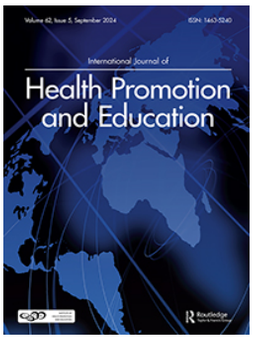

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Looking through the lens of an educator: the role of schools in the management of alcohol and other drug use among high school learners

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ABSTRACT

The effects of learners' alcohol and other drug (AOD) use have far-reaching implications for educators and the teaching environment. The Schools Act 84 of 1996 describes the consequences of misconduct, with its revisions stipulating the conditions and procedures for searching, testing, and drug possession in an attempt to reduce learner substance use. There seem to be inconsistencies in the implementation of guidelines and the current practices at the school level. This research aimed to explore the response by schools to alcohol and other drug use among learners, and the guidelines to identify and address substance use. The study employed a qualitative approach and sampled 14 high schools located in seven municipality clusters in the Cape Town metropole. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with teaching and management personnel. A total of 23 personnel from 11 high schools were interviewed. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and patterns. Three themes emerged from the data, namely Practices of educators in response to AOD use; Policy-implementation gap; and Lack of agency to effect change. There is a lack of cohesive guidelines for educators to address substance use in schools. Consequently, schools use their own discretion to handle the situation; given their resources and social capital. Educators feel uninformed and ill-equipped to assist learners beyond referral. Further, there is a dearth of knowledge on aftercare and relapse in the contexts of the school/learning environment, both of which are critical components of effectively managing substance use.

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Adolescent substance use; safe schools; search and testing; teaching environment

Introduction

Alcohol and other drug (AOD) use can have serious physical, mental, and behavioral consequences for adolescents, including depression, risky sexual behavior, and violence (Aarons et al. 1999; McCabe et al. 2017; Ramsoomar et al. 2013). Previous

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studies reported on the early onset of substance use in South Africa (Chinake 2017; Manu et al. 2017). On average, the initiation of AOD use in South Africa occurs before the age of 13 (Reddy et al. 2008), suggesting early experimentation that may lead to drug abuse and addiction by the end of primary school. Current epidemiological data on the prevalence of adolescent substance use in South Africa is however limited. A 2017 national survey found that 9.5% of individuals aged 15–24 reported harmful levels of alcohol consumption, while 10,2% reported any drug use. Cannabis was the most commonly used drug, as reported by 9.5% in the same age group (Pengpid, Peltzer, and Ramlagan 2021). The most commonly used illicit substances are cannabis, methaqualone, amphetamine-type stimulants such as methamphetamine, opiates, and cocaine (Pengpid, Peltzer, and Ramlagan 2021; Peltzer et al. 2010).

Consequently, educators are increasingly faced with the challenge of managing AOD use among high school learners (Hlomani-Nyawasha, Meyer-Weitz, and Egbe 2020; Sedibe and Hendricks 2020). The effects of learner AOD use can have far-reaching implications for the teaching environment, with disruptiveness expressed in the form of lack of concentration, disrespect for authority, vandalism and physical violence (Liberante 2012; Nemati and Matlabi 2017). In addition to the evidence suggesting that behavioral problems are consequences of AOD use, there are also academic consequences including increased absenteeism and school disengagement (Henry and Thornberry 2010; Osuafor 2021) concomitant with poor academic performance (Osuafor 2021; Patte, Qian, and Leatherdale 2017; Uppal, Paul and Sreenivas 2010) and school dropout (Kelly et al. 2015; Maynard et al. 2015).

