

## Perceptions of Stakeholders on the Causes of Drug Abuse among Primary School Learners in Shibuyunji District, Zambia

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### Abstract

*Drug abuse among primary school learners has negatively affected their performance due to the fact that they absent themselves from school and lose concentration on academic related activities. This study's objective was to determine stakeholders' views and opinions about the causes of drug abuse on primary school-going children in Shibuyunji district. Qualitative data was gathered from four primary schools in the district, through interviews and focus group discussions. Results showed that stakeholders understood the meaning of drug abuse as well as its causes among primary school-going children in the district. Stakeholders stated that the main causes of drug abuse were peer pressure, lack of recreational facilities, curiosity and amusement, lack of parental guidance, availability of drugs in the area, and poverty. The study concluded that primary schools in the area can only be drug-free if parents, community leaders, and school authorities worked together to stem the vice. Among the things that needed to be done to curb the problem to embark on sensitisation programmes in the district among both learners and communities, provide facilities for recreation, enact, tighten and enforce school rules and regulations, and give learners enough school work to occupy their free time.*

**Keywords:** Perceptions, drug abuse, learners, Shibuyunji district, interventions, sensitisation.

### Introduction

Drug abuse among primary school learners negatively affects their school performance because they begin to absent themselves from school and lose concentration on school-related activities. The use of various drugs, both licit and illicit, is a widespread phenomenon among youths worldwide and is increasing at an alarming rate. It is causing serious threats to nations by deteriorating health, increasing crime, and hampering productivity. Drug abuse also destroys relationships, erode socio-moral values and impede the overall progress of societies (Sahu & Sahu, 2012). According to Babbie (2003), young people are becoming the largest hostages of the threat of drug abuse and their vulnerability is increasing gradually. A World Health Organisation report on drug abuse in Southern Africa showed that negative consequences are common traits of drug abuse (WHO, 2003).

These include sexual violence, physical violence, criminal activity, neglect of social responsibilities, disease, injury and loss of life (Olawole-Isaac et al., 2018). Harmful effects occur with any psychoactive substance use and early initiation has been found to be associated with an increased risk of developing addiction and adulthood dependence.

Kasonde, Ndlobvu and Masiye (2012) explained that the effects of drug abuse on school-going children in Zambia are almost similar to other parts of the world. For example, learners would involve themselves in all kinds of vices and mischief and also suffer from the consequences of abusing drugs. One of the consequences of drug abuse is that learners lose concentration on academic work and other beneficial activities. Because of the paucity of information about drug abuse among school-going children in the rural areas of Zambia, this study sought to obtain the views of different stakeholders on drug abuse by primary school-going children in Shibuyunji district, a rural district west of Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. Of particular interest were the causes of drug abuse among school-going children in four primary schools in the district.

### **Description of the Study Area**

The study was conducted in Shibuyunji, a district in the Central Province of Zambia. Although the district is only 48 kilometres from Lusaka, it is considered to be rural. And like in many other rural districts in the country, provision of education in the area is often marked by an absence of good school infrastructure and teaching personnel, as well as inadequate teaching and learning materials (Nkoshu & Mwanza, 2009). In this area, rural poverty and sheer geographical location may be critical factors in determining educational attainment among learners, and these austere conditions can easily be exacerbated if adolescent learners involve themselves in the abuse of drugs.

### **Data Collection Methods**

This was a qualitative cross-sectional descriptive study. A qualitative approach was adopted because qualitative research offers “valuable insights into how people construct meaning in various social settings” (Neuman, 2006, p.308). A sample size of 48 participants was selected from four primary schools in Shibuyunji district. The four schools were purposively chosen based on the researchers’ previous relationships with them and the good rapport that had been established with the administrators and teachers at these schools. The sample comprised four guidance and counselling teachers (one from each participating school), thirty-two learners (eight from each participating school), eight parents from local communities (two from each selected primary school) and four head teachers (one from each participating school). The study used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to collect data. The semi-structured interviews presented

the advantage that they allowed the researchers to use guides in the same way in every interview; they were employed to obtain information from head teachers, guidance and counselling teachers and parents. Focus group discussions were used to collect information from learners. They were used “to evoke a level of respondents’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions otherwise not available when using methods such as observation or interviewing” (Public Health Action Support Team, 2020).

