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**COMBATING DRUG AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG  
‘PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL’ LEARNERS IN WATERFALLS  
DISTRICT, HARARE, ZIMBABWE**

**<sup>1</sup>Tariro Maraïre & <sup>2</sup>Suzila Ismail**

<sup>1</sup>Applied Psychology Department,  
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences University of Zimbabwe

<sup>2</sup>School of Applied Psychology, Social Work and Policy,  
College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author: [tmaraire@sociol.uz.ac.zw](mailto:tmaraire@sociol.uz.ac.zw)

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**ABSTRACT**

The study investigates the causes of drug and substance abuse and proffers workable solutions to overcome the challenge within the private high school environment in Zimbabwe. The researchers used a qualitative research design and data collection method in the form of semi-structured interviews. The participants of this study involved five private high school learners, three private high school teachers and two headmasters from Waterfalls, Harare, Zimbabwe. Data was thematically analyzed. The study established that private high school administrations are neglecting the fundamental pillars of education, thereby compromising the standard of moral fiber in learners. Non-procedural enrollment policies, lack of weekend and holiday rest and no sporting activities were established as the key causal factors of drug and substance abuse among learners in private high schools.

The study concludes that the unconducive learning environment in private high schools in Zimbabwe is fertile ground for learners to succumb to drug and substance abuse usage. Whereas on the contrary, learners should have time to relax, play sports, and engage in creative activities. Therefore, this study recommends the enforcement of standardized healthy living principles of practice in private high schools in Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** Combatting, drug and substance abuse, students, qualitative, semi-structured interviews.

## INTRODUCTION

Drug and substance abuse has invaded the human society causing adverse effects, which include cognitive, behavioural, emotional and social consequences for the users and their families (Jessor, 2017; World Health Organisation, WHO, 2024). The drug and substance abuse situation is an international scourge (Bogan et al., 2020; Peyman et al., 2018), as most countries throughout the world are faced with this problem (Johnston et al., 2019). The world is not silent regarding this drug and substance abuse challenge (Kelly et al., 2020) There are various medical, vocational and psycho-social measures that are being implimented to mitigate to the drug and substance abuse problem, however, global statistics on drug and substance abuse remain high (World Health Organisation, WHO, 2022).

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC (2022) report estimates that, approximately two hundred and eighty four million people aged between 15-64 abuse drugs and substances world wide, which is an increase of 26 million from the previous decade. For the Western world, the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, NCDAS, (2023) says that in the United States of America (USA), half of the 12-64 age range population has abused drugs atleast once in their lifetime, making the number of drug abusers in the USA to be approximately 19.9 million out of a population of 331.9 million. For the United Kingdom, drug abuse is equally a challange as approximately 3.2 million people aged between 16 to 59 take drugs, which equates to around one in eleven adults (UNODC, 2022). In East and Southeast Asia, it is estimated that approximately 19.33 million people abuse drugs (Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN, Drug Monitoring Report, 2022). With the same problem,

South Asia is reported to have approximately 29.83 million drug abusers (Statista, 2023). On the same note, UNODC (2022) estimates that 21.2 people in Western and Central Asia abuse drugs.

In recent years, suicide risks, experiences of violence, mental health deterioration and new human immunodeficiency virus infections have been vile among adolescents globally, and drug and substance abuse being the major contributing factor (Abduh, 2021). Globally, approximately 15 per cent of adolescence, that is, children in high school are reported to have used drugs which include cocaine, inhalants, hallucinogens or ecstasy (International Society of Addiction Medicines, 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC, 2023). The world is fast losing the youth generation, the future is definitely oblique because of drug and substance abuse (Horwitz, 2020). Measures to solve this challenge are urgently needed as drug and substance abuse is spreading like a veld fire and consuming the young generation from the home and school environment (Idnani et al., 2021).

In the Zimbabwean context, drug and substance abuse is generally increasing among high school learners (12-19 years) for both girls and boys (Muchena & Makotamo, 2017). Statistics on drug abuse among high school learners remain approximations as it is a mammoth task to gather actual figures on drug usage in the country. The lack of accurate statistics does not however negate the validity of the severity of the problem within the country (Makande, 2017).