To address the abovementioned barriers to teaching at schools, while protecting the basic rights of learners there are national legislature, policies and guidelines to identify and address learner AOD use and selling within schools. The South African School Act 84 of 1996 prohibits the use and possession of drugs and alcohol at schools and allows for search, seizure and drug testing of learners (Republic of South Africa 1996). The Government Gazette 1040, Regulations for safety measures at public schools, specifies the safety measures that schools should comply with (Republic of South Africa 2001). The Government Gazette 23490 (Republic of South Africa 2008) further stipulate the conditions regarding methods for random searches, seizure, and drug testing. Random searches are allowed if there is a reasonable suspicion that learners are in possession of prohibited substances. In such instances, testing should form part of a structured prevention or intervention programme. The National Policy on the Management of Drug Abuse by Learners in Public and Independent Schools and Further Education and Training Institutions provides interventions for learners who use AOD and guidelines for Teaching and Management Personnel (TMP) to support these learners. Information about drug use and prevention should also be extended to educators and parents.

Considering the efforts of TMP to manage the ongoing learner drug surge, the study aimed to explore the practices at schools in response to learner AOD use, and the implementation of guidelines to identify and address substance use.

Materials and methods

Study design and sampling

The study utilized a descriptive-interpretive (basic) qualitative research design with in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This approach, which was chosen for its flexibility in exploring participants' experiences and perspectives focuses on understanding and interpreting individuals' experiences through interviews, and involves coding and thematic identification to uncover patterns (Elliott and Timulak 2021). Seven community clusters from public high schools in the Cape Town Metropole were included in the study. Schools were chosen based on their proximity to high-crime areas where substance use was known to be common. Two schools in each community cluster, served by different facilities such as clinics and police stations, were selected. The participants included TMP such as educators, principals, educators who were Heads of Departments (HODs) or Grade Heads, as well as School Governing Body (SGB) members. Purposively selected participants were introduced to the interviewers by the school principal, based on their role in dealing with learners suspected of using substances. 'Educators refer to teaching staff, and management personnel refer to principals and SGB members who play an important role in the development of school policies and guidelines for managing learners who abuse substances.

To achieve a variation of perspectives in the implementation of guidelines, two participants per school were interviewed. Educators with less than one year of experience were excluded. An introductory meeting with principals facilitated contact with potential participants.

Data collection

A total of 23 TMP were invited and agreed to be interviewed by trained researchers which included educators, grade heads, SGB members, and principals. The principal investigator has extensive experience in the substance abuse field and was actively involved in the collection of data. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private space on the school premises. While most interviews were conducted in English, some were interviewed in the participant's mother tongue, namely, Afrikaans or isiXhosa. Audio-recorded interviews lasted approximately 30–40 minutes. Research assistants transcribed and translated transcripts into English.

Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis approach (Earthy and Cronin 2008) was used to analyze interviews. Data were managed using Atlas.ti software 23. The authors employed a rigorous analysis process, beginning with independent coding of the data, which was subsequently reviewed and collaboratively merged to create a comprehensive code list. This iterative process involved continuously comparing new data against previously analysed content to assess the emergence of additional codes or themes and sub-themes. After analyzing roughly 15–18 interviews, the researchers noted that no new codes were emerging, suggesting that saturation had been reached. The final interviews served to confirm the thematic structure. Throughout the analysis process the team held

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Sex of participants	**n = 23**
Female	13
Male	10
Age of participants	**n = 23**
20-30 years	6
31-40 years	5
41-50 years	3
51-60 years	9
Years at current school	**n = 23**
1-10 years	16
11-20 years	4
21-30 years	2
30+ years	1

regular meetings to critically challenge interpretations and to reach consensus on the final thematic framework, ensuring a reflective analysis.

This study adheres to the COREQ guidelines for qualitative research to ensure transparency and rigor in reporting. All relevant criteria were considered throughout the research process.

Ethics

The Research Ethics Committee at the HSRC approved this research (Protocol No REC 1/18/07/18), and permission was obtained from the Western Cape Education Department.

Results

The research yielded data pertaining to educators' experiences and practices related to identifying and addressing learner AOD use. Table 1 provides demographic information collected before the start of each interview.

