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## SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF DRUG ABUSE IN ZIMBABWE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this study was to examine school adolescents' perceptions on what they believed to be the causes and effects of drug abuse among them. The research design followed a phenomenological approach where a case study was used. Fifty-five (N=55) participants who were secondary school boys and girls were randomly selected from the target population in three schools in Lupane District, Matabeleland North province. A questionnaire was used as the research instrument to gather data. The study showed that the current social assumption that boys are more prone to drug abuse than girls was indeed true. The results showed that the major causes of drug abuse among adolescents included peer group pressure, curiosity on the part of adolescents, a way of relieving stress. Beer, cigarettes and marijuana were the commonly abused drugs by adolescents who believed that these generally had negative effects on their well-being, family and society. The researchers concluded that there should be peer educators in schools whose purpose will be to educate and try to reform their peers who abuse drugs and that there should be a school based guidance and counselling professional who can operate and facilitate the imparting of knowledge on the consequences of drug abuse students. Parents and communities should be conscientised on the causes and dangers of substance abuse by their children, and anti-drug abuse campaigns are to be held in order to create a drug-free society.*

**Key words:** School adolescents, drug abuse, perceptions, peer pressure

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The problem of drug abuse particularly among young people has reached alarming levels in most countries particularly in the developed world. Adolescent school children have not been spared by the negative

phenomenon as they are part of the larger society within which this problem is experienced. With reference to developmental stages, adolescents or teenagers are generally aged between 13 to 19 years, and most of them are school-going age. Their age has been described as a stage of psychological turmoil; as they tend to try out several roles as well as experiment with so many life activities (Gasva and Goronga, 2012). This paper assumed that one of the things that most adolescents often experiment with is the use of drugs.

A 'drug' is generally viewed as a habit-forming medicinal or illicit substance, especially a narcotic or tranquilliser. The concept of drug abuse has been defined differently by different authorities. One standard definition according to McWilliams and Tuttle (2007: 197) is that;

*Drug abuse is the compulsive, excessive, and self-damaging use of habit-forming drugs or substances, leading to addiction or dependence, serious physiological injury (such as damage to kidneys, liver, heart) and/or psychological harm (such as dysfunctional behaviour patterns, hallucinations, memory loss), or death. It is also called substance abuse.*

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2002) notes that while many people use drugs, only a small percentage abuse drugs. This study assumed that to get the perceptions from adolescents on what they believe regarding drug abuse; would help to find the real causes and effects of drug abuse among them. It was assumed that the participants would be truthful in their responses, hence, would provide honest responses that would help society be a better place with reduced or eliminated substance abuse by adolescents and other people.

### 1.1 Background of the study

Research in drug use and abuse has revealed that while drug use and experimentation is common in pre-adolescents and adolescents, only a small percentage of those users will go on to abuse the drugs (Bureau of Justice Statistics, *ibid*). As Fernald and Fernald (*ibid*: 166) note;

*Drugs today are used for widely different purposes, therapeutic and/or experimental. Prescriptions in therapy aim to alleviate aversive human states, such as pain, anxiety, depression and hallucinations. The purpose in experimental use is often to gain heightened awareness of oneself and the environment, as well as a feeling of well-being and excitement. Notably, the same drug affects different people differently.*

While genetic, environmental and psychiatric causes of drug abuse are possible, it is likely that a combination of risk factors is truly the cause of drug abuse (Haralambos and Holborn, 2005). If an individual has a genetic predisposition to drug abuse, that likely indicates one of the parents abuses drugs. This may create an unstable home life and, possibly, emotional or psychological problems. Together, these can become the drug abuse cause.

Hoffmann and Bahr (2011) say that drug abuse has for many years disturbed lives of many people in most communities, most of whom are adolescents. Adolescents are often faced with challenges which can lead to parent-child conflict. The adolescents view parents or guardians as too strict when they try to shape and control their behaviour; including restraining them from abusing drugs. Some parents or guardians end up giving up as they find their efforts coming to no avail. Due to drug abuse, the teenager often becomes stressed and fails to adapt to the demands and constraints of life.

