

Research Article

The National Policy of Drug Abuse Management in Schools in South Africa: Unknown and Unimplemented

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Abstract

Background: The increasing prevalence of substance abuse among at-school youth calls for the consistent use of available policies that guide interventions to combat the scourge, and so enable policy reviews and amendments to improve interventions. The National Policy of Drug Abuse Management in Schools in South Africa was published in 2002, but the extent to which it is implemented in schools has not been determined.

Purpose: the purpose of the study was to determine the implementation of the National Policy of Drug Abuse Management in Schools in South Africa.

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

Results: The National Policy of Drug Abuse Management in Schools is not known by any of the school management team members, and thus not implemented. The schools also lack written policies of their own that they deal with drug abuse matters in the school environment.

Conclusion: Lack of knowledge about the National Policy of Drug Abuse Management in Schools, as well as absence of school specific policies on drugs depict a concerning gap in efforts to combat substance abuse among learners.

Keywords

National Policy of Drug Abuse Management in Schools, School environment, Drug abuse, Policy implementation, Qualitative design.

1. Introduction

The use of psychoactive substances continues to be a concern on a global scale, [1,2], and compared to other African countries, South Africa has higher rates for both

alcohol and other drugs [3,4]. High rates of substance abuse has also been reported among young people, including learners at school [5-7]. While the prevalence of drug use in South Africa has been reported to be increasing [8], the age of experimentation is declining [9], which means that drug use continues to attract younger users, with more severe consequences for physical, social and academic life.

Although initially, learners are able to conceal their use of substances, the use is later demonstrated by intoxication and disruption of the classroom environment [10], where substance abuse is also associated with poor discipline [11], which include aggression [12], as well as poor academic performance, [13,14] dropping out of school [15,16] and being expelled from school [17].

Although substance abuse has been confirmed to result in negative health and social outcomes across all age groups, these are particularly pronounced if substances are used at an early age, where they are associated with severe negative mental health outcomes which may extend to adulthood [18-20]. Specific serious mental health problems associated with substance abuse at an early age include development of schizophrenia, lower levels of psychological well-being, and subsequent disruption of executive mental function in the workplace. The social consequences of drug use among adolescents

include guilt and stigma, with resultant poor social health, participating in a fight, going out at night, and the number of friends who use drugs [17,21].

It is for these reasons that drug abuse among learners should be given undivided attention, and that schools should be equipped with resources and support needed to combat drug use in the school environment. Despite this, schools often lack the required guidelines and/or skills to address drug abuse in the school environment.

2. About the South African National Policy of Drug Abuse Management in Schools

Acknowledging the problem of substance abuse among in-school youth, the South African National Policy of Drug Abuse Management in Schools was published in 2002, and its purpose was to provide guidelines to increase the capacity of schools to manage drug abuse in the school environment. With the intention of securing schools as a safe and disciplined learning environment to enhance quality education, the policy is anchored on the following pillars:

1. To enable and support effective prevention, management and treatment of drug use, misuse, and dependence in schools. This was to be done by supporting the principle of prohibition of drugs in all schools
2. To promote the application of the principles of restorative justice to, and support those learners who are found to be using drugs
3. To enable schools to develop clear policies on the prevention of drug use, and implement appropriate intervention as the needs arise.
4. To capacitate teachers, in particular those working with drug related incidents, access to professional development opportunities provided by the Provincial Departments of Education

However, after two decades the policy does not seem to have gained traction, hence this study which aimed to describe the implementation of the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in Schools by schools in a school district in the North West Province, South Africa.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

The study used a qualitative design, using in-depth-interviews to collect data

3.2. Population

The study population consisted of secondary schools in a school, of North West Province. Within the schools, members of School Management Teams, which consist of the principal, deputy principal and head of departments were recruited to participate in the study. The core duty of the School Management Team is to serve as an advisory board to the principal.

3.3. Recruitment

Recruitment of the participants started at the District level, and the permission letter obtained from the District was used to negotiate for permission from the Morula and Toloane Circuits, which gave the researcher permission to access the school managers in the circuits. The managers of the individual schools were approached by the researcher, who made an appointment to come to the schools to explain the purpose of the study and to recruit members of the School Management Teams to participate. Each school was requested to identify members of the School Management Teams who were willing to be interviewed. Their names were communicated to the researcher, who made appointments for the interviews.

3.4. Sample

The school district where the study was conducted consists of school circuits which are clusters of schools. The study was conducted in eight schools in two of the circuits. A sample of convenience was drawn from secondary schools in the identified school district. Convenience was determined by the willingness and availability of the members of the School Management Teams to participate. Anecdotal enquiry into the prevalence of substance abuse in the communities in which the schools were situated was used to identify and request specific schools to participate. The final sample size of 21 was determined by reaching the point of saturation, where further interviews no longer provided new information.

