

EXPLORING EFFECTIVENESS OF PEER COUNSELLING IN MITIGATING DRUG AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN ZIMBABWEAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: RURAL LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe, there has been an increase in the number of learners involved in drug and substance abuse. In response, numerous measures among them guidance and counselling have been put in place to mitigate learners against abusing drugs and substances. It is in this context that this study sought to gain insight into the effectiveness of peer counselling strategy as a homegrown remedy to the reduction of drug and substance abuse by rural secondary school learners. It is in this context that the data generation was guided by the qualitative approach. Twenty rural secondary school learners and six stakeholders from different sectors communities who are involved in guidance and counselling initiatives were purposively sampled. Data generated through document analysis and in-depth interviews were analysed according to emerging themes. Findings revealed that in some cases both rural female and male learners are involved in drug and substance abuse as in their interactions they influence each other. Consequently, drug and substance abuse in these rural secondary schools cannot be regarded as a 'boys' hazard. Therefore, this called for the need to empower learners in these rural schools through the engagement of all stakeholders in the formulation of the peer counselling strategy. It is against this background that it can be concluded that to a larger extent peer counselling can be an effective strategy in alleviating drug and substance abuse amongst learners in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools. Therefore the following recommendation was made: in rural secondary schools coaching of all stakeholders on the implementation of peer counselling as an instrument to ease off learners' engagement in anti-social conducts should be strengthened.

Keywords: Alleviating, drug and substance abuse, learners; peer counselling strategy, and rural secondary school

INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, the existing tendency on the usage of drugs, and substances by learners in schools turned into an upsetting incidence to stakeholders as they may be a risk factor (Cooper 2009; Tshabalala, Khosa, Gazimbe & Ncube 2015). There was an increase in the abuse of drugs among Zimbabwe rural school learners (Chidarikire, 2017). In support of drug abuse among learners, Gunda and Mbwirire (2020) found that majority of urban secondary school learners in Zimbabwe are involved in drug and substance abuse. Thus, drug and substance abuse is the wrong use of certain chemicals or drugs to create pleasurable effects on the brain (Nwobi, Uzoekwe, Ofojebe & Nwana 2021). These drug and substances include stimulants like cocaine, depressants like alcohol, opium-related painkiller like heroin, and hallucinogens which contains lysergic acid diethylamide found in alcoholic drinks, tobacco among others are accessible to adolescents (Muwanzi & Mafumbate 2017; Ramakrishnan &

Jalajakumari 2013; Yusuf 2010). It is crucial to note that schools are the first large-scale socializing organization in which the rural learners become associates.

Unlike in a family setup, schools are formed by heterogeneous social elements, and they combine classroom teaching and peer group influence to socialise rural learners. Therefore, schools become the best place for drug and substance abuse intervention (Adefunke 2015; Khanyisile 2005). It is against this background that peer counselling strategy has been advocated for in alleviating drug and substance abuse in schools (Bett 2013). Thus, peer counselling is defined as a system of delivering knowledge that improves social learning and psychosocial support. These are facilitated by peers who ensure that their basic rights are realized through sensitively listening and responding to their peers (Bradshaw 2016). For instance, peer-led programmes (Smoke Prevention) increased amongst adolescents their knowledge on the effects of smoking and strategies to resist pressure to abuse drugs and substances from their peers (Armstrong, De Klerk, Shean, Dunn & Dolin 1990). This can be supported by Kaaria, Nyaga, Oundo and Muriithi (2014)'s findings that portrayed peer counselling strategy as an effective way of assisting learners in drug and substance abuse. In this context, Mertens and Wilson (2012) postulated Peer Counselling Strategy as building a sense of ownership amongst learners in dealing with challenges encountered in day-to-day interactions in their society.

