

Original Research Article

Educators Perceptions on Drug Abuse Prevention: A Post-pandemic Approach

Abstract

The aim of this qualitative case study was to explore the causes of rapid rise of drug abuse among adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic, and analyse the educators' perceptions on the strategies that may be effectively used to prevent or curb the rapid rising in drug abuse in this post pandemic era. The study purposively selected 9 participants from 9 different secondary schools (urban schools and suburban schools, boarding schools and day schools) In-depth interviews were carried out with each participant. Data collected was coded and thematically analysed for recurrent themes. The contributing factors for the rapid rise in the cases of drug abuse among adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic are the government imposed lockdowns, social restrictions, negligent parenting, unmonitored idle time, and urge to experiment as is the nature of most adolescents. The most effective strategies are based on the holistic approach model that engages all stake holders to work collaboratively to implement prevention and intervention strategies. Engaging all stakeholders such as the family, the schools, the health institutions, the police, churches and community at large is hoped to close possible gaps. Other strategies include providing drug awareness education to adolescents and parents on drug awareness, risks of drug abuse, prevention strategies. Keeping the adolescents engaged in fruitful activities such as clubs, sports, community volunteering and training peer counselling teams are among the recommended strategies. This is hoped to create a drug free, safe environment for all learners. In addition, empowering the adolescents with life skills and involving the students in volunteer work for the vulnerable children will help them resist peer pressure and contribute meaningfully to society.

Key words: Educator; substance use; drug addiction; adolescent, prescriptive drugs

1.0 Introduction

Trends for drug abuse among secondary and high school students have been oscillating, rising and decreasing. Thanks for the effort through National Institute of Drug Abuse Prevention (1) that a survey carried out in 2016 reported an overall decrease in drug abuse, this includes (use of alcohol, cigarettes, and many illicit drugs over the last 5 years. As per the 2016 Survey, —“many drug abuse cases had dropped to their lowest levels since this survey's inception; no increase in use of marijuana among teens” in addition the survey also registered a decrease in the use of synthetic drugs as well as decrease in misuse of prescription drugs. However, with the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic there seems to be an unprecedented drastic escalation in drug abuse during and after COVID-19 Pandemic. COVID-19 induced Lockdowns meant schools resort to remote learning. While remote learning was meant to solve the problem of losing learning time by keeping the learners

engaged in school while at home, it also created opportunity school children who had lots of unmonitored idle time to try using drugs. In brief, although remote learning enabled adolescent students to maintain some progress in schooling, several studies (2, 3, 4, 5) pointed to the negative impacts of COVID-19 pandemic through remote learning on the propensity to drug abuse, mental health and social development of many young people during that short 2 year period. As one scholar puts it, the COVID-19 pandemic set the stage for a “lost generation” of youth who could be at even greater risk for substance use in the future (3).

Another study carried out by (6) indicated that drug abuse due to overdose is on the rise going into 2023. This includes deaths due to overdose use of “methamphetamine and other psychostimulant drugs and synthetic opioid involvement. During the COVID-19 pandemic some adolescents experimented with drugs. Fischer, 2023 asserts that mixing drugs (whether intentionally or unintentionally) can make the drugs’ effects stronger and even more unpredictable, which is what makes polysubstance abuse particularly dangerous and even deadly.

In brief, although COVID-19 Pandemic had drastic impacts on different sectors; the hardest-hit are the health and education sectors (7; 8). This is evidenced in the rapid rise in drug abuse during and after COVID-19 Pandemic. Consequently, most schools have to plan on Post-pandemic strategies to recover lost time in order to address the gaps in academic as well as social and moral guidance. Great efforts have to be made to instil the much needed life skills to this cohort of almost lost youths who experienced disparities in access to educational guidance opportunities. This study sought to answer the following 3 research questions;

Research Question One: What are the contributing factors to the rise in drug abuse during and post COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question Two: What are the possible mitigation measures to prevent drug abuse among school children?

Research question Three: What are some proposed strategies for effective intervention?