To analyse the data, summary notes were made of the main points raised by the participants during both the interviews and focus group discussions. Each interview and discussion was then transcribed into verbatims, identifying major themes as a form of data analysis. Therefore, thematic analysis was adopted as the approach for data analysis and all the themes noted in this article are those mentioned by the majority of the participants in their interviews and focus group discussions.

## Findings of the Study

Concerning the causes of drug abuse among the learners, the recurrent themes were peer pressure, lack of recreational activities, poverty, home back ground, and stress.

### *Peer Pressure*

An analysis of the transcribed interviews and focus group discussions revealed that most of the respondents stated that the main cause of drug abuse among primary school-going children in Shibuyunji district was peer pressure followed by lack of recreational activities and lack of parental guidance in that order.

Peer pressure can have a tremendous effect on the behaviour of primary school-going children. At this time, the children are forming new friendships and choosing an identity among those friends. This is the time children start experimenting with alcohol, drugs, sexual activity and other risky behaviours. In view of this, the most prevalent notion among the various stakeholders was that peer pressure was the chief culprit to drug abuse among school-going learners in the district. A parent at one school said:

*Drug abuse in our school among learners is caused by peer pressure. This is where learners who are involved in drug abuse influence their colleagues to take part in abusing drugs. (Parent A)*

This sentiment was echoed by a head teacher who stated that:

*There is also peer pressure from the village and school environments respectively. When peer pressure from both the village and school environments combines forces, these children end up drinking and smoking because of the influence from their colleagues at school and the communities where they come (from). (Head teacher D)*

*(b) Lack of Recreational Opportunities*

Apart from peer pressure, participants cited lack of recreational opportunities as a cause of drug abuse among learners. One parent highlighted that:

*The main cause of drug abuse among our school-going children in the district is lack of recreational activities such as sports to keep them busy all the time. (Parent C)*

A learner attributed abuse of drugs to boredom. She contended that “*Boredom can be caused by lack of recreational activities or when someone loses parents and the only way out for them is to resort to drug abuse.*”

*(c) Poverty*

Poverty was another cause cited by the participants. This included lack of financial support and food at home. Poverty leads to certain attitudes, behaviours, and life conditions which can contribute to drug use. In this study, it was found that school-going children sometimes got frustrated when their parents failed to pay their school fees and they had to drop out of school. One parent stated the following:

*Furthermore, children indulge themselves in drug abuse because of frustrations. For example, where a parent fails to educate a child due to poverty and the latter resorts to drug abuse as a way of relieving stress. Therefore, they resort to drug abuse in order to forget about some of the problems in life. (Parent B)*

A headteacher stated that,

*This is because of poverty where these children come from and they were easily lured into beer drinking and sex in order to earn a living. (Head teacher A).*

**Lack of Parental Guidance**

Another cause cited was lack of parental guide. School-going children who have lost their parents may not have parental guidance and may therefore find themselves abusing drugs. This is also true for children who reside in households in which alcohol and other drugs are abused or where parents do not give good counsel to their children. In this regard, some of the sentiments expressed by the participants were that:

*Some learners indulge in drug abuse after being orphaned and lack proper parental guidance. There is also lack of financial support from the family, and, later, these children find themselves in drug abuse to earn a living. (Learners’ focus group A)*

A guidance and counselling teacher stated that:

*... drug abuse among our learners at [his] Primary School is caused by separation of families (divorces) because when the children do not have both parents to look after them and providing proper care, they easily resort to drug abuse due to lack of parental guidance (Guidance and counselling teacher A).*

A parent stated that “*the other cause of drug abuse among school-going children here in Shibuyunji district is the fact that some parents fail to control their children at a tender age by not telling them the dangers of drug abuse.*” (Parent A)

*(e) Unconducive home background*

Unconducive home conditions where learners came from was cited as another cause for drug abuse among learners. These include broken homes where parents are always fighting, or where adults were drinking and smoking. One head teacher stated that:

