Research Article

Management of Substance Abuse in the School Environment of a School District in North West Province of South Africa

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Abstract

Background: South Africa experiences rife substance abuse among school children, which causes disruption in the school environment, and results in ineffective learning for the affected learners. Although school authorities are expected to manage the situation of substance abuse in the school environment, there is no formal training for the teachers on how to manage this aspect of social life that impacts on academic outcomes. Purpose: The purpose of the study was to explore how schools manage substance abuse at a school environment.

Methodology: A qualitative design was used to collect data using in-depth interviews from 21 members of School management teams in a school district in North West Province, South Africa.

Results: The 3 themes that emerged are contradictory views regarding the extent of the drug problem, with some acknowledging that substance abuse is rife while others downplay the magnitude of the problem, the actions of the school management team consist of calling people in cases of substance abuse, and teachers are not trained on how to mitigate substance abuse.

Conclusion: The ways used by schools to deal with cases of substance abuse among learners is not effective as it consists mainly of 'reporting' the abuse to several individuals. Schools do not have interventions for prevention of substance abuse, and the teachers do not receive training on how to deal with substance abuse in the school environment.

Keywords: Qualitative design; Substance abuse; School-based interventions; School environment; South Africa

Introduction

Changes in the political, economic, and social structures within South Africa have made the country more vulnerable to drug use, and the trend for younger users, including leaners at school [1]. This has resulted in substance use being a major challenge that affects schools on a global scale, including South Africa. Substance abuse has many negative social and health outcomes among adolescents, such as risky sexual behaviour, lower levels of psychological well-being and life satisfaction, delinquency among learners violence in the school environment, and bullying [2-6].

Factors that predict substance abuse among adolescents in South Africa include personal attributes, peer pressure, lower perceptions of school connectedness, distance from school, the social environment and poverty [7-10]. Because the predictors of substance abuse are socially derived, they are often difficult to mitigate.

Although school-based substance abuse programs are reported to be effective, their effectiveness is determined by the extent to which they are known and implemented. School-based primary prevention programs have thus become a central component of drug control strategies, and schools should be encouraged and assisted to develop and implement such programs, as the availability and implementation of such programs are not for all schools [11]. The lack of ineffective prevention and treatment programs for substance abuse often results in disruption of the school environment, with school authorities often not knowing how to manage learners who are under the influence of substances [12].

The frustration associated with disruption of the school environment by learners who use substances often results in their expulsion from the school, which just moves the problematic behavior from the school to the street and community [13]. Moreover, suspension and expulsion from school exacerbates academic deterioration, delinquency, crime, more substance abuse, and therefore jeopardize the children's health and safety. Substance abuse has also been associated with dropping out of school, and presents as both a consequence and predictor of substance abuse [14]. Because in South Africa substance abuse has been reported in both rural, and urban settings, its consequences cuts cross

all settings of the country [15,16].

Academic consequences of substance include poor academic performance, and therefore negatively affect long-term developmental outcomes of the users, [17-19]. Moreover, substance abuse among learners is also associated with disruption of their relationships with family members, teachers at school and their peers [20]. Of concern is the impact of substance abuse on the learners' response to discipline, which negatively affects the morale and professional performance of the educators.

South Africa's response to substance abuse resulted in the development of the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in Schools, which was published in 2002. The purpose of this policy was to provide guidance to schools on how to deal with substance abuse in the school environment, and is comprehensive because it includes prevention processes, and also requires educators to be trained on drug use, misuse and dependency management. To date, the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in Schools remains the only national document meant to guide School Management Teams in the management of drug use among learners. However, a study which focuses on the implementation of this policy reported that the policy is neither known nor implemented by schools, hence the need to explore what schools use to manage substance abuse in schools [13].

Methodology

Study design

The study used an explorative qualitative design, using in-depth interviews to collect data from members of School Management Teams (SMT) in the selected school district.

Population

The population of the study consisted of members of School Management Teams of secondary schools in a school district in the North West Province of South Africa. The School Management Team consists of the principal, deputy principal and heads of departments. The core duty of the School Management Team is to serve as an advisory board to the principal.

Recruitment

Recruitment of the participants started at the district office of Basic Education, and their permission letter was used to negotiate with the management of the randomly selected schools, to conduct the study by interviewing members of their School Management Team (SMT). The members of SMTs were informed of the study and requested to volunteer for participation.

Sample size

The study employed purposive sampling, which is the selection of information-rich cases to study. The point of saturation, which is reached when additional interviews no longer yielded new information, was reached after 21 interviews. The final school sample consisted of 8 schools across 2 circuits. The personnel sample consisted of 3 male principals; 3 male deputy principals; 3 female deputy principals, 5 male heads of department, and 7 female heads of department.