2.0 Literature review

Adolescence is a very critical developmental stage. The child faces a myriad of challenges due to the developmental changes that occur at this stage. Consequently parents and educators need to spend more time with the adolescents especially during this transitional phase from childhood to adulthood. Unfortunately, the sudden inception of COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the regular school programs as well as the general social set up. This disruption had drastic negative impacts on most adolescents. Among the major negative impacts was the sudden rise in cases of substance abuse among adolescents (9).

Major Causes of Rise in drug abuse

The rise in drug abuse has been attributed to a number of causative factors such as idleness of most adolescents during the Lockdown when face to face learning was put on halt; rise in

availability of common drugs purportedly meant for controlling the spread of Corona virus. Due to the increase in idle time, and readily available prescriptive drugs and over the counter pain relief medications have greatly contributed to the rise in drug abuse among adolescents. In addition, some have abused prescription drugs for recreational purposes as some adolescents desire to experiment. According to Dzinamarira et al, 2021, COVID-19 lockdowns are among the key drivers for drug abuse by school-going age adolescents who suddenly found themselves idle, with limited recreational activities, especially in high-density suburb settings. Particularly in Zimbabwe, the high density suburb residential areas were greatly affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic as this resulted in a sharp rise in drug abuse (11). Consequently, there has been a rapid increase in the number of hospital admissions of adolescents during the COVID-19 era and even in this post COVID-19 pandemic era (12). The challenges associated with beginning with might be considered as mild or soft drugs usually leads to drug dependency and addiction so that the body ends up not responsive to these soft drugs and desires harder drugs. In brief, these abused prescriptive drugs have a gateway effect or act like stepping stones to serious drug dependency (13). Indeed this predicts that we are heading for an impending public health problem in the near future.

Readily available chemicals

The prevalence of COVID-19 Pandemic was coupled with a relaxation on restrictions on availability of chemicals that could be dispensed from pharmaceutical stores as sanitizers or similar drugs for protection against Corona Virus. Unfortunately, this relaxation of restrictions on some drugs set the stage for many young people of school going- age to experiment on substance abuse. Some even went as far as abusing prescription drugs. (14). Prescription drugs are a type of medicine prescribed by a qualified medical doctor. They include sedatives and tranquilizers. These are intended to alleviate pain, reduce tension or to slow down certain physiological processes for enhancing the health of the patient (15).

However, like any other drug taken there are very serious health risks in taking prescription drugs. This is why they are taken only under the care of a doctor, and even then, they have to be closely monitored to avoid addiction or other side effects problems. Another major reason for need to take prescription drugs under monitoring by the doctor is that generally people may have different reactions to drugs due to the differences in each person's body chemistry. A drug that may be alright for one person to take could turn out to be very risky, even fatal, for someone else (15). Hence using prescription drugs not specifically prescribed for oneself can be termed drug abuse.

Unfortunately, many teens think prescription drugs are safe because they are prescribed by a doctor. Unbeknown to them is that taking prescription drugs for nonmedical use to get high or "self-medicate" can be just as dangerous and addictive as taking illegal street drug (14). Young people sometimes perceive prescription drugs to be safer than other drugs, (6). Yet the impact of prescription drugs on the developing brain can be very detrimental.

Curiosity and desire to experiment

They say idleness is the handmaiden of temptation. As some of the energetic adolescents found themselves confined due to COVID-19 induced lockdowns they were tempted to experiment with drugs. One initial trial led to another, and eventually led to drug addiction. Generally, experimentation with alcohol and drugs often begins during adolescence, (16). Even in non-pandemic times alcohol and drug use by adolescents are quite common. However, the sudden rise in substance abuse during COVID-19 Pandemic raises eye-brows. It may be attributed to attempts to find relief from anxiety and stress by some of these lonely adolescents. Studies by Lundahl & Cannoy (2021) indicate that pandemic-related life changes, such as social isolation and boredom, seem to exacerbate the risk of substance use. Further, during the COVID-19 pandemic some students who were not technologically apt struggled to cope with the new normal of e-learning ended up resorting to self-medicating themselves with drugs and abusing prescriptive medication (18).

