

Teachers' Lived Experiences and Intervention Strategies in Managing Substance Abuse among Rural Secondary School Learners in South Africa

Rendani Tshifhumulo, Tshifhiwa Khauli & Konanani Constance Matambela
University of Venda, South Africa

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Abstract

Substance abuse among secondary school learners has emerged as a critical challenge confronting educators in rural South African contexts, yet the voices and experiences of teachers navigating this complex phenomenon remain underexplored in scholarly literature. This qualitative study investigates the multifaceted challenges teachers encounter when working with learners who abuse substances at School A Secondary School in Thohoyandou (pseudonym), Limpopo Province. Through semi-structured interviews with five educators, the research reveals a disturbing landscape characterised by classroom disruptions, aggressive learner behaviour, emotional exhaustion among teaching staff, and systemic gaps in professional support structures. The findings illuminate how substances such as cannabis, chove, nyaupe, and alcohol, among others, profoundly compromise the teaching-learning environment, whilst teachers themselves, lacking specialised training in addiction counselling, struggle to balance disciplinary responsibilities with pastoral care obligations. Peer pressure, familial dysfunction, and easy accessibility to drugs near school premises emerged as primary drivers of substance abuse, compounded by parental denial and weak community oversight. The study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive intervention frameworks that incorporate professional counsellors, law enforcement collaboration, parental engagement programmes, and sustained teacher capacity-building initiatives. By foregrounding teachers' authentic narratives, this research contributes empirically grounded insights that challenge current educational policies whilst offering practical recommendations for creating safer, more supportive learning environments in resource-constrained rural contexts.

Introduction

The spectre of substance abuse among adolescents represents one of the most pressing public health and educational crises confronting contemporary South African society. Whilst global discourse has increasingly recognised substance abuse as a multidimensional problem requiring coordinated responses across health, social, and educational sectors (UNODC, 2021), the lived realities of teachers working at



the coalface of this crisis remain inadequately documented. Secondary school educators, positioned as frontline responders to learners' behavioural and psychological distress, find themselves navigating treacherous terrain between pedagogical responsibilities and quasi-therapeutic interventions for which they possess neither training nor institutional support (Blows & Isaacs, 2022).

In rural South African contexts, where socio-economic deprivation intersects with limited access to specialised support services, the challenges confronting teachers intensify exponentially. The Thohoyandou district of Limpopo Province exemplifies such contexts, geographically remote, economically marginalised, and characterised by communities where substance abuse has become normalised through generational cycles of poverty, unemployment, and social disintegration (Ngobeni et al., 2024). Within this milieu, teachers encounter daily manifestations of learners' substance abuse: classroom disruptions, academic deterioration, physical aggression, and behavioural volatility that fundamentally compromise the educational mission.

Despite legislative frameworks such as the South African Schools Act (1996), the Children's Act (2005), and the National Drug Master Plan (2019–2024), which ostensibly provide governance structures for addressing substance abuse in educational settings, implementation remains profoundly problematic (Mokwena & Setshego, 2021). Teachers report feeling abandoned by systemic failures, inadequate training, absent school-based counsellors, unresponsive parents, and communities where drug dealers brazenly target learners during school hours. This implementation chasm between policy rhetoric and educational reality creates fertile ground for teacher burnout, professional disillusionment, and ultimately, compromised learning outcomes for vulnerable youth.

This study emerges from recognition that teachers' voices and experiences constitute critical yet marginalised knowledge in understanding and addressing substance abuse among learners. By foregrounding educators' authentic narratives through interpretive qualitative inquiry, the research seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between individual teacher agency, institutional constraints, community dynamics, and broader socio-economic forces shaping substance abuse patterns among rural secondary school learners. The study poses three fundamental questions: What challenges do teachers encounter when working with substance-abusing learners? What factors contribute to substance abuse among learners in rural contexts? What intervention strategies might effectively support both teachers and learners?

