issues related to substance use.

Across the African continent, various school-based interventions have been developed to address substance abuse among learners, reflecting diverse national strategies tailored to local contexts. In Kenya, the Life Skills Education Programme (2015-2030) has been integrated into the school curriculum to equip learners with critical thinking, communication, and decision-making skills aimed at reducing risky behaviours, including substance use. Namibia’s “My Future is My Choice” (Chandan et al., 2008) initiative targets adolescents with peer-led sessions focusing on life skills, reproductive health, and drug prevention. Malawi has introduced Teen Clubs (Kim et al., 2015), primarily in school settings, to offer psychosocial support, health education, and mentorship to vulnerable adolescents, contributing indirectly to substance use prevention. In South Africa, the Health Promoting Schools Initiative (Joubert & Bradshaw, 2006) adopts a comprehensive model that integrates health into every aspect of school life, including drug education. Zimbabwe’s Students And Youth Working on Reproductive Health Action Team (SAYWHAT) (2023) engages secondary schools through campaigns and partnerships to raise awareness about substance use and empower learners with resistance skills. In addition, Midlands State University (MSU, 2021) launched DASS Programme aimed to educate Grade 6 pupils and their parents using edutainment approaches (e.g., drama, poetry, and quizzes) emphasizing early prevention. Nigeria’s Drug Abuse Prevention Programme (implemented through the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA, 2020), includes school-based awareness campaigns and education sessions to discourage substance use from an early age. These initiatives demonstrate the growing recognition across Africa of schools as critical spaces for early prevention and health promotion.

School-based interventions have shown varying degrees of effectiveness in addressing substance abuse among learners, depending on design, implementation, and context. Studies globally show that interventions introduced early in a learner’s life, especially in primary school can delay initiation of drug use and build resilience (Independent School Management, 2023). The Unplugged Programme in Europe led to better refusal skills and lower intentions to use substances. Health Promoting Schools Framework, which include teacher training, parental involvement and community partnerships tend to have more sustained impacts. In African countries like Kenya, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, interventions like Life Skills Education and SAYWHAT have been more effective when adapted to local cultural values and delivered in local languages.

Despite growing concern over substance abuse among school-age children in Zimbabwe, most interventions have focused primarily on secondary schools, neglecting younger learners in primary education. Emerging reports indicate that children as young as eight are experimenting with harmful substances, such as alcohol, jolly juice powder, and prescription drugs. The COVID-19 lockdown period further exacerbated this trend, particularly in urban areas like HighGlen District in Harare. While the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education acknowledges the problem, there remains a lack of specific, age-appropriate strategies targeting primary school learners. In some cases, schools have been accused of concealing the issue to protect their reputation. This lack of targeted intervention and transparency poses a significant threat to health, safety, and academic development of Grade 7 learners. Therefore, there is a pressing need to explore and evaluate existing school-based strategies to address drug and substance abuse at the primary level and develop practical, context-sensitive interventions tailored for younger learners.

II. Material And Methods

This explorative qualitative study was carried out at a selected primary school in HighGlen District with classroom teachers, guidance and counselling specialists, and the school head from May 2023 to May 2024. A total of 14 adult subjects (both male and females) within ages ranging from 30s to 60s were included in this study.

Study Design: Qualitative descriptive study

Study Location: This was a primary school within HighGlen, District, in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Study Duration: May 2023 to May 2024.

Sample size: 14.

Sample size calculation: A purposive sample 14 participants was selected, with the size guided by the principle of data saturation. Interviews continued until no new themes emerged, ensuring rich, in-depth data analysis.

Subjects and selection method: The subjects for this study consisted of ten teachers, three guidance and counselling, and the school head selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method commonly used in qualitative research. The goal was to gather rich, relevant, and meaningful insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of substance abuse at primary school level.

Inclusion criteria:

Participants in the study were selected based on the following characteristics:

1. Must be currently employed at the selected primary school in HighGlen District, Harare.
2. Must have at least one year of teaching or counselling experience within the school.
3. Must be directly involved in learner support, either through classroom teaching, school leadership, or provision of psychosocial services.
4. Willingness and ability to participate in the study through interviews and provide informed insights on substance abuse among Grade 7 learners.
5. Fluent in English or Shona to ensure clear communication during data collection.