Loneliness due to social restrictions

These social restrictions due to pandemic induced lockdowns resulted in loss of jobs for some parents and guardians which cascaded to disruption of family income or constrained associated financial resources. Coupled with school closures, this in turn led to remote learning. Although this remote learning approach worked well for some students, the other side of this coin was that it generated feelings of loneliness among many young people because of long-term social isolation and limited opportunities to interact with peers (9;19). This sounds paradoxical in the sense that it contradicts popular belief that most adolescents' drug abuse is strongly attributed to negative peer pressure. So in this case, although peer pressure was minimal during COVID-19 Pandemic, drug abuse among adolescents was reported to be rising. This could be attributed to faulty parenting styles such as permissive parenting (20) or negligent parenting that heavily relies on schools for the moral development of their children. This is evidenced in reports from studies that indicate that spending more time in the household is not always a consistent protective factor. Studies by Smith et al, 2021 observed that some youths who got more exposed through parental modelling were found drinking and using other illicit substances with their parents shortly after social distancing measures were imposed. This confirms that permissive or negligent parental attitudes and behaviors could encourage and facilitate youth alcohol consumption and other substance abuse as children spend more time with parent and away from school. Such permissive parenting and negative role modelling of health practices are likely going to influence the perceived norms towards substance use, which may in turn lead to increased post pandemic drug abuse.

In addition, due to the new normal of remote learning some learners felt isolated from their class mates and instructors. In addition, most of these adolescents lacked both instructional and parental guidance. Studies indicate that generally students experienced extreme anxiety and stress (21). Consequently, when some students experienced stressful times some resorted to negative behaviours of dealing with stress such as drug abuse (5; 22)

Lack of adequate moral guidance

Prior to the Pandemic induced Lockdowns the usual School-provided drug awareness programs were no longer being presented to the learners since most schools had switched to remote learning mode. Hence most schools focused more on the academic subjects instead of providing the much needed guidance and counselling lessons for adolescent students. Due to the pandemic induced lockdowns and remote learning pedagogical modes, inconsistently-planned educational programs some crucial educational components such as guidance and counselling, (where issues such as life skills and drug abuse prevention is usually taught) were not catered for in the remote learning settings (3). This was exacerbated by the pandemic induced lockdown and social distancing restrictions banning of religious gatherings where moral lessons and drug abuse prevention lessons are usually taught. Research indicates that Religious affiliation tends to mediate the negative effects of deviant peer influences such as drug abuse (23). However, other studies seem to mitigate some of the risk, including increased family time, parental monitoring, and decreased access to substances (17).

In an effort to control the rapid spreading of the Corona virus and contain the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic there were strict Government enforced Lockdowns resulting in social restriction. Although the initiative was targeted to produce positive impact for the benefit of many, it turned out that it resulted in unintended consequences that have been harmful in the lives of some adolescents (2).

Attitudes and misconceptions about drugs

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage associated with identity formation. At this stage many young people may develop wrong attitudes about their identity to the extent that some may wish to experiment with drugs so as to feel the ecstasy associated with abuse of certain drugs. In most cases this is based on misconceptions about drugs and their effect in people's life. According to NIDA, (2016) such misconceptions include the following myths about drugs;

- a. Teen agers are too young to get addicted after all, drug addiction is voluntary
- b. Drugs that are legal are helpful, illegal drugs are harmful hence drugs such as prescription medications are not bad for you. (24)..
- c. Combining drugs is not harmful.
- d. Addicts can never recover; Rehabilitation doesn't work.
- f. Addicts can stop anytime they want.
- g. Once detoxification ends, if the addict does not return to drugs, changes in the pathways of the brain will return to their normal state
- h. Academic performance is not negatively affected by drug use
- i. Driving is not affected by the influence of drugs
- j. You have to use drugs for a long time before they can really hurt you.