However, on the contrary in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools' focus were mainly on educational psychologist, social workers, parents, and school heads leaving out the marginalised learners in the formulation of adolescent-friendly programmes (Zvirevo 2013). Further, Gunda and Mbwirire (2020) acknowledged that most studies were focused on the causes of drug and substance abuse amongst urban secondary school learners. There is a dearth of literature on the views of rural learners on the effectiveness of peer counselling in mitigating drug abuse in rural schools in Zimbabwe. This brings to light the need for rural learners to be accorded the platform to speak and share their own experiences and formulate their strategies that enhance behaviour change (Fournier, Mill, Kipp & Walusimbi 2007). However, obstacles are weighing against the realisation of the earlier proposed counselling strategies in the Zimbabwean context (Nkala 2014). For example teacher-counsellors' lack of proper training negatively affects their roles in creating a platform for the implementation of peer counselling amongst learners (Trevisan & Hubert 2001). Thus the emancipation of these marginalised learners in rural schools may be made possible through training them to allow for the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills to enable the mitigation against drug and substance abuse in learning centres (Chidarikire 2017).

In addition, peer association plays a crucial part in sustaining learners' aspiration to belong and feel connected in their interactions (Uslu & Gizir 2016). Thus, peer counselling can positively contribute towards learners through advocating for responsible for lives (Maiwa, Ngeno & Kiaritha 2021). In support Samkange and Dombofema (2016); Samanyanga and Ncube (2015) in their findings put forward that adolescents acknowledged the significance of their receiving tutelage on the consequences of drug and substance abuse and strategies to minimise them. In this regard, it was noted that in urban secondary schools peer counselling was being undertaken through various initiatives with the view to reduce incidences of drug and substance abuse amongst the adolescents (Chireshe 2013). However, it is not the case with rural secondary schools, which have few peer counsellors or none to provide rural learners with the much need on the dangers of drug and substance abuse (Nwobi, et al. 2021). In addition, there is a dearth of literature on issues to do with drug and

substance abuse amongst rural learners (Acuda & Eide 1994; Jakaza, Nyoni & Muzingili 2018). It is against this background that this study to gain insight into this issue guided by the following question: To what extent can peer counselling be an effective strategy in alleviating drug and substance abuse in rural secondary schools? It is in this context that the researchers formulated the methodology that was guided the data generation, presentation, and analysis. This is discussed in detail in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology was commensurate since it allowed the researchers to gain insight into patterns and trends concerning the issue under investigation (Chinyama, Sibanda, Chamisa, Tirivangasi 2021). Hence, this section outlines the strategy employed by the researchers in data generation, presentation, and analysis.

Research Paradigm and Approach

In this study, data generation was grounded in the interpretive paradigm, and qualitative approach which accorded the researchers the opportunity to capture the participants' opinions, beliefs, and experiences about the issue under investigation (De Vaus 2001; Dube 2016; Gudyanga 2016; Pilarska 2021; Yong, Husin & Kamarudin 2021). In this context, the researcher managed to have an appreciation of participants' subjective interpretation and understanding of their experiences, and settings as well as how they experience the issue under investigation (Creswell 2014; Minichiello & Kottler 2010). It is against this background that the researchers deemed this research design adequate since it allowed them to get an in-depth and detailed comprehension of trends emerging from the discussion (Walliman 2011; Wolliman 2010).

Data Generation Tools

In data generation, the researchers were the chief tools supported by document analysis and in-depth interviews. This called for the collaboration between the researchers and the participants in a bid to gain an in-depth comprehension of the issue under investigation (Miller & Maguire 2008; Tshelane 2013). In addition, this enabled the researchers to engage with the participants through a clearly defined interface in a natural setting (Ridder 2017; Sanders, Lewis & Thornhill 2012). It's important to note that the use of these methods allowed for a methodical data generation process, within the stipulated frame. By employing these methods it allowed for methodical triangulation where the generated data was checked against information derived from other sources such as consulted literature (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007).

Sample and Sampling Procedures

A sample according to Creswell and Creswell (2018) includes members from whom the researchers gain information and draw conclusions. In this same sense, researchers, purposively (Creswell 2013; Zvirevo 2013), selected twenty (20) rural secondary school learners who had the following experiences: eight (8) were involved in drug and substance

abuse; seven (7) at one time were involved in drug and substance abuse; and five (5) were never involved in drug and substance abuse. In addition six (6) stakeholders from the Ministry of Public Service Labour and Social Welfare, Ministry of Health and Child Care, Non-Governmental Organisations, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's Psychological Services Department, community leaders, and teacher-counsellors were conveniently selected to be part of the sample.