The high school phase is a period of focus and shaping of the future aspirations through educational provisions by facilitators or educators among adolescents (Adam, 2013; Baena et al., 2019). Experimentation, peer pressure and self-identification are the main traits exhibited by these adolescence (Abdulkarim. 2015; Askew et al., 2022). This is therefore, a delicate stage in human growth, as the high school learners age bracket are adolescents housed under one institution (Borg & Gall, 2019). High schools are thus, important institutions that must be evaluated in terms of their safety to ensure that they do not become breeding spaces for drug abuse among learners (Denche-Zamorano et al., 2023).

Zimbabwe has increased in urban population over the years (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2022). This urban growth has compromised the capacity of existing public high schools to

admit learners, hence, emerged privately run high schools within communities. These private schools are licensed to operate by the Government of Zimbabwe as independent entities which are bound by the constitutional provisions of Zimbabwe on education. Indisputably, these private schools are second homes for the adolescence as they are entrusted by the government, parents and guardians to keep adolescents safe, as learners spend most of their day time at school (Muchena & Makotamo, 2017). Ideally these schools are purposed to educate learners academically as well as nurture skills, talent, innovativeness and creativity, yet in recent years, they have become drug abuse hubs (Muchena & Makotamo, 2017). The moral fiber and mandate of these private schools in general is arguably questionable as the rate of drug abuse among learners has tremendously increased in Zimbabwe. Drug and substance abuse coming from such trusted institutions of integrity may indicate to a failure and lapse in policy and governance within the private high schools system. As such, the current study interrogates the drug and substance abuse problem within private high schools in Zimbabwe, and seeks to proffer solutions to curb this challenge.

Ways to combat drug and substance abuse have been thoroughly researched in Zimbabwe among street children (Zvira, 2016; Jakaza & Nyoni, 2018), the youth age group (Makande, 2017; Maraire et al., 2020; Matutu & Masusa, 2019; Mazuru, 2018) and in Zimbabwe generally (Marandure, 2023; Matunhu & Matunhu, 2016; Muchena & Makotamo, 2017; Mukwenha et al., 2022). The current study appreciates that drug and substance abuse is a menace among the mentioned groups in society, however, there is a lacuna and little research on battling drug abuse within the school environment among learners in private high schools. Despite the severity of the drug and substance abuse problem among learners in high school, few studies have been conducted on ways of combatting drug and substance abuse among this age group within the context of private high schools. The current study in conducting this research would thus, be of importance to parents, guardians, private high school learners, administrators and teachers and the community at large in informing possible practical ways to combatting drug and substance abuse within the school set up.

## **Aim**

The aim of the study is to understand the causes of drug and substance abuse within the private high school environment in Zimbabwe and to find ways to combat the problem.

## **Objectives**

1. To investigate the causes of drug and substance abuse among adolescence in private high schools in Waterfalls District, Harare, Zimbabwe.
2. To establish ways to combat drug and substance abuse among learners in private high schools in Zimbabwe.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

The current study uses the term adolescents to refer to young boys and girls between the ages of 12-19. These are also referred to as learners in this paper as they are high school students (form one to 6 students). The study discusses causes and ways to combat drug and substance abuse among learners within private high school institutions in Waterfalls District, Harare. Private high schools in this context are schools that are neither Government run nor conventional, old private or trust schools. The study is making reference to private schools that have mushroomed within the Zimbabwean urban setup to cater to the increase in school going children within these communities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researchers employed a qualitative research design in the form of semi structured interviews to gather information from research participants. Interview questions were compiled guided by the research objectives of the study. The interview questions were sent for verification by two experts in drug abuse at the researchers' affiliated institutions. The interview questions were found be sufficient to adequately meet the objectives of the study. Research respondents were purposively selected, five private high school learners and three private high school teachers and two headmasters from Waterfalls, Harare, Zimbabwe. The researchers shared the goal of the research with heads of private high schools in the district who cascaded the information to teachers and learners. Those who were willing to participate made an appointment with the researchers for the purpose of conducting interviews. The respondents were chosen with the aim to hear perspectives of important stakeholders within the school premises. Students were chosen as respondents as they are the adolescence being exposed to drug abuse, teachers were chosen as respondents because they are the personnel that directly facilitate learning to students, and headmasters were chosen as respondents because they are part of the