Usually such myths and misconceptions are propagated among adolescent negative peer pressure or through unguided media (24: 23). Hence there is great need for guidance and Counselling at this crucial stage of development. Unfortunately, during COVID-19 Pandemic

such guidance and counseling from schools and religious institutions was very limited due to social restrictions

Although schools later re-opened for face to face as the Pandemic was phasing out, some damage had already been done. Some of the adolescent students had been initiated into drug abuse habit. Once the drug habit is formed it further leads to addiction and dependency syndrome and becomes difficult to break as it progresses. (26). Adolescent years are formative years that represent an important developmental stage during which the foundation for future patterns in substance use is often established (27). It has also been observed that the quantity and frequency of use of drugs during adolescence period are strongly associated with risks for heavy use and misuse of substances in adulthood (28). Hence, preventive education and strong intervention strategies are crucial at this stage soon after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prevention Strategies

Several strategies for prevention of drug abuse have been suggested. While several scholars have recommended education as the critical factor for the prevention of substance use and abuse (1, 6), a holistic approach seems to be among the best. The holistic approach tends to be more effective as it engages all key stakeholders such as schools, communities, health institutions, adolescents and their parents. A holistic approach, is similar to the integrated approach whereby concerted support is provided to drug abuse victims. This support focuses on the whole person, not just their mental health needs (29)

The holistic approach focusing on risk reduction and strengthening protective factors as schools work with communities, families and individuals (14, 30). The holistic approach is similar to the ecological Model (31) that considers the impact of several spheres of influence that surround the growing child. Such influences include family, peers, religious structures and community at large. Engagement of each of these spheres or stakeholders will ensure strong protection from the temptations to succumb to experimental drug abuse by the growing adolescents.

Stakeholder engagement.

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, the key stakeholders in the development of the child including the adolescent are the church, the family, the peers and the community. Studies by Yu & Stiffman, (2010) indicate that Positive family relationships and religious affiliation function as between negative environment and illicit drug abuse among adolescents, such supportive mediators that tend to form a protective barrier around the vulnerable adolescents.

Empowering the student with life skills

Generally adolescents who are empowered with adequate life skills such as decision making and assertiveness are better able to resist temptations to experiment with drugs or develop resilience even after being initiated to drug abuse. Such adolescents tend to respond positively to interventions. Empowering adolescents with decision making skills help the adolescent to resist peer pressure and stand up for their values. Hence educating adolescents is very critical to prevention of drug abuse and interventions for those already into drug abuse.

The holistic approach emphasizes educating adolescents and their parents about the risks of drug misuse and abuse can play a role in combating the problem (The National Institute on Drug Abuse (1; 32). As adolescents are empowered with appropriate life skills they can help as peer counselors for fellow students in drug abuse prevention and intervention.. Studies indicate that adolescents tend to pay attention to advice from their peers more that from adults. Hence using peer counsellors may prove an effective strategy for drug abuse prevention and intervention.

Family engagement

The family is the primary in the socialization of the growing child. Although schools, the church and the peer group may also have a strong influence later in life this comes as secondary socialization. Hence engaging parents in drug prevention and intervention programs helps a great deal. Studies by (33) indicate that family based intervention programs such as educating parents and their adolescent children helps develop a united front that tends to curb adolescent behaviour problems or barricades against negative peer pressure such as drug abuse (34). According to The National Institute of Drug Abuse , 2016 (1), educating adolescents and their parents about the risks of drug misuse and abuse can play a role in combating the problem of substance abuse.

Engagement of Schools,

In today's educational systems children spend more time at school that at home. This has greatly strengthened the socialization role of the school. In most countries, government greatly relies on schools and other educational institutions for the socialization and nurturing of growing children especially in issues of drag awareness. Most schools have always been given the mandate to ensure provision of adequate guidance and Counselling to growing school children. However the disruption of the usual school programs by the remote learning modes reduced contact time for provision of guidance and counseling (35).