Data Analysis

In this study researchers present data in a frame that pictures answers to the issue under investigation. The data was generated in four hours on Saturdays in order not to disturb the teaching and learning activities and work commitments of participants (Chidarikire, 2017). This was done through transcribing in verbatim the data from the interview schedule according to themes as they emerged (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Interpretive content analysis is used literature sources with the view to triangulate it with what had emerged through in-depth interviews (Bowen 2009; Janks 2012). In this study data generation, and analysis was conducted in a cyclical, concurrent, and iterative manner (Creswell 2013). This enabled researchers to move forward and backward with the view to capture empirical evidence several times, thereby creating fertile ground to check the trustworthiness of the data (Chimbi & Jita 2021). In addition, this created a platform for researchers to bring together new insights about the issue under investigation in a reflective manner; instead of conducting data generation, and analysis as once-off actions. This resulted in common ideas, opinions, experiences, and beliefs being grouped into emerging themes, which acted as the basis for the provision of answers to the study's research question.

Ethical Considerations

In gaining entry into the field to generate data the researchers considered issues such as applying for permission to conduct the study from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The granting of the permission to carry out the study created the platform for the researchers to engage the participants (Awosusi & Adegboyega 2013; Jacobs 2016; Ngesu, Ndiku & Masese 2008) in data generation. However, before engaging the participants in the exercise, they were made aware of their role in the study, and this enabled them to make informed decisions on whether to participate or not to participate. In dealing with the participants, researchers adhered to the principles of confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and the right to pull out at any stage of research. In the next section researchers present, analyse, and interpret the generated.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of the finding was looked at through a lens made up of the social resistance skills; and drug, and alcohol theories of aggression (Berkowitz 1993; Botvin 1970; Geen 1990). Thus, the social resistance skills theory highlights that social, and psychological factors are central in promoting the onset of cigarette smoking and later, drug and substance abuse. On the other hand, the social resistance theory brought forward the notion that drug and substance abuse results from pro-drug social influence from peers, among other factors.

Hence, the school as a community is involved in initiating intervention programmes, enacting and enforcing policies, and regulations, targeted at reducing the levels of drug, and substance abuse by learners. It is in this context that these theories were selected with the view that the researchers were going to gain more knowledge on the effectiveness of peer counselling strategy in transforming rural secondary school learners' mindsets towards drug and substance abuse (Etonge 2014; Makina 2012; Vinz 2016). Thus, in a school set up vulnerable learners are expected to receive psychosocial support from groups such as psychologists, teachers, and learners in the form of peer support groups. It's crucial to take note of drug and substance abuse amongst learners as a setback associated with various social immoralities in secondary schools (Oliha 2014). Hence, the need for peer support groups that assist learners in increasing knowledge, skills, and values necessary for positive behavior transformation through sharing of experiences among themselves (Al-Khayat 2021; D'Costa, Lobo & Ward 2021).

It is against this background that this section focuses on the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of generated data with the view to provide more insight into the effectiveness of peer counselling in alleviating drug, and substance abuse in rural secondary schools. This data was generated from the participants from the select rural secondary schools through in-depth interviews. Intending to protect participants' identity, researchers used numbers as a form of identifying the selected students, with letters of the alphabet denoting those other participants who were included in the study for triangulation purposes. Thus in this case pseudo names in the form of numbers and letters of the alphabet were used to stand for real names of the participants. Based on this study's main research question this part of the discussion focuses on the importance of guidance and counselling, which was introduced in the primary and secondary school curriculum as the fountain for peer counselling knowledge, skills, and techniques (Chidarikire, Chikuvadze, Dube & Gonzo 2021). It was noted that the strength of this programme as a strategy in both rural and urban schools was that it was entrenched in the principle of sustainable learner formation (Chikuvadze, Magutsa & Gonzo 2021). The findings of this study were divided into the following main themes:

Theme 1: Participation of Learners in Drug and Substance Abuse in Rural Secondary Schools

