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BRIEF REPORT

Drug abuse by learners in South Africa: a replication and extension study

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This study sought to determine the nature, extent and causes of drug abuse in South African township schools. Interview data were collected from a convenience sample of 24 participants from 4 schools (10 learners, 8 school personnel and 4 School Governing Board (SGB) members, a social worker and one Department of Education (DoE) official responsible for handling drug abuse by learners in the district. Document analysis was also conducted using the social worker's records. The study found that dagga, tobacco and alcohol were the most readily available, commonly used and abused drugs by learners in these schools. The study also found that learners tended to use cocktails of drug combinations.

Keywords: nature, extent, causes, drug abuse, learners, schools, South Africa

The use and abuse of drugs is a key challenge and major concern facing schools, families and societies globally (Kepe, 2003; Laufer, 1997; Mhlongo, 2005; Nesor, Ovens, Ladikos, & Olivier, 2001; Rizk, 2008). Research shows that drug abuse by learners is now a serious problem in South African schools (Betancourt & Herrera, 2006; Brook, Morojele, Pahl, & Brook, 2006; Pama, 2008; Parry, Myers, Morojele, Flisher, Bhana, Donson, & Pluddeman, 2004). Pama (2008) is one of the few researchers who studied learner perceptions towards drug abuse in one high school in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. In this study, Pama (2008) found that drugs most commonly used by learners in their schools included tobacco, alcohol, painkillers, dagga, cocaine and mandrax. Pama (2008) concluded that these drugs negatively affected both learners' achievement at school and their lives as a whole.

Betancourt and Herrera (2006) carried out a study to determine the relationship between alcohol and drug problems and sexual and physical abuse in three urban high schools in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Brook, Morojele, Pahl, & Brook (2006) established predictors of drug abuse among adolescents to include psychosocial factors (victim attributes and peer drug abuse) and these were key to frequent drug abuse. Nesor, Ovens, Ladikos, & Olivier (2001) demonstrated that community pressures such as crime, unemployment, insecurity and newly found teenage 'freedoms' were key in initiating teenagers into drug abuse. The authors doubted if ever the trend would abate.

Learners who have low self-esteem and who feel a profound sense of inadequacy are vulnerable to drugs (Erasmus, 2007). Visser (2003) found learners to believe to: (a) forget their problems (23 %); (b) increase performance (21 %); (c) engage in self-harm (97 %) and (d) feel good, brave and happy (6 %). Such behaviours carry high risk for violence (de Wet, 2003; Emler, 2001). Parry (1998) claimed that peer pressure is common among learners in influencing each other to drink alcohol. This brief study

sought to replicate existent findings on types of drugs that are readily available to learners, the extent of drug abuse amongst learners in some South African schools, causes of drug abuse by learners in schools, and perceived effects of drug abuse on the learners.

Method

Participants and data collection

A convenience sample of 10 learners, 8 school personnel and 4 School Governing Board (SGB) members, a social worker and one Department of Education (DoE) official ($N = 24$) constituted the participants.

In-depth interviews, school records (documents) and focus group discussions were used to collect data in this study. Neuman (2011) views a focus group as a special type of qualitative research technique wherein group members are interrogated informally by a moderator or researcher in a non-directive manner. Focus group discussions were used in this study because they gave participants the opportunity to be involved in the discussion and assist by hearing what others have said and adding to what has been left out.

A tape recorder was used to record participants' exact words during interviews. The advantage of using a tape recorder was that the researchers could listen to the participants' responses a number of times before drawing conclusions.

Ethical considerations

Permission to carry out this study was sought from the Department of Education in East London district. A similar letter was sent to the Department of Social Development requesting permission to conduct interviews with a social worker. Subsequent to these letters, the main researcher followed up with the District Office in person and telephonically until these letters were received. The schools granted permission for the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the names of the schools (A, B, C and D) and participants used in this study.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically. This process made for reliable data summaries. Our qualitative data examined similarities and differences in participant responses.