Exclusion criteria:

Participants were excluded from the study if they:

1. Had less than one year of experience working at the school.
2. Were not directly involved in learner support, teaching, or counselling roles.
3. Declined to provide informed consent or were unwilling to participate in interviews.
4. Were on leave or unavailable during the period of data collection.
5. Demonstrated limited familiarity with the issue of substance abuse among Grade 7 learners within the school context.

Procedure methodology

After written informed consent was obtained, a well-designed interview guide was used to collect the data from the study participants. The interview guide included socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, teaching, leading and counselling experience, duration at the school, and knowledge of substance abuse issues among Grade 7 learners.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which allows for the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns within qualitative data. The researchers began by transcribing all audio-recorded interviews verbatim. This was followed by an in-depth reading of the transcripts to develop familiarity with the content and context. From this close engagement with the data, meaningful phrases and expressions were highlighted and coded to capture significant insights. These codes were then organized into broader themes that reflect participants' experiences, perceptions, and understandings of school-based strategies to address drug and substance abuse. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they represented the data accurately and provide a coherent response to the study's guiding questions. Throughout the process, attention was paid to context and variation in participants' perspectives. To maintain rigour and trustworthiness, the researchers incorporated peer review and invited participants to verify the interpretations through member checking. An audit trail was maintained to document the analytical decisions taken during the process.

III. Result

Characteristics of participants

The study engaged ten teachers, three guidance and counselling specialists, and the school head in interviews. Participants were both male and female, with ages ranging from the late 30s to early 60s. Their professional experience spanned from a few years to more than a decade in the education sector. All participants were proficient in English and offered thoughtful reflections on their roles, observations, and experiences concerning substance abuse among learners. Their responses revealed key themes related to the severity of substance abuse among Grade 7 learners, underlying factors contributing to this behaviour, and the school-based strategies currently in place to address the issue within the educational setting.

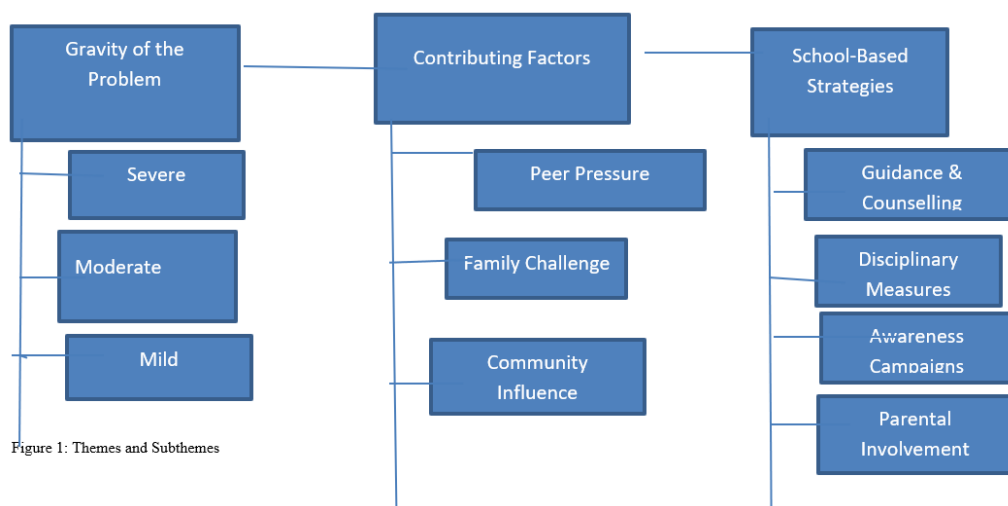


Figure 1: Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1 – Gravity of the Problem