Community engagement

The child does not grow in a vacuum. The social community around the child greatly influences how the child is socialized. A society that glamorizes drug abuse tends to promote drug abuse by not imposing laws against sale of illicit drugs or being lenient towards drug pushers in its community (29). Engaging the whole community ensures that all the weak links are strengthened and every stakeholder works collaboratively in a concerted

Efforts to prevent drug trafficking. Schools are best strategically positioned for effecting school based drug abuse prevention programs (30).

Demystifying misconceptions

Since most adolescents develop some misconceptions about substance abuse there is need to correct these misconceptions. Demystifying misconceptions about drug abuse will help adolescents develop right attitudes about the negative effects of drug abuse. (25). If appropriate guidance and counseling is timely provided, it will help to demystify these wrong notions about drugs in some adolescents (25). This would go a long way to prevent the urge to experiment with drugs at a tender age as is common among adolescents.

3.0 Methodology

The study followed a descriptive qualitative case study. The sample of study was purposively selected from teachers in rural, urban and peri-urban secondary schools. In addition some of the participants were purposively selected from boarding schools and day schools. Participation was voluntary. Generally, school-going adolescents spend about a 30% of their time of the day at school (36). Hence the educators are the ideal respondents to participate in the study. Out of twelve teachers approached nine consented to participate. In depth interviews were used to explore strategies used for intervention and prevention of drug abuse in some secondary schools. Data was collected till the point of saturation. Data collected was cleaned, coded and analyzed for recurring themes.

Table 1 Participants

School	Participant	Coding
Day School 1	Female	D1
Day School 2	Female	D2
Day school 3	Male	D3
Day School 4	Female	D4
Day School 5	Female	D5
Day School 6	Male	D6
Boarding 1	Female	D7
Boarding 2	Female	D8
Boarding 3	Male	D9

Thematic analysis indicated that there are five possible themes engaged in prevention and three major intervention strategies. These are discussed in the findings below.

4.0 Findings

The findings indicate that the issue of drug abuse infiltrates the adolescents life through various avenues such as idleness, curiosity (desire to experiment), loneliness, identity crisis, peer pressure, lack of adequate guidance and counselling. Reports from the participants indicate that drug abuse prevention is the best way forward. Actually, it is much better than trying to stop the viral spreading of drug abuse or to break the drug addiction cycle. Five

major themes were repeatedly hinted. These are; were reducing most frequently repeated strategies were educating both adolescents and parents on risks drug abuse, reducing idle time by keeping the adolescents occupied with positive activities, providing a conducive school environment, collaboration between the family and school and engaging the community social institutions for law enforcement (Church, Police, Health and social welfare services).

Research Question One: What are the contributing factors to the rise in drug abuse during and post COVID-19 pandemic?

Lockdowns, social restrictions and Idleness,

The leading causes of the sudden steep rise drug abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic are the lockdowns and social restrictions; these led to school closures and limited activities. This meant the adolescents had plenty of idle time with no school assignments. The COVID-19 induced lockdowns and social restrictions also meant no going to church or religious gatherings (19). Participant D3 and D 4 echoed similar observations that due to boredom and idleness, *“some adolescents experimented with prescriptive drugs (D3) and other students experimented with over the counter pain killer medications as a way of self-medicating themselves when they felt lonely, stressed or frustrated (D4).* This has been exacerbated by the ready availability and affordability of these substances to adolescents (9).

Negligent parenting

The other repeated contributing factor to the increase in drug abuse is negligent or irresponsible parenting. Industrialization has gradually shifted the parenting role from the actual parents of the children to relatives or hired maids. These negligent parents had heavily relied on the schools and the church to provide their children with moral guidance. As a result these children lack adequate guidance and counselling. Some of the participants raised the concern that *“Negligent parenting is compounded by the fact that most of the biological parents are abroad hence they lack strong bonding with their children except that of providing money for tuition and material needs such as clothes”* reported participant (D8).