It was noted that the strength of this programme as a strategy in both rural and urban schools was that it was entrenched in the principle of sustainable learner formation (Chikuvadze, Magutsa & Gonzo 2021). It is in this context that one of the participants expressed the following:

From my interactions with both adolescents in and out of school I have noted that drug abuse in most instances has been associated with males. But the prevailing situation in our schools and society, in general, has made me come across some cases where females are also involved in dagga smoking or drinking alcohol (Interviewee A)

In support a participant had the following to say:

When we went for cluster sports competitions some of my female colleagues imbibed opaque beer. Upon querying from them on what they were doing. In response, they asked me whether

beer drinking or smoking the weed was either for boys or men alone in this community (Interviewee 5)

From the above citation, it was revealed that most female learners seem to be influencing each other into taking drugs at their rural schools. This concurs with Okoza and Aluede (2009)'s view that much of drug and substance abuse by learners takes place in the learning environment. In addition, it was noted that drugs and substances were not gendered, thus their usage cut across gender in rural secondary schools. Hence based on the principle of equality and equity there was no need to exclude female learners in peer counselling activities that militate them against drug and substance abuse in their schools (Mushunje & Kuyayama-Tumbare 2014). This brought forward the need for the participation of both female and male learners in peer counselling activities in rural secondary schools through the use of gender-sensitive instructional methodology and language.

Theme 2: Effectiveness of Peer Counselling In Mitigating Drug Abuse in Rural Secondary Schools

With the above acceptance that both female and male learners were in one way or the other involved in drug and substance abuse in and out of the school, it is, therefore, the focus of this forthcoming discourse to gain an insight into the capability of peer counselling in alleviating drug and substance abuse in the selected rural schools. This agrees with an assertion by Boitt (2016) that the involvement of learners in these undesirable societal activities has accentuated the need to lend an ear to them. In this regard the participants made the following contributions firstly:

From a discussion with my brother who is studying at university, I was made to believe that peer counselling was a powerful tool to fight against drug and substance abuse at school and in the community. In this situation, it is possible to share my concerns with my friends or classmates (Interviewee 7)

This citation concurs with Rutondoki (2000)'s idea that peer counselling creates a platform for learners to interact freely expressing their views on their colleagues' concerns. Thus counsellors tend to have more time with their peers sharing their problems (Lapan 2001). In support of this and the earlier on presented opinion a participant voiced that:

At home I stay with an uncle who introduced me to smoking marijuana; luckily in my class, I happened to share a desk with one of the female peer counsellors such that during our spare time we could engage in discussions on drugs and substance abuse. I learned a lot from my interaction with the female peer counsellor. I have changed my mindset with regards to drug-taking and now am concentrating on my studies (Interviewee 1)

From the verbatim descriptions, it was revealed that peer counselling in rural schools had the potential to alleviate drug and substance abuse in rural secondary schools. These findings concur with Arudo (2008); Chireshe (2006) that peer counsellors are equipped with knowledge and skills to handle various issues such as drug and substance abuse. Under such a scenario learners tend tendency to act encouragingly in reply to ideas heeded from their colleagues (Chidarikire, Chikuvadze & Muza 2021). Hence this creates the basis for the

researchers to single out amongst many peers counselling as an effective strategy to alleviate drug and substance abuse by learners in rural secondary schools.

Theme 3: Teacher-learner Interaction as a Strategy to Enhances Peer Counselling

In addition, the strategy is collectively formulated centred on the ability of those involved to deal with real-life issues. In this context, there was a need for the rural secondary schools under investigation to create a conducive environment for teacher-learner interaction. Thus through the teacher-learner interaction, one of the participants had the following:

When I was in primary school my grade 5 during counselling lessons we were taught about the dangers of smoking dagga. We also discussed how as learners they can be pushed into taking such things as marijuana. Our teacher encouraged us to resist pressure from our friends or even from adults to take drugs (Interviewee 10)