Data collection tools

A researcher-developed interview guide was used to collect qualitative data, and a quantitative questionnaire was used to collect socio-demographic questionnaire.

Data collection

Data were collected in an office of each school, using the interview guide. The interviews were digitally recorded, and field notes were used to capture non-verbal communication during the interview process. The language of data collection was English.

Data analysis

The socio demographic data was analyzed quantitatively and displayed as summaries, proportions and percentages. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, typed into Word and the transcripts were imported to Nvivo 12 software for thematic data analysis. The analysis consisted of the researcher reading a few transcripts to familiarize himself with the data, and in the process identified the use of words, phrases and patterns which relayed same concepts or meanings. These sets of words were put together and labelled under a common theme or code, and this was the draft codebook. The identified codes were applied to subsequent transcripts, and the codebook was modified as new codes emerged, or when themes were merged or deleted. The final list of themes was used as the basis of the narrative.

Ethical considerations

The study was ethically approved by the ethics committee of Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (MREC/H/128/2014). Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the District office of the Department of Basic education, the 2 circuit managers and the management of the schools. The individual participants provided written informed consent.

Results

Characteristics of the participants

21 members of the 8 secondary schools in the 2 circuits in the Letlhabile Area, North West Province, were interviewed, with 5 schools in circuit A and 3 in circuit B. The total of 21 participants consisted of 11 males and 10 females, with ages ranging from 40 to 60. Table 1 below shows further details of the ages of the participants. Table 2 below shows the position and gender attributes of the participants. Table 3 below shows management and gender characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Ages and gender characteristics of the participants (n=21)

Age Range	No. of Females	No. of Males	Total	Percentage
40-45	2	6	8	38.1%

46-50	3	1	4	19.1%
51-55	1	2	3	14.3%
56-60	5	1	6	28.5%
Total	11	10	21	100%

Table 2: Positions and gender characteristics the participants (n=21)

Positions	Circuit A		Circuit B		Fre-quency	Percent-age
	Female	Male	Female	Male		
Principal	-	3	-	-	3	14.3%
Deputy Principal	2	1	1	2	6	28.6%
HOD	6	3	1	2	12	57.14%
Total	8	7	2	4	21	100%

Table 3: Management experiences of the participants (n=21)

Years in Manage-ment	No. of Females	No. of Males	Total	Percentage
1-10	2	3	5	23.8%
11-20	7	6	13	61.9%
21-30	1	2	3	14.9%
Total	10	11	21	100%

Qualitative findings

The following 3 themes emerged from data analysis of the qualitative data.

Theme 1: Contradictory views regarding the extent of the drug problem: This theme indicates contradictory views of the participants regarding the substance abuse problem in the communities surrounding the school. While some acknowledge the seriousness of this problem, a few minimize the existence of the problem. The contradictions are even voiced by participants from the same school. Those that acknowledge the seriousness of substance abuse in the community and their schools expressed themselves as follows:

"It is very rife. In the school it is now swimming amongst the grade nines and to some extent, to the grade tens. Most people who are not learners of the school but who used to be learners of the school are very much into drugs and we see them along the streets as we are going home in the different corners just assembled and smoke dagga and doing other things including nyaope" (A 48-year-old male principal from school D).

"It's bad, very bad. Even though it is not so easy to get drugs in the school yard as I said most of the learners will come having smoked those things from outside, but it is very difficult to find drugs in the school yard. There were few reported cases of drugs in the school yard, even though I was never involved in such cases." (A 42-year-old male HOD from school A)

"There is a general problem of drugs in the village which is also creeping into the school." (A 58-year-old male deputy principal from school B)

"It's very serious." (55-year-old male principal from school G)

"It's very serious. Learners from as earliest 14 years in grade 8 they are found with dagga in the classrooms." (43-year-old female HOD from school G)

Views that substances were not such a problem were expressed as follows:

"In the school yard it is very minimal, you can't find them having them in their possession. We usually just find those ones smoking cigarettes in the toilets but as you know, cigarettes they usually mix them with other things like marijuana." (A 60-year-old male principal from school H)

"It not that rife, it's just that the learners do want to smoke not the drugs, but they smoke cigarette and marijuana." (49-year-old female HOD from school G)

"Mmm… it's minimal, like I've said there, we don't have the problem with our… our children. It's minimum, it's…. my observation we are having for now 2 boys who make use of that drug, so I think is so minimum." (55-year-old female deputy principal from school F)

Theme 2: The actions of the school management consist of calling people: This theme emerged from responses to the question of the action of the school when a learner was caught using or being in possession of drugs, and the actions entailed calling variety of people, to inform them of the problem.

The parents of the implicated learner are often the first point of call

"When the learner is caught using drugs, first of all we phone the parents to come to school immediately and if we cannot get hold of the parents, we issue a letter indicating to the parent that we need the parent as soon as possible the following day. If the parent is at home during the time of the phoning, the parent is called to the school the very same day so that the parent can come because of what we need to solve by that moment" (57-year-old male deputy principal from school C).