Another participant D5 expressed similar sentiments *“Most of the students are lonely since they are left in the care of house helps. Some of these house helps do not have time to show parental care, they just leave the kids to do what they want...the school has seen that challenge and have reduced the boarding fees so as to accommodate such children in boarding school where students are cared for and monitored. In addition, some schools introduced clubs and a variety of sporting activities where leaners can socialize, as well as be fruitfully engaged “.*

Seeking a Sense of identity and belonging

During the days of social restrictions, some felt cut off from their peers. Since some of them had absentee parents, with no school teachers to mentor them, they lacked a sense of belonging. Consequently they resorted to experimenting with drugs. Feeling, lonely drove

some of the young adolescents to experiment with the readily available drugs and medications meant for the control of the spread of the Corona virus. Research by (9) assert that the on-going COVID-19 lockdowns may also have compounded the situation as school-age adolescents suddenly found themselves idle with limited recreational activities, especially in high-density suburb settings. As observed by Participant D4, *some adolescents felt cut off from family abroad and resorted to drugs out of frustration*. Adolescence is the age of developing a sense of identity or else one will suffer from identity crisis. Apparently some adolescents engaged in drug abuse as a way of developing as sense of identity.

Research Question Two: What are the possible mitigation measures to prevent drug abuse among school children?

Once a person is initiated to drug abuse it becomes very difficult to break the addiction cycle. Hence, effective mitigation strategies focus on prevention of the initial intake of drugs. This can only be possible if all the stakeholders are actively engaged in implementing preventive measures. Most participants seemed to emphasize the participation of school administrators and parents. Participant D2 emphasized that *“schools (educators) should be alert and vigilant, watching out for and signs or symptoms of drug abuse such as strange behaviour among learners. In addition, Schools should make “unexpected or random Raids in students desks, bags and campus grounds. Watch out for unusual behavior or appearances, or violence , bullying etc”*

Keep them engaged in fruitful activities. Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by having lots of energy. If the these youths do not have somewhere to expend their high energy in they end up misbehaving. As participant D5 put it, *keep them occupied in clubs and sporting activities*, yet at the same time schools should be *monitoring them watching out for any strange behaviour (D9). Clubs can help them learn new skills D6 Help them Learn new things/ skills (D2).*

Education on Risks of Drug Abuse

Educating both the adolescents and their parents is the key to prevention. One participant D6, reported that one parent was shocked to know that their child was deeply involved in drug abuse. To avoid such shocks both adolescents at their parents need to be educated on drug awareness and the risks of drug abuse. *Hold regular Guidance and counselling sessions for student (D7)*. In addition, *invite parents to be addressed by officers from hospital and rehabilitation centres on the prevalence of drug abuse as a social menace (D5)*. Further to this, one passionate Participant added; *Teach drug awareness to family from conception (D8)*. In other words schools and other stakeholders should not wait until there is a problem but instead they should provide education on drug awareness as early as possible.

Schools need to emphasize the risk behaviours and dangers associated with drug abuse such *“Effects on Health, Violence at school, unwanted pregnancies, school drop outs, crimes, unemployment etc ” (D2)*. Several participants pointed out the importance of taking the group of students to a rehabilitation centre for them to actually see the effects of drug abuse on a

person's life (D3, D4, D5 & D9). To underscore this, schools may need to take the students for a brief visit to rehabilitation centres.

Schools should create a safe haven for some of the learners from broken homes.

Other adolescents may be facing academic or social challenges, yet there is no one to help them at home. This was observed by some of the participants who indicated that *Teachers should alert, vigilant, yet caring* (D2). They should acknowledge their responsibility as *In loco parentis and Provide listening ear* (D7) to the adolescents, then Participant D5 added; *“Provide safe have, expand boarding facilities so as to accommodate vulnerable children from unsafe homes”*.

Train Peer Counselling teams

Most adolescents prefer to listen or open up to their peers more than to their parents or teachers. Hence there is need to train some as peer counsellors and engage them. Participants D8 and D2 emphasized the use of peer counselling. *“Peer counselling teams help some to open up freely to their colleagues who may help them without pulling down their self-esteem”* (D2). Since some adolescents trust their peers more than their parents, *“Trained peer counselling teams can work with the school counselling committee to provide the much needed guidance and support”* (D8).