From the above excerpt, the participant pointed out that most of the learners start using drugs and substances with the influence of colleagues' interests and expectations. This concurs with Kiiru (2004); Masese, Joseph and Ngesu (2012) who postulated that peer pressure influences learners to engage in drug and substance abuse with the view of being identified with a certain peer group and under impression that these substances are a source of wisdom. Further analysis of the participant's opinion showed the call for the learners in rural schools to resist pressure from their peers to take drugs and substances. In an endorsement of the above sentiments, the next participant expressed that:

Interestingly the introduction of Guidance and Counselling as a compulsory non-examinable subject in both primary and secondary schools accorded learners with the opportunity to appreciate their responsibilities in peer counselling covering a wide range of issues such as drug and substance abuse by adolescents in and out of rural schools (Interviewee D)

The teaching of Guidance and Counselling as a compulsory and non-examinable subject was enhanced through *Director's Circulars 23/2005 and 2/2006* (Gudyanga, Wadesango, Manzira & Gudyanga 2015). In support Chidarikire (2017), argued that legally this directive sought to empower and to make learning this subject mandatory in all schools. In this context, it can be highlighted that from the above remarks learners were expected to master the concepts which form peer counselling and thereafter apply them in solving issues bedeviling their peers in learning or those in the society.

Theme 4: Use of Technology as a Strategy to Mitigate Drug Abuse among Rural Secondary School Learners

In the implementation of peer counselling as a tool for militating against drugs and substances though, in the rural context, it was believed that appropriate technology could be used to aid its effectiveness. It is against this background that one of the participants observed the following strength of using technology in peer counselling activities:

Of concern to us is that we are now living in a technologically charged environment so as adolescents of today we are technologically compliant even though we are in this rural setup.

I think through our gadgets we can access information that can enhance our peer counselling skills (Interviewee 16)

With the earlier assertion, another participant had the following contribution towards the issue under discourse:

On our cell phones, we have apps such as WhatsApp that we mostly use for chatting and sharing jokes amongst friends and relatives. In this regard I have the following questions that seek answers: Why can't we use these apps to share strategies for reducing drug and substance abuse in our schools? (Interviewee 11)

From the above excerpt, it can be noted that the participant acknowledged that those rural learners with access to technologies at times use these for other purposes that were not educational. From the other another the participant seemed to be encouraging others to use these technologies in sharing information concerning the mitigation of drug and substance abuse amongst learners in their rural secondary schools. In support of this view, the next participant articulated that:

I would like if given the platform to encourage my colleagues to use technologies in spreading information on issues to do with drug abuse rather than concentrating on playing music or watching movies on these devices. On another hand school heads should provide those without devices to access school computer labs so that they google in search for information on issues of concern (Interviewee 20)

In this verbatim account, it was contended that learners may use technologies to create platforms for their peers so that information on drug and substance abuse can be shared or disseminated. These technologies offer some form of confidentiality and anonymity as these rural learners are counselling each other on issues of concern as peers. This concurs with Mthiyane (2015)'s findings these technologies can be used as tools, which enhance the lives of the marginalised in society through networking them to improve information dissemination amongst peers.

Theme 5: Role of Rural School Development Committees in Mitigating Drug and Substance Abuse

In continuation this discussion centres on the responsibilities of parents and guardians in learners' emotional, moral, academic, and psychological development in schools as a mandate by the instrument on School Development Committees. In this regard, one participant had the following:

The Ministry of [Primary and Secondary] Education some years back came up with a policy document to enable parents and guardians to form a committee (SDC) through, which they could or can participate actively in the governance or the running of the school (Interviewee E)

In concurrence with the previous contribution, another participant suggested that:

You know these adolescents of today are involved in delinquent activities [the smoking of dagga] be it at school or home. So it is my thinking that as parents or guardians through these committees we need at all costs to join hands with heads to try and mould these boys and girls into upright citizens (Interviewee A)

This goes along with Zvirevo (2013)'s findings that the issue of peer counsellor coaching is in a bid to widen their knowledge foundation from which other learners can draw off and be mentored. In addition, this coaching emboldens the peer counsellors and gives them confidence, which results in them earning great respect from fellow learners (Bett 2013). With this in mind, one participant explained that:

In our SDC [School Development Committees] meeting were informed that one of our learners [Junior Councillor for the area] was supposed to attend a workshop on children's rights. Therefore we took it upon us as a committee that all the expenses were to be met by the school. We do this on the assumption on his/her return from the training other learners will be briefed on what transpired there (Interviewee B)