school administration and policy making board. Data was collected and thematically analysed. Ethical considerations such as getting consent from participants and not manipulating received data was observed by the researchers. Waterfalls District was chosen as the study location since it is one of the districts with more private run high schools than public ones in Harare.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The superordinate themes that emerged from the interviews were as follows: a) Need for sporting activities b) Need for weekend and holiday rest c) Need for school enrollment reforms

### **a) Need for sporting activities**

The study established that adolescence in private high schools lack sporting activities. The learners expressed that their schools are regimented to produce good academic grades, as such, have no time for sports. The learners articulated that, they have a need to steam off the academic pressure, hence, some of them end up escaping to drug and substance use. One learner had this to say:

*The school environment is just tense, there is nothing exciting, to cool off the pressure of school, so a lot of us end up taking drugs. As students, we are just competitive in nature, sports give us healthy competition. In the absence of sporting activities, we compete for anything, including vaping competitions, to establish who gets high the slowest.*

On the same note, teachers voiced that their schools do not have sporting programs, yet sports are a huge protective factor from drug and substance abuse. Teachers' sentiments were that, adolescence are easily pressured and frustrated and that can result in drug and substance abuse. Sports are a good relaxation exercise, they ease academic pressure and make the learners more acquainted to their teachers and break classroom tension between teachers and learners, hence are a good restraint factor from drugs and substances use. A senior teacher expressed that:

*While learners can use sporting time to take drugs at school grounds, as reported in some schools, the damage*

*of not engaging learners in sporting activities overweighs the mischief that happens during sports. Adolescence have a lot of energy to expend, sports help them channel such energy to good use.*

In agreement with teachers, school principals said that sports are a fundamental aspect of learning which brings out a wholesome learner who is academically, physically and mentally smart. While schools know the importance of sports, there are some policies that need to be interrogated. One school principal shared:

*Most private high schools are built on very cramped pieces of land that have simply no space to conduct sporting activities. It is expensive to rent sports fields from nearby public schools, and also a huge task to arrange learners' movement to play sports at nearby schools on a regular basis. Moreover, there are no organized competitive inter-school sporting activities for emerging private schools. There are no zonal, district and provincial sports committees and completions for these schools, so sporting activities are just nonexistent.*

The current study takes a position that one way to combat the drug and substance abuse problem in private high schools is to introduce sports in these schools. The connection between sports and sound minded learners who shy away from drugs and substances abuse cannot be overstressed (Child trends, 2020, Dawson et al., 2019). There is a strong positive relationship between engaging in sporting activities and enriched cognitive functioning of the brain, physical and mental health among adolescence (Edinyang, 2016, Andrews et al., 2020). Thus, sports play a pivotal role to eliminate stress and improve in bodily, psychological and intellectual growth among learners, and these are protective factors from drug and substance abuse (UNODC, 2024). The current study thus, situates itself among previous studies (Baena et al., 2019; Kaluwe, 2019; McGuine et al., 2021) which postulate that positive personality attributes such as discipline, time management, team work, leadership, high self-control, emotional stability, enhanced self-esteem, confidence and positive interpersonal skills are improved in adolescence through sports. Hence, sports are a critical need in high school education among adolescence. Furthermore, tapping from the social bonds theory by Gottfredson

and Hirschi (2019), an individual who belongs to a team, has positive competition, goals and an aspiring career in sports is socially bound by these mentioned important factors, which reduce chances of engaging in drugs. Simply put, engaging adolescence in sporting activities can significantly reduce their chances of being involved in drugs. Therefore, one effective way to fight drug and substance abuse in private high schools in Zimbabwe is to introduce sports in these institutions of learning.