As illustrated in Figure 1, three themes emerged from the data. The interconnection of these themes depicts the multifaceted factors involved in understanding how educators and schools approach substance use among learners. The figure includes details about the systematic coding process which were then merged into broader categories that encapsulated shared patterns and trends. Finally, the categories were synthesized into key themes.

Practices of educators in response to AOD use

This theme covers the guidelines followed and measures taken by TMP in the event of suspected drug use, possession, or drug dealing on school premises. The sub-themes that emerge provides details for performing drug searches, testing and linkage to substance use services.

Figure 1. Description of the analysis process.

Procedures to conduct searches and drug testing

Random searches at schools are the consequence of a perceived suspicion among educators that learners are either using drugs or are involved in the sale of drugs at school. Suspicion of drug dealing usually follows untoward behaviour on the school grounds or when learners are found to be in possession of drugs. Patrols and searches are usually conducted by selected educators.

> . . . Our code of conduct says the search is on suspicion that you're using drugs, then you may be searched, and you may be randomly tested (Male, HOD)

> Not every educator can search learners, so if they suspect a learner of using substances then only the Grade Head can. (Female educator)

The involvement of law enforcement in executing random searches at schools was mentioned by participants across schools. Search initiatives are usually aimed at confiscating illegal substances and objects at school, such as alcohol, drugs and weapons.

> We've had some random searches where the police have come with the Safe Schools initiative. We've brought in police and dogs to come and check all the classes and search the bags. And that is where we find the learners with drugs. (Female educator)

As with searching, testing is done on suspicion of drug use, which are usually a result of physiological signs exhibited, such as hyperactivity or lethargy, and behavioural signs such as disruptiveness in the classroom. While most schools were equipped to do drug screening at schools, some schools left testing to parents, or they referred learners to external facilities such as clinics or treatment centres for testing. Reasons for testing at home or an external facility included refusal to be tested at school, denial among parents that their children use drugs or a lack of screening tests at school.

> The parents are in denial most of the time, they don't believe us . . . And unfortunately, we don't even have any of these drug tests anymore. (Female Grade Head)

> I think the parents that doesn't (want us to test) are parents who actually want to cover up for their kids. Those are the parents that doesn't give consent, and they say, 'we will test them at home'. (Female Educator)

Schools have varying policies to deal with learners who exhibit signs of drug use or intoxication. Procedures at most schools include sending learners home or notifying the parent to fetch the learner.

> The code of conduct says that should you be in the possession of drugs, we confiscate it, and we give you a letter, you have to go home, and you must bring your parents. If a child gets here stoned, then we immediately give you the letter, 'go home'. (Male HOD)

Linkage to substance use treatment services

Most TMP mentioned an existing link between the school and local substance use treatment services. Referral is either facilitated by the school or by the guardians. If a learner tests positive for drug use at school the usual first step is to notify the guardians, followed by a disciplinary hearing and then a referral to treatment.

> It will be a disciplinary hearing and then from that depending on the seriousness of the case it'll either go to the governing body or a suspension is involved. She (psychologist) contacts helping network . . . run by drug counsellors. So, they see the child once a week (Female Educator on SGB)

The usual management plan includes proof that the learner received treatment, however, this plan does not include a management plan to ensure that learners have been rehabilitated or that they are on the path of recovery. Interviews with TMP did not reveal any information on follow-up drug screening or the provision of psycho-social support to maintain sustained abstinence. The only requirement from schools was to provide proof that a treatment center had been accessed, before a learner could return to school. An observation made is that there exists no defined protocol for repeated positive testing. However, a participant mentioned that if a learner tested positive three times, it may result in expulsion.

Policy-implementation gaps

Shifts in perceptions of normal behaviour

There is a major issue with the implementation of the policy relating to the normalisation of substance use in communities. Tobacco use on school premises has been normalized to the extent that it is no longer considered a violation of anti-substance use policies by educators and learners alike. Consequently, there is permissiveness and lack of control of learner tobacco use, with no negative consequences for learners who smoke. This is concerning as mixing of other drugs with tobacco were reported by many, indicating that illicit drugs are being used openly.