*Drug abuse in our school among learners is mainly caused by home background and peer pressure. Home background affects these children in such a way that they come from homes where their relatives such as uncles and siblings who imbibe beer and smoke marijuana. Therefore, when these children see their relatives drink and smoke, they copy and think it is something normal. (Head teacher C).*

Guidance and counselling teacher also added her voice to this. She said:

*Apart from that, drug abuse among our learners at our School is caused by separation of families (divorces) because when the children do not have both parents to look after them and providing proper care, they easily resort to drug abuse due to lack of parental guidance. (Guidance and counselling teacher B)*

Guidance and counselling teacher D stated that “*... broken homes is where mostly the orphaned children feel frustrated about life and resort to drug abuse*” while a parent was of the view that:

*Drug abuse among school-going children in our district is mainly caused by poor home background. For example, in some homes, parents are unable to control their children by telling them the dangers of drug abuse because in the first place the parents themselves are not educated and they do not see the value of education. Therefore, drug abuse to them is just a normal thing. (Parent B)*

*(f) Stress*

The last main cause of drug abuse among school-going children in Shibuyunji district cited by the participants was stress. However, in almost all the cases where

stress was cited as a cause, the participants stated that primary school-going children indulged in drug abuse due to poverty. The following are some of the views expressed by the participants:

*... poverty has caused our learners here to be involved in drug abuse so that they can be stress-free at home when there is hunger. (Guidance and counselling teacher C)*

*Apart from that, others get involved in drug abuse due to the pressures of life [poverty] and would want to get rid of those problems when they are stressed through drug abuse. (Learners' Focus Group A)*

*... poverty is when there is hunger where these learners come from and would want to take drugs to relieve themselves from such stress. (Learners' Focus Group B)*

*... some learners are forced to take drugs because of stress so that they can forget some of the problems they face. (Learners' focus group C)*

## **Discussion**

The study showed that peer pressure was the most cited cause or predictor of drug abuse among primary school-going learners in Shibuyunji district. Significantly, peer pressure plays a vital role in influencing young people to take to drugs. All the respondents indicated that people who indulge in drugs are usually influenced by friends when they start abusing drugs. In fact, it is common practice for growing children to be influenced by friends when they assume certain types of behaviour, be it good or bad. The current study revealed that some young people were being influenced by friends whenever they took drugs. This finding resonates well with Mwamwenda (1995, p. 489) who opined that “people like to conform as a way of getting approval from others. This is especially true for adolescents who may yield to peer pressure in an attempt to conform.”

Peer relationships are crucially important for school learners because they are a primary group from where behaviour is learnt. More often than not, young people have the desire to be appreciated by friends and have a sense of belonging to a peer group. If they do not conform to the requirements of the group, young people might have a sense of rejection. Peer pressure is, therefore, associated with the desire to gain total acceptance into the peer group. Young people are required to conform and satisfy the demand of peer groups. Some of the demands of such peer groups may entail using drugs. Clearly, peers tend to exert the most robust influence on their friends, especially at the imitation stage, which leads to addiction. It can, therefore, be concluded that social learning processes play a vital role in modeling individual attitude and behaviours in drug abuse. The quality of the peer group a child joins will determine whether he/she gets positive or negative reinforcement from the social group (Gatonye, 2006) and parents need to know what kind of

friends their children are keeping company with. On their part, learners need to have self-confidence and inner strength to stand firm, walk away, and resist doing something they know is wrong. They can also choose friends wisely, those with similar values and beliefs. Additionally, they can get support from a trusted adult such as a parent, teacher, or school counsellor.

The study also showed that lack of recreational activities in the district was the second most cited cause of drug abuse among primary school learners in Shibuyunji district. According to Agbai (2018), outdoor recreation for children is most important both for fun and boredom-relief and for mental and physical development. The current study, however, shows that there was lack of recreational facilities and activities for most youngsters to pass time in the area. The participants indicated that, due to boredom, most young people resorted to using drugs in order to pass time. This is in line with findings from previous studies which have also stated that children encounter different stressors in life and require recreation to 'shake off' some of the stress (Mwamwenda, 1995 and Agbai, 2018). Mohasoa's (2010) study in the rural areas of Zeerust, North West Province of South Africa, noted that there were no recreational facilities in the rural areas, and, as a result, adolescents tended to engage in risky behaviours, including use of drugs. Ngesu et al. (2008) and Maundu (2013) also submitted that learners like taking drugs owing to boredom and idleness. This problem may be exacerbated if schools do not give their learners enough home work to keep them engaged most of the time. Local communities can also reduce use of harmful illegal products among the youth by providing recreational facilities which can take away the children's boredom when they are not at school.