Literature Review

Substance abuse among school-aged populations represents a global phenomenon, though its manifestations vary considerably across geographical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts (Jumbe et al., 2021). International research consistently documents correlations between adolescent substance use and adverse outcomes, including academic underachievement, school dropout, mental health deterioration, and engagement in high-risk behaviours (Jatau et al., 2021). Within the African continent, substance abuse among learners presents distinct contextual dimensions shaped by post-colonial legacies and ongoing socio-economic transformations. In Nigeria, the abuse of codeine syrup and tramadol among secondary school students has reached crisis proportions (Oshodi et al., 2019), whilst Kenyan adolescent health surveys reveal approximately 10% of 15–19-year-olds reporting alcohol abuse, with strong associations between substance use and school absenteeism (Jumbe et al., 2021). South Africa's unique historical trajectory characterised by apartheid's social engineering and persistent structural

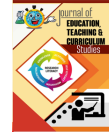


inequalities creates distinctive conditions for adolescent substance abuse, with research indicating that 31–49% of secondary school learners report lifetime substance use (UNODC, 2021; Nzama & Ajani, 2021). Particularly alarming is the emergence of "nyaope," a lethal cocktail combining heroin, cannabis, antiretroviral medications, and toxic additives, increasingly penetrating rural communities (Mnyandu et al., 2021).

The aetiology of learner substance abuse is multifactorial. Peer pressure constitutes perhaps the most consistently documented risk factor across diverse contexts (Zemba, 2022): adolescents' desires for acceptance and group belonging create powerful motivations for conforming to peer norms, including substance use. Family environments exert equally profound influences. Parental substance use models addictive behaviours, whilst family dysfunction, characterised by conflict, neglect, or parental absence, creates emotional voids that adolescents may fill through substance-mediated escape (Peltzer & Ramlagan, 2020). At the structural level, endemic poverty, unemployment, and limited recreational opportunities create conditions of hopelessness wherein substances offer temporary respite. The deliberate proximity of drug distribution networks to schools further facilitates access and normalises substance presence within community landscapes (Ngobeni et al., 2024). Post-colonial political economies restructured African societies in ways that concentrated poverty, dismantled traditional support systems, and normalised substance use as a coping mechanism among displaced labour populations (Farmer, 2003; Turshen, 1999). Structural Adjustment Programmes then intensified this vulnerability by defunding health systems and accelerating urban informality at precisely the moment when unemployment and social dislocation created maximum demand for relief, leaving states structurally unable to respond (Lurie et al., 1995; Simone, 2004).

Despite the breadth of research on substance abuse prevalence and risk factors, considerably less scholarly attention interrogates teachers' experiences managing substance-abusing learners. Existing studies reveal multifaceted challenges spanning practical, emotional, and ethical dimensions (Richert et al., 2020). Teachers struggle to differentiate substance abuse symptoms from mental health conditions or typical adolescent behaviour without access to screening tools (Nkosi & Pretorius, 2022). Classroom management difficulties intensify when substance-affected learners exhibit disruptive or aggressive behaviours, consuming disproportionate teacher time and generating cumulative stress (Blows & Isaacs, 2022). Role ambiguity further complicates teachers' work: educators must navigate tensions between disciplinary enforcement and compassionate support, and between maintaining confidentiality and reporting obligations (Mokwena & Setshego, 2021). Resource constraints represent the most fundamental challenge schools lacking counsellors, social workers, or psychologists leave teachers assuming responsibilities far exceeding their professional training (Mupara et al., 2022).

A critical gap exists in the literature: whilst quantitative prevalence studies document the scope of the problem, qualitative research foregrounding the authentic, contextualised experiences of rural teachers remains scarce. Studies conducted in township or urban settings (Mkhize, 2023; Blows & Isaacs, 2022) do not adequately capture the compounded vulnerabilities characterising Limpopo's Vhembe District, where geographic remoteness, resource scarcity, and community-level normalisation of substance use intersect. This study addresses that gap by privileging teachers' narratives as a source of empirically grounded, policy-relevant knowledge.