#### **b) Need for weekend and holiday rest**

The researcher also found out that learners in private high schools attend mandatory classes on weekends and school holidays. Learners highlighted that they are suffocated and tired by continuous learning with no weekend and holiday breaks, more so, there are hardly any sporting or relaxation exercises at school. Apart from rest deprivation, learners expressed concern that they are not having time with their families as they are always at school. All the learners expressed that they feel violated by studying with no break, and some are failing to hold on to the pressure and end up taking drugs and substances.

A learner lamented:

*I am now detached from my family, friends and church. We are meant to go to school every weekend and on school holidays, and this is the time my family will be visiting my mother who works out of town. I hardly see my mother.*

Another learner said:

*These teachers say that they keep us at school so that they protect us from drug abuse in our communities, yet it is us bringing drug abuse to the communities because, I tell you everyone here needs a little dose of drug to pull the pressure of school. Our homes are safe, it is this serious pressure that is making most of us to snap into drug use.*

The researcher also talked to teachers from the selected private high schools in Waterfalls District regarding this matter. The teachers expressed the importance of collaborated efforts between parents and teachers in raising adolescence. The teachers expressed that, the learners are now spending way too much time at school more than



required. Teachers' sentiments were that while there are toxic homes, there should be a healthy balance between times spent at school and at home by learners.

*With these teens, we strongly depend on cultural values that are instilled and emphasized in the home by parents and caregivers to help the teens stay away from drugs. Parents know their children better, and can pick some bad behaviours in them, sadly they hardly spend any time with their children because of the school program.*

Another teacher highlighted that:

*You can evidently see that the learners are tired of school. The schools however, are getting profits and teachers are also getting additional income from weekend and holiday classes. This is obviously at the expense of the learners' mental wellbeing. The learners and parents are cornered as we continue with the curriculum or syllabus on those resting days so that learners will be compelled to come to school.*

Heads of schools agreed that indeed there are weekend and holiday lessons being conducted in private high schools. They articulated that, both the learners and teachers require adequate rest but at policy level, these private schools should never be closed, for them to achieve good grades among learners. The principals admitted that they have probed learners who claimed that they took drugs to ease the pressure that comes with lack of rest. One of the headmasters said:

*The essence of sending children to day schools is for the parents to stay with their children at home so that they can support them in their education, physical and mental growth. Some parents do not subscribe to the notion of seeing their children after every three months, as the case in boarding schools. Though against government regulations, to maximize on profits and get good grades from learners, school administrations make children come to school on every break and they charge extra fees for that period.*

The current study suggests for the ban of weekend and holiday lessons as a way to combat drug and substance abuse among learners.

Learners must be given time to rest and be with their families away from the school environment. Ethics and values are instilled in the home (Masiye & Ndhlovu, 2016; Smith et al., 2019). Lack of weekend and holiday rest is resulting in the learners being alienated from their families and family ideologies. Whilst schools can support positive behaviour in learners, family input is very important to enable a well-balanced learner (Steele et al., 2023; Valkenborghs et al., 2018). One of the inhibiting factors of drug and substance abuse are strong family ties and close engagement with parents and care givers among adolescence (Sullivan & Childs, 2021; Tancred et al., 2018). Through such close family interactions and bonds, deviant behaviours can be identified in their infancy stage and are dealt with in a loving and cultural manner within families (Sarasmita et al., 2018; Tancred et al., 2018). Such collaborative efforts between teachers and schools can be effective in nurturing adolescence of good moral values. With the current school calendar in private high schools, learners do not get enough time to interact with their families, share any challenging issues, or be guided accordingly by their families, they have become strangers to their families. Masiye and Ndhlovu (2016) agree that adolescence are still children, they must under no circumstances be deprived of time with their families. Such deprivation can culminate into hostile, antagonistic and unacceptable behaviours including drug and substance abuse.

Still on the same note, burnout is inevitable if one continuously gets involved in the same activity without a breather (Heward-Mills et al., 2018). Fatigue, boredom, monotony and lack of motivation can easily lead to drug and substance abuse (Hirschi, 2002; International Society of Addiction Medicines, 2024). In congruence with previous researches (Hirschi, 2002; International Society of Addiction Medicines, 2024), the current study asserts that, while hard work is important, learners can experience burnout and take drugs and substances to evade pressure. Such could be the case with learners in Zimbabwe's private high school who are deprived of rest during weekends and school holidays.