Results

Nature of drugs readily available to learners in schools

Learners from schools A, B, C and D were in the same area or neighbourhood, not far from each other. Two learners from school A, two learners from school B, and three learners from school C indicated that dagga ('wit'), cigarettes and tablets were readily available to learners in schools. Most learners confessed to buying these drugs from peddlers.

The extent of drug abuse amongst learners in schools

Learners from school A described the age of drug abusers as ranging from 15–18 years, learners from school B indicated the age of drug abusers to range from 14–18 years. Learners from school C indicated that the age of drug abusers ranged between 11–14 years. Responses from learners from school D indicated that since it was a junior primary school with learners aged between 6–10 years and with classes from grades R to 4, they indicated that their school had no drug related problems. The percentage of users was not apparent from these data.

Causes of drug abuse among learners in schools

When learners in focus group discussions were asked about the reasons why these learners abuse drugs a learner from school A said, '*...they are imitating friends; cooling down stress; these learners are moneyed; their parents using drugs too/selling drugs; have background problems*'. Another learner from school B said, '*Curiosity, they want to know how they would feel after they used dagga. They say they become clever but that is not so instead they become more hyper that means they talk a lot and more often out of topic discussed*'. A learner from school C said, '*They feel neglected by their parents when they ask for something and do not get it; some parents do not care for their children; feel relaxed; fears go away, worries vanish also. The other one was left with a gun by the father who passed away. They need counseling I think so*'. It is clear from the above participants' responses that drug users and abusers use drugs because they want to fit into a group; of peer pressure; social problems; neglect; their neighborhood has a lot of drugs that are easily accessible; exposure to drugs as most learners' parents sell alcohol and many adults use and abuse drugs in front of their children; and seeking attention. A member of the SGB from school A said, '*Most of the learners are scared of examination papers so they decide to use drugs and females use and abuse tablets for slimming purposes as they want to be slender in shape*'.

Discussion

Drugs were prevalent among learners in schools were combinations of dagga and cigarettes, cigarettes and tablets, including dagga known as 'wit', mandrax and alcohol. The above findings are consistent with the literature (Hewana, 1996; Pama, 2008; Searll, 1989). The study

also found that learners tend to imitate friends as well as their parents who use or sell drugs. Other learners indicated peer pressure and neglect by their parents as reasons for abuse. Some learners indicated that learners who use and abuse drugs had parents that were either not working or are employed in a low-paying job. Educators, on the other hand, indicated that it was mostly learners who stayed with grandparents during the day when parents are at work who tend to have drug related problems. The Department of Education alleged that learners from child-headed homes where there was no adult supervision were vulnerable to drug abuse in schools. The above findings are consistent with the literature (Brook et al., 2004; Mati & Feni, 2004; Visser, 2003).

Rape, early pregnancy and prostitution were identified as being linked to drug abuse by Emler (2001), Joubert (1999) and Peterson (2009). Early pregnancy and HIV/AIDS were reported by Mhlongo (2005); Joubert (1999) and Peterson (2009) among drug users and abusers. These findings are consistent with other literature (Brook et al., 2006; Emler, 2001; Parry et al., 2004; Pama, 2008).

The study found that peer pressure and poverty were causes of drug abuse by learners in schools. Some learners sold drugs at school for older people and their parents or guardians. Searll (1989) found that due to their ages, learners are not charged for drug abuse even if they are caught. Similar findings were reported by Mabindla (2007) who found that older people who sent learners to sell drugs at schools had connections with police who would release a learner found with drugs with ease. Pama (2008) claimed that culture causes learners to use and abuse alcohol and drugs during weddings, birthday parties and initiation school.

Conclusion

The most readily available drugs to learners in South African schools were dagga, cigarettes, alcohol, mandrax, cocaine and slimming/sleeping tablets. The extent of drug abuse was not apparent from the data though there were indications that it was rife among mid-teenagers. Peer pressure, parental neglect, curiosity and desire to 'cool off from stress' are some of the identified causes of drug abuse among adolescents.

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