Engaging the community

Since drug abuse is a social problem, engaging the community is very imperative. This involves involving the various social institutions such as the law enforcement (police), Health institutions, the home (family) and school administrators. Echoing this, several participants indicated the following in puts *“Control strangers into school campus”* (D3). Another participant vehemently pointed out that the law enforcement government institutions should *Control drug pushers, close such shops* (D6). *“Ban and arrest Drug pushers”*; said Participant D4. Another participant added that schools need to educate the community around the schools on dangers of drug use, and the police need to warn those who may be tempted to introduce drug abuse.

In addition, parents are encouraged to strengthen their family bonds as one participant puts it; *“spend time with their children, so they feel loved; remember lack of love creates a vacuum in a child's life and drug pushers want to fill this vacuum”* (D9);. In addition, *parents are encouraged to help their children to develop life skills such as assertiveness and resisting peer pressure* (D9).

Churches also play a significant role in moral development and prevention of drug abuse. Some participants pointed out the following observations; Participant D5 said; *Collaboration of church with families and guardians makes them Supportive family through Parental affirmation...churches may Call for Family togetherness at church or school and educate*

In addition, church programs may provide moral guidance through church Prayer groups, Sermonettes, Help them to confide in trusted counsellors, provide temperance lessons. D8 Engage them in Pathfinder clubs D6, and form teams to visit rehabilitation centres D8: Lastly, other participants indicated that churches may also help keep the children fruitfully occupied in different activities such as *“Volunteers clubs where they learn new skills and develop health and temperance talks so as to teach others in the community”* (D5) as well as *“being involved to teach younger ones”* (D9).

Research question Three: What are some strategies for effective intervention?

One of the common misconceptions that adolescents have about drug abuse is that it is easy to break the drug habit anytime. However, studies have shown that it is not as easy to break the drug addiction cycle. Hence, prevention is better than cure.

If drug abuse is noticed early then most intervention strategies involve the family and the school. The research participants suggested several intervention strategies. Among these are; *“quarantining the offenders or warning and giving the offenders a second chance in school, as well as giving offenders redemptive discipline”* (D2). Participant D1 suggested *“stern rebuke, but Rebuke in private so as to save the image of the offender”*.

Schools need to work collaboratively with families. Engaging the parents in intervention is very crucial so that they are supportive. However, several participants indicated that *Parents or Families need to be counselled to be patient and supportive.* (D6,D7, D9).

If the case has blown out of hand then engaging the health specialists may be very necessary. In this case the offender may need to be withdrawn from school as a way of protecting the other learners.

5.0 Discussion

The challenge of the sudden rise in drug abuse is rampant world over, (37). The major contributing factors being the COVID-19-induced lockdowns and social restrictions, school closures and lots of idle time which drove some adolescents to experiment with drugs. This is supported by several studies that indicate that some school going adolescents even experimented with some prescriptive drugs and others with over the counter medications (10; 9 ; 6; 12). In addition to this, negligent parenting contributed to drug abuse. Paradoxically, while lockdowns meant most parents were now available to provide guidance to their children, the study found out that most of the children engaged in drug abuse are those with parents working abroad, hence they were under the guardianship of relatives or hired caregivers. Consequently, although the parents abroad could provide money and other material resources, these children lacked parental love, and moral guidance. The hired caregivers and related guardians had relied too much on schools and churches to provide the much needed guidance and counselling. When the lockdowns were implemented it meant social restrictions; no peers, no school, no church left these children very vulnerable to

experiment with drugs. This concurs with studies by (19) that indicated that some adolescents resorted to drug abuse due to frustrations, loneliness and boredom.