"We normally use a cell phone to contact the parents so that the parents come while they are on that condition so that they can have proof of what we are talking about." (60-year-old principal from school H).

"We normally call the parents and the principal calls the disciplinary committee even the class teacher to handle the case." (42-year old female HOD from school D).

The School Governing Body (SGB), as the main decision maker in school governance, is also informed, especially because if there will be suspension or expulsion, this body has to endorse the decision

"If the learner is caught using drugs the parents are called before the school disciplinary team. The members of the SGB will deal with the matter and they will ask the learner to stay home for some time maybe a day or 2 with the permission of parents. Then the counselling from the Area Office will follow. We have this unit that deals with challenges that children have and we ask them to intervene and help. It is unfortunate that most of the time they promise

to come but never come to help." (42-year-old male HOD from school A)

Even the police are often called:

"Ahh… I should say it starts mostly at home because in cases that we had, you'd find that the kids will bring dagga from home because it's been planted at home. There's a source and now sometimes they would say they collect it from the neighbor's yard, so which will tell you that the source is so much spread that the school has to deal with this problem immediately from home, then we have to stop it and involve the police." (43-year-old female HOD from school G)

Theme 3: Teachers are not trained on how to mitigate substance abuse: This theme indicates the lack of any form of training received by educators on how to deal with substance abuse in the school environment, and these views were expressed as follows:

"I myself, I didn't receive any training." (44-year-old male deputy principal from School F)

"So far what I know we don't have a formal training that was received by educators here at school." (58-year-old male deputy principal from school B)

"I have never attended any training and I am not aware of any member who has received training of how to deal with learners using drugs or any workshop." (56-year-old female HOD from school D).

"No, there is no training. We are using our own applications and our own minds. There's no training whatsoever conducted either by the Department or by ourselves as individuals due to work load we are having." (60-year-old male principal from school H)

Discussion

Although the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in Schools is supposed to guide schools on how to manage substance use in the school environment, this policy is not known or used by any of the schools (Mokwena et al, 2020). The implications of this finding is that the schools do not have a comprehensive and consistent strategy to address substance abuse, and thus the individual members of the school management use their own decisions, which cannot be assessed for effectiveness. Moreover, the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in Schools is more comprehensive than just dealing with incidences of drug use at school, because it includes the requirement that schools develop their own policies, with prevention and rehabilitation components, and further requires that educators receive training to deal with drug use at school. In the absence of this policy, schools use ad hoc decisions and limit management of drug use to action against the learner who is found to be in possession of, or using drugs in the school environment.

School Governing Bodies are legally required to provide governance leadership to schools but their ineffectiveness in other areas of their practice has previously been identified [21,22]. With substance abuse being such a significant social, health and academic challenge, the need for effective School Governing Bodies is essential. However, the lack of knowledge about the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in Schools by School management teams is an indication of an area of need for these governing structures, without which schools are not enabled to manage the problem.

When substance abuse is identified in a school setting, it suggests that it also occurs outside of the school environment as well, and calling parents to inform them that their child is using drugs may not achieve much, especially because the parents themselves may be tolerant of substance use [23]. The expectations and assumptions that the parents will do something to effectively address the behavior may not hold.

Similarly, calling the police implies that substance abuse is limited to being viewed as a criminal behavior, which is does not include the social aspects, does not address the academic aspects and does not include the prevention aspects which should be implemented schools. Although the SGB was identified as expected to play a crucial role in mitigating substance abuse, its specific and tangible role could not be identified by any of the participants.

Discipline in South African schools has been a major topic of discussion over the past decade, with educators expressing that they have been disempowered in their ability to institute discipline, and that learners do not fear or respect educators because they know that nothing will happen to them [24]. This has resulted in chaotic and unmanageable classrooms, which is increased by lack of substance abuse prevention and management in the classroom [24]. Moreover, reported that effectiveness management of teaching and learning is often inadequate in many South African schools, and that this occurs because educators fail to compensate for the inadequate social and educational skills among learners and their communities, including substance abuse [25].

In the meantime, the development and implementation of evidence-based interventions to manage substance abuse in schools remain lacking.

Conclusion

The study confirmed that schools do not have specific interventions to deal with cases of substance abuse, even if that occurs in the school environment. Moreover, none of the participants indicated any prevention intentions used by the school for substance abuse, neither are the teachers trained in efforts to mitigate substance abuse, though the problem is rife in many South African communities.

Recommendation

It is recommended that efforts to encourage schools to

implement the principles of the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in Schools be enhanced, which will enable schools to assess whether the policy is implementable, whether it is effective and to implement necessary corrections or modifications to the policy.

Conflict of Interest

We confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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