> . . . That first one is marijuana . . . You call that a Tossie . . . It's rolled like you would roll a cigarette with tobacco. They use that, that's the most popular one at our school, this Tossie. (Female HOD)

Similarly, cannabis use, and its effects are becoming increasingly common. There appears to be a misunderstanding regarding the Cannabis for Private Purposes Bill (2020) within various communities. The misinformation about cannabis use is widespread among learners as well as educators. Additionally, learners use the Bill as an excuse to show defiance when told that it is a prohibited substance.

> . . . When this weed/marijuana law came in, they just said 'but we don't smoke here at school we smoke outside school and on our way to school. (Male Educator)

> . . . We have learners who come to school stoned. I think there was also a misinterpretation of the law with regard to cannabis (Male Educator)

Educators expressed a need for guidance on how to address the emerging cannabis use patterns among learners. The Bill is also not fully understood in the context of the school setting, where learners may come to school already under the influence. This makes it challenging to adhere to the usual protocols since transgressions are not taking place on the school grounds.

> Even us, we are not well educated in terms of the act . . . I think the kind of support that we need so that we are able tell learners something. (Male Educator)

Fragmented implementation of school guidelines

Educators acknowledged that they do not effectively implement the existing abstinence policy from the Department of Education. When learners are found to be intoxicated or when testing positive for substance use, the first formal action taken is suspension. However, suspension without intervention is not considered effective in reducing substance use. Consequently, repeated suspensions occur, with no adequate focus on referral to treatment.

> I'm just frustrated because I don't believe in punitive measures, I believe in restorative measures with learners. But our hands are tied when it comes to restorative . . . my desire is that the help the kid gets is enough to really help them and change behaviour, that it doesn't end up being punitive only . . . We are supposed to help them. (Female Educator on SGB)

Educators face a dilemma when learners are found to be using substances. Safety policies prohibit the school from removing learners from the premises without their parents collecting them. However, from a disciplinary perspective, the suspension is viewed as a corrective measure or punishment for substance use behaviour. By removing the learner from class, suspension aims to prevent disruptions and separate the learners from others to avoid modelling unfavourable behaviours.

A top-down decision-making approach to address learner substance use within schools presents systemic barriers whereby a lack of transparency and information-sharing hinders educators' ability to support learners. This ultimately impacts the course of actions taken by educators, a lack of information on the final course of action, and subsequent processes to follow when learners return to class.

> You don't hear anything more about what really happened there, or if anything was done regarding the case (at school) . . . or if the principal gets it (information), but as a teacher we don't get feedback. (Female Educator)

Lack of agency to affect change

Disempowered by policies and protocols

Many educators feel that the policies and protocols they have to comply with leave them feeling disempowered. Educators are required to report suspected substance use or possession, however, educators are not involved in the process of addressing substance use from a disciplinary or health and well-being perspective.

> I take the learners down to the office, I report it to the seniors because then it is out of your hands. Because the principal usually tells us that if something do happen whatsoever, you must report it . . . But then what is happening after that? You don't see any change. (Male Educator)

Inability to cope with demands beyond the scope of teaching

Educators often perform tasks that are beyond teaching duties, such as counseling, social work, or law enforcement. As a result, they feel overburdened, exhausted, and stressed, which can have negative effects on their health and effectiveness. They feel unsupported, overwhelmed, and powerless in their work environment, which also affects their sense of safety.

> So I honestly feel that a teacher is not enough actually to get a child to not do something. We have 37 teachers on the school. . . Each teacher is busy the entire the day. We don't have time, we run like policemen up and down whole day. (Female Educator)

Discussion

Educators have a unique opportunity to monitor learning progress and observe changes over time. Educators have multiple roles beyond teaching, such as being a parent, mediator, and counsellor. This can result in challenging role conflicts when they have to address substance abuse among learners (Shuro and Waggie 2021).