The study showed lack of parental guidance as the third most mentioned cause of drug abuse among primary school learners in Shibuyunji district. Parents (whether biological or adoptive) are among the most important people in the lives of young children because children depend on them for learning, guidance, protection, care, and overall well-being (Jacob & Seshadri, 2013). Participants in the current study indicated that young people in Shibuyunji community indulged in drug abuse owing to lack of parental supervision. This was especially so for those children who were orphaned. Such children are often looked after by their grandparents who do not pay attention to what they do. This vulnerability left many school learners at risk of using drugs. The finding is similar to that of Shoemaker (2004), who contended that laxity in parental discipline of their children gives birth to delinquency which is invariably associated with drug abuse. Pengpid and Peltzer (2013) also explained that lack of parental supervision is often associated with drug abuse. Therefore, parents need to get involved with their children's school; they should ensure the children are at school and are learning.

Furthermore, the study showed that some children abused drugs because of the frustrations of poverty. It was learnt that the increasing deprivation of necessities

in some homes forced some parents to send their children out to sell merchandise on the streets to make ends meet. Learners from poverty-stricken homes were forced to find ways of looking for other means of survival. Previous studies have indicated that when children were engaged in activities such as hawking and street vending, they became prone to taking drugs so as to gain more energy to endure the hardships that came with such activities. For example, a study by Adjei, Aboagye, and Yeboah (2012) in Kumasi, Ghana, found that sending children into the streets for vending exposed them to delinquent behaviour which included drug abuse. Apart from abusing drugs, poverty can also drive young people into vices such as underage sex and even early marriages. Many of the children may be hungry owing to a lack of food at home.

School-based education is required for drug abuse prevention among primary school-going learners. This is because, according to the Victoria State Government (2009), one of the counterbalancing roles that education can play in relation to drug abuse is inculcating informed decision making in the learners. There is also need for proper guidance and counselling structures at school and in communities which can deal with issues of loneliness and stress. Concerning 'modern life', some learners think they are being up-to-date by indulging in drug abuse. Some think that drugs are 'cool' or harmless while others believe that an adolescent will use drugs (Sussman, Skara & Ames, 2008). All such matters can be attended to by having proper guidance and counselling structures in schools.

## **Conclusion**

This study was premised on the perceptions of stakeholders on the causes of drug abuse among primary school-going learners in Shibuyunji district of Zambia. The study established that peer pressure, lack of recreational activities, curiosity and amusement, lack of parental supervision, prevalence of drugs in locality and low-income levels of family or poverty were cited as the main causes of drug abuse by school-going children. To this effect, the researchers recommend the need for parents to be alert to and monitor who their children befriend and to be trained in self-efficacy to enable them supervise their children. There is also need for the establishment of recreational activities in schools in particular and Shibuyunji district generally to attend to the problem of boredom among learners. Alongside this, schools should be giving learners enough school work (particularly homework) to occupy their time after school. Further, there is need to avoid use of alcohol at school events which may interfere with drug education and prevention efforts. There is also need to address poverty by empowering households in the area economically to avoid drug abuse among school-going children.

Apart from working with parents, school authorities should enhance communication and teamwork among different stakeholders who include community leaders. There is also need to increase drug education in primary



schools which should go alongside guidance and counselling to give the learners confidence and to make informed decisions. Johnson et al. (2007) asserted that school-based education of youth has a long history as a strategy to reduce child and youth use and abuse of drugs. Parents may need training and sensitisation to equip them with skills to address drug abuse among their children. On their part, schools can enact, tighten and enforce school rules and regulations concerning drug abuse to avoid loopholes.

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