Often, the challenges facing the teenager lead to further abuse of drugs. The adolescent's biological and emotional turmoil drives the individual to seek help from their peers. They will consequently try anything that an adult does yet at the same time, the adolescent needs parental care. This chaotic situation leads to maladaptive behaviour such as premature sex, and drop outs at school. Rice and Dolgin (2002) are of the view that in most instances, sadly enough; adolescents generally lack knowledge of the consequences of drug abuse.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

Drug abuse seems to be on the increase among secondary school boys and girls and students in Lupane Secondary Schools are no exception. If this issue remains unaddressed, it can develop into a serious problem among adolescents which will consequently affect their person, families and the larger community.

## 1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to gather perceptions of adolescents on what they believed to be the causes of drug abuse among them as well as their effects. This was done with the view to coming up with a possible remedial solution to the problem. The research was guided by the following specific objectives;

- To explore what the adolescents believed to be the causes of drug abuse among them
- To determine whether or not peer pressure or fear of being isolated by peers leads to drug abuse among adolescents

- To examine adolescents' knowledge of the consequences of abusing drugs

#### 1.4 Significance of the study

The study was intended to:

- Enlighten adolescents and society about the common causes of drug abuse
- Expose adolescents to the several dangers of abusing drugs in order to help them refrain from substance abuse
- Encourage families and communities to contribute towards a drug-free society
- Help schools and the relevant government ministry to be part of the social system that fights against drug abuse in schools.

## 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### 2.1 Causes of Drug Abuse among Adolescents

The cause of drug abuse is not fully known but likely includes genetic predisposition, environmental circumstances and co-occurring conditions (Giddens, 2009). Hoffmann and Bahr (2011) note that it has been noted that drug abuse often runs in families, suggesting genetics is one of the causes of drug abuse. While having parents that abuse drugs puts a child at risk, it is possible for the child to grow up without drug abuse problems. It is also possible to abuse drugs without having any other drug abuser in the family tree. Thus, it seems clear that genetics alone is not the cause of drug abuse.

With reference to environmental causes of drug abuse, Bahr (2003:129) says that;

*There are certain life circumstances, particularly among younger users, that are risk factors for, rather than the direct cause of drug abuse. Parental abuse and neglect are commonly seen as part of the cause of drug abuse. An adolescent or pre-adolescent may be trying to gain attention from an inattentive parent or escape an abusive one by using drugs; prolonged attempts through drug use can be a cause of drug abuse. A drug user, or the presence of drugs in the home, can also be a major cause of drug abuse.*

As noted by McWilliams and Tuttle (2007), drug abuse also often occurs alongside other conditions like mental illness. For them, while mental illness itself is not thought to cause drug abuse, one condition may indicate, and be complicated by, the other. One of the causes of drug abuse may be the attempt to manage the symptoms of an underlying mental illness or disorder. For example, a person with depression may repeatedly use a drug to 'get high' as an escape from their depressive mood (called self-medication). The depression wasn't the cause of drug abuse, but it was a contributing factor. It is known, however, that not everyone with a mental illness abuses drugs so mental illness alone is not the cause of drug abuse (Hoffmann and Yang, 2010).

For Arnett (2004:19), additional risk factors contributing to the causes of adolescent drug abuse include:

- Unstable home environment, often due to drug abuse or mental illness of the parent or caregivers
- A poor relationship with parents, siblings and/or relatives
- Use of drugs by friends/peers or availability of drugs with friends
- Permissive attitude towards their own drug use and the ultimate abuse of the drug by the adolescents
- Behavioural problems combined with poor parenting
- Poor achievement in school leading to frustration
- Apparent approval of drug abuse in the school, peer group or community.

Rice and Dolgin (ibid) cite lack of knowledge and dangers of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs as one of the many factors that lead to substance abuse among adolescents. As reported by Arnett (ibid), many young people become involved in drugs before they are fully aware of the health risks and the power of addiction. Berger (2006), states that adolescents who take up smoking believe that they will never have cancer or heart disease. Young people also tend to dismiss possible health risks because they seemingly 'bounce back' so quickly and as if without having experienced any apparent negative effects (Messar and Millar, 1999).