Theoretical Framework

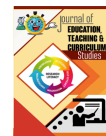
This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks that together illuminate the individual and contextual dimensions of learner substance abuse. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides foundational explanatory power by positing that individuals acquire behaviours through observational learning, modelling, and reinforcement mechanisms (Rumjaun & Fawzia, 2020). When learners observe peers, family members, or media representations portraying substance use as desirable or consequence-free, imitative behaviours become more probable. Positive reinforcement, whether social acceptance, stress relief, or euphoric experience, further entrenches usage patterns. This framework is particularly useful in explaining peer-driven initiation and the intergenerational transmission of substance use behaviours within families.

Complementing this individual-level focus, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) directs analytical attention to the nested environmental contexts that shape developmental trajectories (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2021). At the microsystem level, immediate environments such as family, school, and peer groups exert direct influence on learner behaviour. The mesosystem encompasses interactions between these microsystems, for example, family-school communication. The exosystem includes broader community structures and local drug distribution networks, whilst the macrosystem encompasses cultural values, economic systems, and policy frameworks. This multilevel conceptualisation illuminates how substance abuse reflects not merely individual pathology but systemic failures across ecological levels, failures that teachers, positioned at the intersection of microsystem and mesosystem, are left to manage largely alone. Taken together, these two frameworks provide the analytical scaffolding for interpreting the findings and for situating teachers' experiences within both interpersonal and structural dimensions of the problem.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which prioritises understanding social phenomena through participants' lived experiences, meanings, and subjective realities (Creswell, 2014). Interpretivism treats reality as socially constructed, thereby necessitating methodological approaches that capture complexity, context, and participants' voices (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021). The study was conducted at School A Secondary School (pseudonym) around Thohoyandou, Vhembe District Municipality, Limpopo Province, a rural setting characterised by high unemployment, limited infrastructure, and geographic remoteness. Purposive sampling identified five teachers (three female, two male), aged 34 to 48 years, all holding Bachelor of Education qualifications and with 3 to 20 years of teaching experience. All participants were Tshivenda-speaking, facilitating culturally appropriate communication. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. Conducted in private settings within the school premises to ensure confidentiality, interviews lasted 30–45 minutes, were audio-recorded with informed consent, and followed an interview guide covering key themes whilst allowing flexibility for Participant-directed exploration of emergent issues (Campbell et al., 2020).

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following established procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim; transcripts were repeatedly read for data immersion, followed by systematic coding of recurring patterns, concepts, and meanings. Related codes were grouped into broader categories and subsequently organised into overarching themes, with constant comparison ensuring interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts. Research quality was



evaluated using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, operationalised through prolonged engagement, member checking, thick description, audit trails, and reflexivity. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Venda and the Limpopo Department of Education. Participants provided informed consent and confidentiality was maintained through pseudonymisation of both participants and the school. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, participants retained the right to decline answering any question and to withdraw from the study at any stage (Berman et al., 2020; Khoa et al., 2023).

Findings and Discussion

Analysis revealed five major themes characterising teachers' experiences: (1) multifaceted classroom challenges, (2) aetiological factors driving substance abuse, (3) teachers' role ambiguities and limitations, (4) systemic support deficits, and (5) intervention recommendations. These themes, explored below with supporting quotations from participants, illuminate the complex reality rural educators confront.

Theme 1: The Multifaceted Nature of Classroom Challenges

Teachers consistently described profound classroom disruptions attributable to substance-affected learners, particularly those in junior grades (Grades 8–9), where substance experimentation appears most prevalent. Participant 2 articulated experiences shared across interviews:

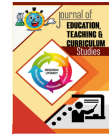
"Grade 8 and 9 are much worse; they use drugs a lot, and when you walk into class, you smell marijuana. They are not involved in class. They react when you try to communicate with them... Some experienced dizziness, leaving us in a precarious situation, unsure of what to do. They do threaten us when we try to correct them for their misdeeds while they are high."