The findings of the study revealed that drug abuse among Grade 7 learners was generally viewed as moderate rather than severe. This perception was consistently expressed by most of the teachers interviewed and also confirmed by all the guidance and counselling specialists involved. While the extent of the problem was not considered widespread or extreme, there was a shared acknowledgement among all participants that some Grade 7 learners had already been exposed to or had experimented with drugs. A typical statement reflecting this theme came from one teacher who remarked, *“We can’t say drug use is very rampant at Grade 7, but there are definitely some pupils who have tried substances. It’s not yet out of control, but the signs are there, and we need to act early.”* Conversely, two participants expressed concern that drug abuse is becoming an increasingly serious issue in primary schools. They observed that much of this behaviour was occurring subtly and often escaped the attention of school authorities, suggesting that the problem might be more widespread than it appears. A typical statement reflecting this view was expressed by one of the guidance and counselling teachers who said, *“It’s not yet a crisis, but we have seen signs. Some Grade 7 learners experiment with substances, especially during break time. It may seem moderate now, but if we ignore it, it can escalate quickly.”* The findings are consistent with global research indicating that substance use may begin in primary school and, if unaddressed, has the potential to escalate as learners grow older (Koebe, 2023; NACADA, 2019).

Theme 2 – Contributing Factors

Participants identified several contributing factors to substance among Grade 7 learners. Key among these were peer pressure, where learners are influenced by friends or classmates who are already experimenting with drugs. Family challenges, such as lack of parental supervision, domestic conflict, or parental substance use, were also cited as significant drivers. In some cases, children exposed to inconsistent or neglectful parenting appeared more vulnerable to substance experimentation. Furthermore, the broader community environment was seen as a critical influence, particularly in areas where drugs are easily accessible, and substance use is normalized by local role models or older youths. These factors often interact, creating a high-risk context that fosters curiosity, experimentation, and continued use among primary school learners. The following typical statements illustrate the contributing factors to substance abuse among Grade 7 learners:

“Some of these children start using drugs because their friends are doing it. They don’t want to feel left out.”

“We have cases where parents are hardly at home, or they are always fighting. The child ends up looking for comfort elsewhere, and sometimes that’s through drugs.”

"In this area, there are a lot of shebeens and people selling substances openly. The children see that and think it's normal."

"Some parents actually take drugs in front of their children. That sets a bad example."

These contributing factors are consistent with international research, which has also identified peer influence, family dysfunction, and exposure to substance use within the community as significant drivers of early drug and substance abuse among children (Andrews et al., 2013; Goliath & Pretorius., 2016; Gunda & Mbwire, 2020).

Theme 3- School-Based Strategies

The school had implemented a range of school-based strategies aimed at addressing substance abuse among learners. These included formal guidance and counselling sessions where learners were educated on the dangers of drug use and supported to make better choices. Disciplinary measures were also employed to deter learners from engaging in substance-related behaviours, although some staff expressed concern that punishment alone was insufficient without deeper psychosocial support. Awareness campaigns were organized through assemblies, classroom discussions, and collaboration with external stakeholders such as the police or local health workers. Parental involvement was another critical strategy, with schools engaging parents through meetings and communication efforts to enhance home-school collaboration in addressing the issue. However, some participants noted that parental involvement was often limited, especially in cases where parents themselves were either unaware or indifferent to the problem. One of participant reported, *"We try to talk to the learners during guidance and counselling periods, and sometimes invite parents for meetings, but not all parents respond. We've also had sessions with police officers coming to speak about drugs. It helps, but I think more needs to be done to reach the children before they get too deep into it."*

IV. Discussion

The study highlights that while drug and substance abuse among Grade 7 learners in HighGlen District is currently perceived as moderate, it remains a significant concern that requires urgent and proactive attention. The contributing factors, peer influence, family instability, and exposure to community-level drug use, underscore the multifaceted nature of the problem. The school-based strategies currently in place, such as guidance and counselling, disciplinary actions, awareness initiatives, and parental involvement, reflect a commendable effort to address the issue. However, the findings suggest that these interventions may benefit from being more structured, age-appropriate, and integrated into a broader health promotion framework. Strengthening teacher capacity, fostering multi-sectoral collaboration, and developing evidence-based interventions could enhance the effectiveness of school responses. Ultimately, early and context-sensitive prevention strategies are essential for protecting the well-being and future of primary school learners.

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