Santrock (2003) also reported that the lack of a healthy nurturing home environment and presence of chaotic lifestyle in childhood has been shown to increase the use of drugs as users seek to obtain a feeling of acceptance by a social environment that is abusive of drugs. Furthermore, young people may be vulnerable to teasing and exclusion from the group if they are perceived to be non-drug abusers (Messar and Millar, 1999). Peer pressure leads adolescents to be involved in drug abuse and there is also fear of being isolated by peers who have taken drug abuse as a fashion.

According to Bah et al., (2005), if an adolescent has friends who abuse drugs, they will most probably be expected to be involved too. Berk (1998) points out that conformity to peer pressure is greater during adolescence than in childhood or young adulthood, a finding that is not surprising considering the amount of time adolescents often spend together. Hassert (2001) also asserts that belonging to a clique including a drug-abusive one is very important for most adolescents and serves several functions including feeling of acceptance and social cohesion.

## ***2.2 Consequences of Drug Abuse by Adolescents***

This paper assumed that there are several consequences of drug abuse by adolescents. In the same vein, Hilbern (2010:176) note that;

*Young people who persistently abuse drugs or substances often experience an array of problems, including academic difficulties, health-related problems (including mental health), poor family and peer relationships, and involvement with the juvenile justice system. Additionally, there are consequences for family members, the community, and the entire society.*

With regards the effect of drugs on academics, studies show that declining grades, absenteeism from school and other improper activities, and increased potential for dropping out of school are problems associated with adolescent substance abuse (Bureau of Justice Statistics, *ibid*). Hawkins, et al (2008) cite research indicating that a low level of commitment to education and higher truancy rates appear to be related to substance abuse among adolescents. Cognitive and behavioural problems experienced by alcohol- and drug-using youth may interfere with their academic performance and also present obstacles to learning for their classmates.

Fernald and Fernald (*ibid*: 167) say that;

*Parenthetically, it should be pointed out that in most societies, caffeine, nicotine and alcohol are the most widely abused drugs. The first serves as a stimulant; the second has only minor experimental effects, including relaxation or acting as a mild stimulant; and the third is quite unpredictable, depending partly upon the user's initial state and amount of the substance taken. The dangers in these drugs, or any other taken in sufficient and excessive quantity, are there. They may result in damage to the lungs, liver, brain, or other organs of the body. They can also induce a psychological dependency, in which the individual feels irritated or tense*



*without the drug. And in some instances, there may be chemical changes in the body that result in physiological addiction, producing withdrawal symptoms when the drug is no longer available.*

For McWilliams and Tuttle (ibid), long term psychological damage from drug abuse seems to be associated primarily with the stability of an individual's personality, as well as the chemical properties of the drug. For them, the less stable the individual is; the greater is the likelihood of a severe disturbance resulting from the abuse of a drug. Gropper (2005) note that the social and economic costs related to youth substance abuse are also high. They result from the financial losses and distress suffered by alcohol- and drug-related crime victims, increased burdens for the support of adolescents and young adults who are not able to become self-supporting, and greater demands for medical and other treatment services for these youth.

### **3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research design**

The research used a phenomenological approach, which is a study designed to explore and understand people's everyday lived experiences (Embree, 2007; Shosha, 2015). A case study was used to collect participants' perceptions. A case study is an in-depth examination of an extensive amount of information about very few units or cases for one period or across multiple periods of time or a research strategy which focuses on understanding the social dynamics present within single cases (Eisenhardt, 2009:210). A phenomenological case study was considered to be ideal for this research because the method focuses primarily on the experiences which the participants have had in real life situations (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln, 2011).

The targeted population was made up of 1163 secondary school pupils in three secondary schools (A to C) in Lupane district of Matabeleland North province. The parents of the students get their livelihood through communal farming. It is, therefore, imperative to note that the participants for this research were not sophisticated and the most common drugs available to them included alcohol, marijuana and cigarettes. While it would have been ideal to select only those adolescents who partake in drugs, it would have been difficult to pinpoint drug abusers among the whole population. It was therefore, for this reason, that the entire student population from the three schools was targeted, ranging from form 1 to form 4; with ages ranging from 13 to 19 years.