This account captures multiple challenge dimensions simultaneously. The olfactory presence of cannabis signals brazenness—learners sufficiently intoxicated that concealment becomes impossible or unnecessary. Classroom disengagement manifests as passive withdrawal and active resistance, disrupting not only substance-using learners' education but that of classmates whose learning suffers from constant interruptions. Physical symptoms such as dizziness, which may indicate withdrawal or overconsumption, place teachers in impossible positions: lacking medical training or access to school nurses, they must determine appropriate responses to potential health emergencies whilst simultaneously maintaining classroom order. The threat of violence adds another dimension, with teachers describing fear of physical assault from learners whose substance-altered states reduce impulse control and heighten aggression.

Participant 3's description of aggression among senior female learners reveals substance abuse's gendered dimensions:

"Some students, both boys and girls, smoke marijuana. We have issues with girls because they become aggressive after smoking. There are numerous instances of 'mujolo' [romantic relationships]. Because a boy cheated on them, you see girls battling over him. They are the best at beating their peers. They show us no respect at all."

This observation in our assumption challenges stereotypical associations of substance-related aggression with male learners. The public nature of such violence normalises aggression within school culture whilst undermining teacher authority. These findings resonate with broader South African research documenting correlations between substance abuse and disruptive school behaviours (Blows & Isaacs, 2022; Mokwena & Setshego, 2021), though Participant narratives add contextual richness absent from



quantitative studies, revealing how disruptions accumulate incrementally – day after day, period after period – wearing down teacher resilience.

Theme 2: Aetiological Factors – Understanding Why Learners Use Substances

Consistent with Social Learning Theory predictions (Rumjaun & Fawzia, 2020), peer pressure emerged as teachers' primary explanatory framework. Participant 4 noted:

"Peer pressure is the main cause of students' marijuana use and alcohol consumption. Some people end up using the drug crystal because they want to fit in with the groups that are active with drugs."

Teachers also identified dysfunctional family environments as significant contributors. Participant 4 continued:

"Some students are interested in this because of their family backgrounds. Some come from shattered homes, and some parents don't even give a damn about their kids... Some students are raised in households where everyone smokes, drinks, and does other illicit activities; they imitate their parents and don't perceive anything wrong with it."

Parental non-cooperation further frustrated intervention efforts, as Participant 5 lamented: "Their parents don't seem bothered when we try to talk to them, and some of them don't even bother to come to the meetings. Which is really depressing. Who are we if the parents don't give any thought to the kids?" This aligns with research demonstrating that family-based prevention programmes are superior to school-only approaches yet require parental willingness to participate—cooperation frequently absent in contexts of poverty-related stress (Ramsoomar & Morojele, 2022).

Perhaps most alarming, teachers described how community structures actively facilitate learner substance access. Participant 1 explained:

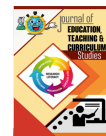
"The majority of community members distribute drugs to students. A bike comes by during the break and sells our children marijuana and narcotics (crystals) via a fence. Even when students are wearing uniforms, the informal stores offer drugs to them. You can see a student smoking a cigarette in the morning as they come from an Indian store."

The school management and teachers at the selected school have started working with parents, the police service, and the local University to educate learners about the dangers of substance use. In the campaign, social workers and youth workers are invited to support the programme, focusing on the effects of substance use. This study is part of the campaign that has received endorsement from the Department of Education and the local University. One of the major steps taken by the school was to ensure that parents serve as security during study time, which has added hours to support grade 12 learners. The process has yielded improved results for grade 12 learners.

These observations align with Ecological Systems Theory's emphasis on environmental influences (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2021): when communities lack collective efficacy and poverty-driven economies embed drug sales within local structures, elimination efforts become particularly challenging.