Our research highlights the intricate relationship between departmental guidelines, school policies, and educators' practices when it comes to managing AOD use among learners. We observed that while schools implement various guidelines, there are discrepancies in how they interpret and apply the South African School Act 84 of 1996 and its amendments, which cover searching and testing for drugs, confiscation of drugs, the consequences of drug use, as well as interventions for learners in need. This indicates a pressing need to establish and disseminate best practices for substance use policies that can be adopted by schools more broadly.

Data shows a lack of coordination between policies and guidance to implement, making it difficult to manage substance use at schools. The fact that schools are struggling to access external services such as counsellors, social workers, and appropriate rehabilitation facilities, highlights the need for more departmental support to access appropriate external services (Mokwena et al. 2020; Shuro and Waggie 2021).

The overall finding of the study is that there is a significant relationship between the substance use problem in the school and how it is addressed, and the magnitude of the problem in the community. This impacts the level of implementation of school guidelines, as prescribed by the Schools Act, resulting in fragmented and inconsistent substance use control measures.

Since the publication of the measures for Safety Measures at Public Schools (Government Gazette 22,754) in 2001, South African schools have been designated as drug-free zones. However, the violation of school policies, such as the possession and use of drugs, is associated with increased rates of crime on the school premises, as was also found in a previous study (Ramirez et al., 2011). Similarly, the current study reveals that schools located in crime hot-spots face a challenging task of implementing policies as guidelines, leading to an over-involvement of law enforcement agencies at places of learning.

Dealing with substance abuse among learners can be a difficult task for educators. According to Pillay, Patel, and Setlhare-Kajee (2023), educators often lack the necessary knowledge and understanding of psychosocial interventions, as well as the involvement of significant stakeholders. This indicates a lack of knowledge and awareness of effective interventions in preventing alcohol and other drug (AOD) use among learners. A systematic review of programs that involve both students and parents (Newton et al. 2017) confirmed that in at least one trial, such programs were effective in postponing or reducing teenage AOD use. This finding is consistent with the systematic review conducted by Das et al. (2016), which highlighted the evidence supporting the role of interventions in preventing AOD use. However, despite these positive findings, the value of these interventions may be questionable due to a lack of awareness and insight among schools and educators regarding the availability of psychosocial interventions, hindering the schools' ability to effectively address issues related to AOD use among learners.

According to this study, the guidelines for addressing substance abuse in schools are fragmented, which leads to teachers making decisions based on their context while trying to adhere to the Schools Act. The current study suggests that it is important to prioritize educator training on managing substance use in schools. This can be achieved by addressing the broader social issues that contribute to learner drug use, and by improving referral networks and follow-up. This recommendation is similar to a recent study by Pillay, Patel, and Setlhare-Kajee (2023), which proposed that schoolteachers should be trained to recognize learner mental health risk factors.

Conclusion

The study reveals that educators lack awareness about what happens after a learner is referred for treatment. They also have limited understanding of aftercare and relapse, which are critical components in dealing with substance use.

To improve the well-being of both educators and learners, a mutually informative relationship between educators, principals, and members of the school governing body is crucial. This will allow educators to provide input in shaping AOD use decisions and classroom support. Empowering learners to take ownership of their situation requires improved messaging and communication about addiction. Additionally, fostering trust and collaboration with the community, youth organizations, and creative community programs is necessary for better interventions that don't stigmatize learners.

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Author contributions

The first author (ZP) conceptualized the study and was involved in all phases of the study, including data collection, analysis, and compiling the manuscript. The second author (GK) was involved in the initial phases of the study, including the development of the research instruments, the data analysis, and compiling the manuscript. The last author (DD) was involved in the analysis of the data and compiling the manuscript.

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