### **c) Need for school enrolment reforms**

The study also established that the enrollment process in private high schools has a lot of loopholes. Private high schools in Waterfalls district do not turn down any applicants. These schools recruit as

many learners as they can. This causes over population in the schools that are already situated in limited spaces. The classrooms become crowded affecting the teacher -student ratio and the general monitoring of learners' behaviour and conduct within the school. Since there is this drive to recruit as many learners as possible, these private high schools admit learners without conducting any background checks. The schools take in learners that would have been expelled from other schools without even assessing the risk the learner brings to the school. Transfer letters for new students are hardly asked in these schools as long as the new learner meets the financial requirements of the school. The schools also admit school drop outs who want to continue with school and repeat students too. One learner had this to say:

*Many of us here are learners who would have been expelled from other schools because of mischief, which include drug and substance abuse. It is common knowledge that if you get expelled from public schools, you will be admitted in private schools without any questions asked.*

Sharing similar sentiments with learners, one teacher reiterated that:

*School owners are worried about numbers. The bigger the enrollment, the more revenue the school makes. Teacher jobs also become secure, as such, no applicant is turned down despite their history, even those expelled for drug and substance abuse from their previous schools. Most learners also are repeat students, as such, they might be older than their classmates, and such students in most cases influence deviant behaviour including drug and substance abuse to conventional learners within their age band and educational level.*

The current study argues that if private high schools enroll a manageable number of learners that they can monitor, this can go a long way to reduce drug and substance abuse in schools. With large number of students that are not proportional to the teacher student ratio, drugs can easily be sneaked into the school, abused within the school premises and learners get high and engage in deviant behaviour without the knowledge of teachers and the school administration

(Shibalika, 2021; Ondieki & Mokua, 2012). Also sharing the same notion with the current study, Ngesu et al. (2008) agrees that, if schools enroll more students than they can accommodate, they become porous to drug and substance abuse because they will face challenges of regulating and monitoring the behaviour of a large number of learners. The study gathered that with the quest to have as many learners as possible, private schools end up enrolling school dropouts and repeat students. Having students who are of a different age band from their classmates creates a fertile ground for drug and substance abuse within the school environment. Kaluwe (2019) and Masiye (2016) concur that peer pressure is prone to happen in situations where there are age disparities and constant interactions between a younger and an older adolescents. Edinyang (2016) also says drug and substance abuse persuasion and recruitment is often done by an elder peer who has seen more of life. Relating to the case in this research, older learners, especially repeat students and returned drop outs in private high schools can influence their younger classmates to engage in drug and substance abuse. Thus, a healthy school environment for adolescence is one in which learners are in the same class with their age mates, as they will be at the same developmental stage and the scope of worldly exposure (Chesang, 2013; Hosseini et al., 2017).

The researcher also established that it is a common practise for private high schools to take in expelled learners from public high schools and traditional private schools including drug and substance abusers. When a school is infested with deviant learners and without adequate monitoring, those learners with unwanted behaviour can influence others to take drugs. A meta-analysis by Nabayi (2014) and Hughes et al. (2017) suggest that drug abuse can be learnt through social learning, as such, schools should keep it at the minimum to enrol adolescence who use drugs.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research results reveal that extreme pressure is leading to drug and substance abuse among learners in private high schools in Waterfalls District, Harare. These institutions of learning are noted not to offer the basic fundamental aspects of education, such as extra curriculum activities, sports, free weekends, screening of transferring learners and failure to adhere to the Ministry of Education's regulations. The

study concludes that to combat drug and substance abuse in these private high schools there is need to offer healthy and protective environments for adolescents in schools so that they will not fall into the drug and substance abuse snare. The researcher recommends for the incorporation of basic learning principles such as rest, healthy competition, innovativeness and thorough screening and monitoring of learners so that institutions of learning can seize to be stress centres for learners.

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