A random sample of sixty participants (N=60) was selected. According to Isaac and Michael (2004), the recommended sample size for a population of 1163 students should be 291, which is 25%. However due to financial and other logistical constraints, a sample of sixty respondents was selected. This research deliberately intended to include more boys than girls in the ratio 42:18 respectively and this was done to test the current social assumption from the social environment that boys are more prone to drugs than girls. Thus, a total of 60 participants who comprised of 42 boys and 18 girls was utilised to accomplish the study. Class attendance registers from the three schools were used to come up with the samples.

A questionnaire was used as the research instrument to gather data. Ethical issues such as confidentiality, privacy and informed consent were observed and taken into consideration. No names were written on the questionnaire to maintain adolescent's anonymity. The participants were asked to be truthful in their responses and were required to respond to items on the questionnaires that required them to present the drug abuse scenario as it appeared to them. In this regard, 60 questionnaires were, therefore, delivered in person and 55 of them were completed and returned, which was a 91% return rate. Participants were given one week to fill the questionnaires which gave them enough time to provide well thought responses. All questions in the questionnaire were designed to find out adolescents' views regarding the causes and effects of drug abuse among teenagers of their age group.

Before the questionnaires were distributed to the respective schools, a pilot study was carried out to validate and strengthen the reliability of the questionnaire (Marshall, 2006; Marshall and Rossman, 2009). In this regard, 10 teenagers who comprised of 6 males and 4 females were arbitrarily selected from the community for this purpose. Following the piloting of the questionnaires, some of the questions were reconstructed for clarity to respondents.

#### 4.0 STUDY FINDINGS

The first item sought to determine whether adolescent drug abusers could be influential on adolescents. The subjects were asked to place a tick in the appropriate option from the following. Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD).

**Table 4.1: Adolescent drug abusers have an influence on their peers**

Participants	SA	A	D	SD	Total
Males	10	15	9	6	40
Female	5	6	4	0	15
Total	15	21	13	6	55
%	27	38	24	11	100

Findings showed that 15(27%) strongly agreed, 21(38%) agreed, while 13(24%) disagreed and 6(11%) strongly disagreed. Generally, the majority of students 36(65%) were in agreement while 19 (35%) were not in agreement with the view that adolescent drug abusers have an influence on their peers. Thus, peer pressure was revealed to be a driver of drug abuse amongst adolescents which was in agreement with Arnett (2004)’s risk factors contributing to the causes of adolescent drug abuse.

The purpose of the second item was to examine whether the participants perceived ignorance of the consequences of drug abuse by adolescents.

**Table 4.1 Teenagers’ perception on ignorance of the consequences of drug abuse**

Participants	SA	A	D	SD	Total
Males	16	12	7	5	40
Female	7	3	3	2	15
Total	23	15	10	7	55
%	42	27	18	13	100

Findings showed that 23(42%) strongly agreed, 15(27%) agreed while 10(18%) disagreed and 7(13%) strongly disagreed. Thus, the majority of adolescents amounting to 38(69%) generally confirmed ignorance of the consequences of drug abuse.

Item 3 examined whether adolescents’ perception on drug abuse is caused by curiosity.

**Table 4.3 Respondents’ views on abusing drugs due to curiosity**

Participants	SA	A	D	SD	Total
Males	6	15	11	8	40
Females	3	8	3	1	15
Total	9	23	14	9	55
%	16	42	26	16	100

Findings showed that 9 (16%) strongly agreed, 23(42) agreed while 14(26%) disagreed and 9(16%) strongly disagreed. There was therefore an almost balance of views with more students amounting to 32(58%) generally agreeing while 23 (42%) disagreed that drug abuse by adolescents was caused by curiosity and the need for experimentation. Thus, curiosity was largely perceived to have an influence as a driver of drug abuse among teenagers, a finding found to be consistent with findings by Stuart and Sunseen (1991).

Item 4 sought to find out whether adolescents perceived the demand for freedom as one of the causes of drug abuse.