Theme 3: Teachers' Roles, Limitations, and Emotional Toll

Teachers described various attempts to address substance abuse despite lacking specialised training. Participants 1 and 3 outlined typical approaches:



"Every Monday and Friday, as teachers, we have an assembly when we inform students of what is and is not permitted. We do let them know that drugs are not permitted and won't be helpful... We do hold meetings to try to address the issue... Since it's against the law for teachers to beat students these days, we sometimes have to contact parents to step in and try to find a solution."

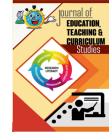
The reference to the prohibition of corporal punishment reveals generational tensions worthy of critical reflection. In the era preceding the South African Schools Act (1996), which banned corporal punishment, physical discipline was a commonly employed mechanism of behaviour management in schools. Some participants appear to perceive its removal as the loss of a deterrent. However, it must be emphasised that the evidence base on corporal punishment does not support its effectiveness in addressing substance abuse specifically – fear of physical punishment may suppress visible substance-related behaviour in the short term, but it does not address the underlying drivers of addiction, nor does it equip learners with coping skills or alter the social and economic conditions facilitating drug use (Mkhize, 2023). Moreover, corporal punishment is associated with increased aggression, school avoidance, and damaged trust between learners and educators, outcomes that are counterproductive to the kind of open, supportive relationships that effective substance abuse intervention requires. The real issue reflected in this comment is not the absence of corporal punishment but the absence of its replacement: teachers have not been provided with evidence-based alternative strategies, which reflect a systemic failure of professional development and institutional support.

Participant 4's response reveals more concerning coping strategies: "In certain situations, I just stare and carry on with my work because these students don't even respect anyone and use inappropriate language." This withdrawal, disengaging rather than confronting substance-affected learners, whilst understandable given teachers' limited options, essentially abandons affected learners to their addictions. Such responses reflect not teacher indifference but realistic assessments of futility when lacking effective intervention tools or institutional support.

The emotional burden teachers carry emerged as a particularly poignant theme. Participant 3's concluding statement, "This school needs prayers for real. We are traumatised," captures the psychological distress teachers experience. Repeated exposure to learners' substance-driven behavioural problems, witnessing wasted educational potential, confronting aggression, and experiencing persistent ineffectiveness collectively generate stress, frustration, helplessness, and burnout (UNODC, 2021; Richert et al., 2020). The absence of debriefing opportunities, employee assistance programmes, or peer support networks leaves teachers processing traumatic experiences in isolation.

Theme 4: Systemic Support Deficits

Perhaps the most consistent theme concerned inadequate institutional support structures. Participant 5 articulated widespread sentiment: "We are having these challenges because we don't have professional people to guide our learners. Professionals like social workers and counsellors are needed to assist our learners... There is no support from the school or the department itself. We are struggling." South African schools, particularly rural institutions, typically lack such personnel due to budgetary constraints and recruitment difficulties (Mupara et al., 2022). Consequently, teachers assume responsibilities far exceeding their professional preparation, experience role overload, and perform tasks for which they lack competence, in a situation that serves neither teachers nor learners. Teachers also identified a lack of collaboration with external stakeholders, with Participant 3 recommending: "They can also try to work



with the South African Police Service and try to ask for assistance from the community. Having professionals who can train us to deal with learners involved with substances." This recognises substance abuse as requiring multi-sectoral responses, though police involvement requires careful management to avoid criminalising vulnerable learners rather than supporting rehabilitation.

Theme 5: Intervention Recommendations – Teachers' Perspectives

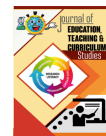
Despite considerable challenges, teachers articulated thoughtful recommendations. Prevention was emphasised by participants 1, 2, and 4: "There should be more awareness campaigns to teach learners about substance abuse." Research, however, demonstrates that interactive, skills-based programmes substantially outperform didactic information provision (Morojele & Parry, 2020); awareness alone is insufficient without environmental changes that address availability, peer norms, and socio-economic conditions. Teachers additionally recommended regular police partnerships to deter dealers, engagement of community civic organisations and traditional leaders, parent education workshops to enhance supervision skills and reduce denial, and the employment of school-based social workers and counsellors. This last recommendation receives strong empirical support: meta-analyses demonstrate that school-based counselling is effective in reducing adolescent substance use, particularly when combined with individual counselling, peer support groups, and family interventions (Skeen et al., 2020).