3.5. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced by collecting data from different schools, and from different post levels (Principals, Deputy principals and Head of Departments). The sample also consisted of both men and women with a wide range of experience in school management.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Institutional ethical clearance and approval of the study was obtained from the University Research and Ethics Committee reference number MREC/H/128/2014: PG. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Bojanala Education District and the school management of the schools which participated in the study. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from individuals who were interviewed.

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of the Schools

Twenty-one members of School Management Teams from eight secondary schools in the school district were interviewed. Eleven (11) of those interviewed were males and ten (10) were females. Their ages ranged from 40 to 60, with the 40 to 45 years group the largest at 38% (Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of the Age Group 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: Post-levels of the members of the School Management Teams (N =21).

Position	Male	Female	Number	Percentage
Principal	3	0	3	14.3
Deputy principal	3	3	6	28.6
HOD	5	7	12	57.1

The years of experience in school management ranged from 1 to 30, with 61% of the participants with an experience of 11 to 20 years. Most of the participants were head of Departments (57%). The post levels of the participants are shown in Table 2.

4.2. Qualitative findings

The first objective of the bigger study was to explore and describe the implementation of the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in the selected schools, and the meeting of this objective was dependent on the knowledge of the participants about the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in School. The participants were to respond to the question “what do you know about the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in School?”. This objective could not be met because none of the participants had the policy in their schools, and did not know about the policy or its contents.

4.3. Lack of school drug policies

The follow-up question was to find out about specific school-developed policies that are used to address the overall problem of substance abuse, with the question, “Does your school have a drug policy that is implemented to manage drug abuse in the school?”. This question was relevant for the study, irrespective of whether the school did or did not have the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in Schools. If they had, the study was to analyze the school policy, to determine the extent to which it meets the requirements of the national policy. However, if the school did not have the national policy, the study was to access whatever policy they had, and describe how it is implemented.

Although none of the schools could produce a written policy document, they could however describe series of actions or processes followed to address the problem of drug abuse. However, these processes were limited because they focused on actions taken by the school when a learner was found to be using drugs, and lacked core components of a comprehensive drug policy, such as education and prevention of drug use by learners, as well as the training of educators.

5. Discussion

School based policies are key for the prevention and

management of drug use in schools [22], as such policies have been found to be effective [23]. However, the existence of a policy, such as the National Policy on Drug Management in Schools, if not known, cannot be implemented, and thus does not benefit the school environment in any way. Even if the National Policy on Drug Management in School has merits, these cannot be confirmed because the policy is neither known nor implemented. The finding that none of the schools that participated knew about the national policy indicates a serious gap in efforts to combat drug use in schools. However, this finding may not be unique to this school district as other studies have found that knowledge of South African policies, rules, and regulations in relation to substance use within school premises is limited [7]. The National Department of Basic Education in South Africa may therefore assume that because there is a policy, it is being implemented. An indication that the National Policy on Drug Management in School is not known was that a search of academic papers using it as key words failed to yield any results. Instead, other programs such as “*Ke Moja*” Substance Abuse prevention program yielded results, which indicates that they are known, implemented and assessed [24]. The finding that schools do not know of, and therefore do not implement the National Policy on Drug Abuse Management in Schools is a major concern as it has implications at various levels, which include the following:

There may not be specific interventions in schools to prevent drug use. Schools often act after a learner has been identified. However, it often takes a long time before drug use is identified, which implies that the prevention of drug use is compromised.

The schools lose out on the benefits of knowing about, and using the guidelines provided by the policy.

The schools lack consistency in dealing with drug use at school, both within and across schools

In the absence of policy, schools do their own things, which often includes expulsion, which is precisely prohibited by the national policy.

Important requirements of the policies are not implemented, including the training of teachers on

dealing with drug abuse in the school environment. According to the national policy, this training is supposed to be conducted by the Provincial Department of Education

In the absence of guidelines, schools often resort to expulsion of learners who are deemed to be unruly, which includes those that use drugs [25]. Literature reports that being expelled from school has long term negative consequences, which include substance abuse in adulthood and even homelessness [17, 26]. Additionally, expulsion from school contributes to increased aggression behavior in social life [27, 28]. It is for that reason that the National Policy discourages expulsion from school, even for learners who use substances. In the absence of knowledge about the policy, schools often expel learners without knowing and consideration of the long term implications of such an action [29, 30].

Two major public health implications of lack of knowledge about, and resultant lack of implementation of the policy are the following:

Because the policy is neither known nor implemented, it remains a shelve document, which cannot be assessed, reviewed or amended. Implementation is a pre-requisite for these processes, and all these processes are needed for refinement and therefore improvement of a policy.

The appropriateness, usefulness and effectiveness of the policy remains unknown

6. Conclusion

Despite the serious problem of substance abuse among in-school youth, the South African National Policy on Drug Management in School, which is meant to provide guidance on how schools should manage this public, school and education aspect, is not known and therefore not implemented. It is recommended that the National Department of Basic Education be formally engaged about this gap, and that processes be established on the implementation of this policy, whether as it is or in an amended form.

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