**Table 4.4: Participants’ perceptions on whether demand for freedom causes drug abuse**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Total</b>
Males	3	7	10	20	40
Females	0	4	7	4	15
Total	3	11	17	24	55
<b>%</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>

From the table above, 3(5%) strongly agreed, 11(20%) agreed while 17(31%) strongly disagreed and 24(44%) disagreed. From the findings, it is crystal clear that the majority (75%) of the participants were in disagreement to the statement that the demand for freedom leads adolescents to abuse drugs. Only 25% of the participants perceived that the demand for freedom was the cause for drug abuse.

Item 5 was meant to determine whether the subjects perceived drug abuse as a way of relieving stress.

**Table 4.5: Respondents’ perceptions on abuse of drugs as a stress reliever**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Total</b>
Males	8	19	7	6	40
Females	2	6	5	3	15
Total	10	25	12	8	55
<b>%</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>

The results showed that 10(18%) strongly agreed, 25(45%) agreed while 12(22%) strongly disagreed and 8(15%) strongly disagreed. The findings revealed that the majority (63%) of the respondents generally agreed to the statements that drug abuse was as a way of relieving stress while 37% generally disagreed.

In item 6, the motive was to determine if teenagers abused drugs in order to impress friends.

**Table 4.6: Participants’ perceptions on impressing friends as the cause of drug abuse**

	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Total</b>
Males	7	12	11	10	40
Females	2	7	2	4	10
Total	9	19	13	14	55
<b>%</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100</b>

From the above table, 9(16%) strongly agreed, 19(35%) agreed while 13(24%) disagreed and 14(25%) strongly disagreed. It was interesting to note that the results are somehow balancing, with 51% of the participants agreeing while 49% disagreed that the desire to impress friends was a cause of drug abuse among adolescents.

Item 4.7 examined whether fear of being isolated by peers could cause abuse of drugs among adolescents.

**Table 4.7: Participants’ perceptions on fear of isolation by peers as a motive behind drug abuse**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Total</b>
Males	8	16	6	10	40
Females	0	4	4	7	15
Total	8	20	10	17	55
<b>%</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100</b>

It can be noted that in Table 4.79 a total 8(15%) strongly agreed, 20(36%) agreed, while 10(18%) disagreed and 17(31%) strongly disagreed that fear of isolation by peers is a motive behind drug abuse among adolescents. Interestingly too, the results are somewhat balanced as 51% of the participants generally agreed while 49% of them were in disagreement with the statement.

Item 8 sought to determine which drugs teenagers generally partook. The trend that was revealed by the findings is that beer, cigarettes and marijuana were the drugs commonly abused by adolescents. At the same time, more boys than girls abused each of the drugs, with beer topping the list of the drug abused. Item 9 aimed to discovering participants’ knowledge about the effects of drug abuse. Slightly less than half 26(47%) believed that drugs caused health problems including depression and anxiety while a total 20(36%) believed that drug abuse led to social problems such as withdrawal from others. The remainder (17%) were of the view that the effect of drug abuse among adolescents differed with individuals, but concurred that drug abuse generally had negative effects on adolescents, their families and communities.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the findings of the study, the researchers concluded that:

- The social assumption that boys are more prone to drug abuse than girls was indeed true
- Most adolescents believed that peer group pressure was a major driver of drug abuse amongst adolescents.
- The majority of adolescents confirmed ignorance of the consequences of drug abuse
- Curiosity was largely perceived to have an influence as a driver of drug abuse among teenagers
- Most adolescents did not perceive that the demand for freedom was a cause for drug abuse
- The majority of adolescents believed that drug abuse was as a way of relieving stress
- Among the different drugs that can be abused, beer, cigarettes and marijuana were the commonly abused drugs by adolescents. Adolescents believed that these generally had negative effects on their well-being, family and society.

Form the above conclusions, it researchers recommended that;

- There should be peer educators in schools whose purpose will be to educate and try to reform their peers who abuse drugs
- There should be a school based guidance and counseling professional who can operate and facilitate the imparting of knowledge on the consequences of drug abuse students
- Parents should be conscientised on the causes and dangers of substance abuse by their children
- Communities should hold anti-drug abuse campaigns in order to create a drug-free society.

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