Discussion: Situating Findings Within Broader Contexts

This study's findings coalesce around several key insights. First, substance abuse creates multidimensional challenges for teachers spanning classroom management, safety concerns, academic mission compromise, and emotional distress challenges that exceed typical teaching demands and require skills and support structures frequently absent in rural South African schools. Second, substance abuse among learners reflects complex causal pathways involving peer dynamics, family dysfunction, community-level facilitation, and structural socio-economic conditions, demanding interventions at multiple ecological levels simultaneously. Third, teachers demonstrate commitment to learners' welfare and conscientious effort despite inadequate preparation and institutional support. Fourth, current policy frameworks are not implemented at the ground level, creating disjuncture between legislative rhetoric and educational realities.

The findings validate both theoretical frameworks employed. Peer influence, parental modelling, and observational learning clearly shape learners' substance-related behaviours, supporting Social Learning Theory's core propositions (Rumjaun & Fawzia, 2020). Simultaneously, the importance of family environments, community contexts, economic conditions, and policy implementation aligns with Ecological Systems Theory's multilevel environmental focus (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2021). The findings also suggest the necessity of theoretical integration: neither framework alone adequately captures the full complexity of substance abuse, requiring synthetic approaches that recognise the simultaneous operation of individual agency, interpersonal dynamics, and structural constraints.

Several policy implications emerge. First, urgent investment in school-based support services, such as counsellors, social workers, and nurses, is a critical priority requiring budgetary commitment from national and provincial education departments. Second, comprehensive teacher training programmes must incorporate substance abuse content, equipping educators with recognition skills, basic intervention strategies, and effective referral knowledge. Third, multi-sectoral collaboration frameworks, including memoranda of understanding between education, police, health, and social development



departments, require formalisation. Fourth, broader social determinants such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality require attention: whilst education-sector interventions are necessary, they remain insufficient absent progress on structural conditions. While these findings are deep and authentic, they are not necessarily generalisable to all South African schools or urban contexts.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the profound challenges confronting rural South African teachers working with substance-abusing learners. Teachers described navigating treacherous terrain between educational responsibilities and quasi-therapeutic interventions for which they possess neither training nor support. Classroom disruptions, aggressive behaviours, academic decline, and safety concerns fundamentally compromise teaching effectiveness. Substance abuse among learners reflects complex interactions between peer pressure, family dysfunction, community-level facilitation, and structural socio-economic conditions, demanding comprehensive, multilevel interventions that current systems are failing to provide.

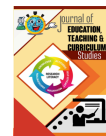
Yet amidst these challenges, teachers demonstrate remarkable resilience and commitment, continuing to attempt interventions and articulating thoughtful, experience-grounded recommendations: employing specialised personnel, providing teacher training, fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration, engaging parents and communities, and addressing substance availability. These recommendations warrant serious consideration by policymakers and administrators. Ultimately, addressing substance abuse among learners requires recognising it as a shared responsibility transcending individual teacher capacity. Schools cannot solve alone what reflects broader social failures, such as poverty, inequality, inadequate health systems, weak law enforcement, and community dysfunction. Investing in specialised personnel, training programmes, multi-sectoral partnerships, and evidence-based prevention approaches represents not merely educational expenditure but social investment in young people's futures. Teachers' voices, foregrounded throughout this study, deserve attentive hearing; honouring their experiences requires translating insights into concrete action: policy reforms, resource allocations, and systemic changes creating conditions in which all learners, including those struggling with substance abuse, find support, opportunities, and pathways towards healthier, more hopeful futures.

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