From the citations, it was noted that besides the School Development Committees were legally established to participate actively in the administration of school activities. About the excerpts (*cf interviewee A*) there was an acknowledgment of the existence of learners involved in drug and substance abuse both in the school and in the community. It is against this background that the participants expressed the committee's commitment to the creation of an environment in rural secondary schools. This was to be made possible through the parents or guardians consenting to children's participation in peer counselling. Hence this belief those School Development Committees are part of the stakeholders pushing towards the creation of a drug and substance abuse-free environment in rural schools. In addition parents and guardians were supposed to provide funding for the construction or maintenance of specialised counselling facilities at the school as mandated by the policy on guidance and counselling. This concurs with Rutttoh (2015) who highlighted that the involvement of parents or guardians through their committees removes all problems encountered by peer counsellors as time allocation and infrastructure are made available and accessible.

Theme 6: Peer Counselling as a Strategy to Enhance Rural Learners' Active Participation in Mitigating Against Drug and Substance Abuse

In addition, it's significant to note that peer counselling provides the platform for the emancipation of the voiceless rural learners so that they can free themselves from problems encountered in their rural secondary schools. This was supported by the following contribution:

As the SDC [School Development Committee] we have submitted to the Ministry [of Primary and Secondary Education] through the district offices our concerns about the new curriculum. One of the things we highlighted was the need to intensify the Guidance and Counselling activities due to an increase in the number of learners being caught abusing drugs. In this regard, I would like to express my happiness as we are proffering home-grown

solutions to indigenous problems. It's my hope content won't be imposed on us to implement
(Interviewee F)

In reinforcing the need for parents and guardians' involvement in the fight against drug and substance abuse by learners in rural secondary schools a participant advanced the following opinion:

In formulating a powerful tool to deal with among other things drug and substance abuse by learners in rural schools there was a great need to involve all key stakeholders in the deliberations. I am of the view that in crafting a sound peer counselling strategy the inclusion of community efforts makes our fight against drug and substance abuse a bit easier
(Interviewee C)

From the citation, it was revealed the peer counselling strategy formulation required the involvement of different stakeholders among them parents or guardians. These bring in the sense of contextualizing the strategy to their set due to the incorporation in it of the under users' cultural values and norms. Therefore this creates the basis for the acceptance of the strategy by all stakeholders and its implementation will be effected with everyone's support. Thus this concurs with Dube (2016) who highlighted that this brings together all stakeholders irrespective of their social background to identify collectively challenges faced by learners in rural schools and to proffer possible solutions. In support, Higginbottom and Liamputtong (2015) alluded that this collaborative effort concerning peer counselling strategy acts as a liberating force for those learners in rural secondary schools involved in drug and substance abuse. Hence those from the marginalised societies should be given the platform to create knowledge geared towards the formulation of strategies to be engaged in the resolution of learners in rural secondary schools' problems with drug and substance abuse.

CONCLUSION

Findings revealed that in some instances in these selected rural secondary schools both female and male learners are immersed in drug and substance abuse. Hence drug and substance abuse in these rural secondary schools under investigation cannot be regarded as a 'boys' problem. Therefore this called for the need to empower learners in these rural schools through the engagement of all interested parties in the formulation of peer counselling strategy. This lays the foundation for the implementation of peer counselling in rural schools with the support of information-rich participants. It is against this background that it can be concluded that to a larger extent peer counselling can be an effective strategy in alleviating drug and substance abuse amongst learners in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools. During data generation researchers encountered the following limitations: some participants were unwilling to divulge the information, and some were reluctant to respond to issues under discussion, this caused a delay in finishing the study within the planned time frame. In response, researchers encouraged the participants to be honest and promised anonymity of the contributions. In this context, it is recommended that all stakeholders in rural secondary schools should be educated about their roles in the promotion of peer counselling strategy. In addition, researchers recommend that future studies need focus on the obstacles encountered

in the implementation of peer counselling in dealing with rural learners involved in drug and substance abuse.

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