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion the challenge of drug abuse that escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic seems to continue to rise during this post pandemic era. The study drew several prevention strategies from the research participants from several purposefully selected secondary schools. The contributing factors for the rapid rise in the cases of drug abuse among adolescent are the COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdowns, social restrictions and negligent parenting. The most effective strategies focus on a holistic approach engaging all stake holders to work collaboratively to especially prevent the spread of drug abuse. But in case one is already hooked, intervention strategies based on love and redemptive discipline have been recommended to be effective. The suggested strategies for prevention or intervention revolve around a holistic approach. This means engaging all the relevant stakeholders in a collaborative way will help close the gaps in moral guidance created by the pandemic. A holistic approach engages the family, the schools, the churches, the community and its social institutions. Suggested effective strategies include schools providing a safe environment for all learners, keeping the students engaged in useful activities such as clubs, training peer counselling teams and educating adolescents and their parents on drug awareness, risks of drug abuse, prevention strategies. In addition, empowering the adolescents with life skills and involving the students in volunteer work for the vulnerable children will help them resist peer pressure and contribute meaningfully to society.

7.0 References

1. NIDA, 2016. Shatter the Myths
2. Mann MJ, Smith ML, Kristjansson AL, Daily S, McDowell S, Traywick P. Our children are not “behind” due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but our institutional response might be. *J Sch Health* [Internet]. 2021;Epub ahead of print. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13016>
3. Noyes E, Yeo E, Yerton M, Plakas I, Keyes S, Obando A, et al. Harm reduction for adolescents and young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: a case study of community care in reach. *Public Health Rep.* 2021;136:301–8. [Article Google Scholar](#)
4. Bera L, Souchon M, Ladsous A, Colin V, Lopez-Castroman J. Emotional and behavioral impact of the COVID-19 epidemic in adolescents. *Curr Psychiatry Rep.* 2022;1–10.

5. Dumas TM , Ellis W , Litt DM . What does adolescent substance use look like during the COVID-19 pandemic? examining changes in frequency, social contexts, and pandemic-related predictors. *J Adolesc Health*. 2020;67(3):354-361.
6. Fischer, R. (2023). Drug Abuse Trends and Treatment Approaches for 2023. Dec 14, 2022. <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/drug-abuse-trends-and-treatment-approaches-for-2023>
7. Mudenda S. Letter to Editor: Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): a global health problem. *Int J Pharm Pharmacol*. 2020;4:1–2. [Google Scholar](#)
8. Hawke LD, Szatmari P, Cleverley K, Courtney D, Cheung A, Voineskos AN, et al. Youth in a pandemic: a longitudinal examination of youth mental health and substance use concerns during COVID-19. *BMJ Open*. 2021;11.
9. Mukwenha, S., Murevanhema, G. Madziva, R, Dzinamarira, T., Herrera, Helena and Musuka, G. (2021) Increased illicit substance use among Zimbabwean adolescents and youths during the COVID-19 era: an impending public health disaster. First published: 02 November 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.15729>
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/add.15729>
10. Dzinamarira T, Musuka G. The paradox of re-opening schools in Zimbabwe in the COVID-19 era. *Public Health Pract*. 2021; 2:100070. <https://>
11. ZIMFACT. Factsheet—Zimbabwe's drug, alcohol abuse problem under COVID-19—ZimFact. 2021. Available at: <https://zimfact.org/factsheet-zimbabwes-drug-alcohol-abuse-problem-under-COVID-19/>
12. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). UNICEF Zimbabwe pledges to engage young people on developmental issues. 2021 Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/stories/unicef-zimbabwe-pledges-engage-young-people-developmental-issues> .
13. Deza, M. (2014) Is there a stepping stone effect in drug use? Separating state dependence from unobserved heterogeneity within and between illicit drugs. **January 2014** *Journal of Econometrics* 184(1) 265730664_Is_there_a_stepping_stone_effect_in_drug_use_Separating_state_dependence_from_unobserved_heterogeneity_within_and_between_illicit_drugs.

14. Layman, H.M., Thorisdottir, I.E., Halldorsdottir, T. *et al.* Substance Use Among Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic: a Systematic Review. *Curr Psychiatry Rep* **24**, 307–324 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-022-01338-z>

15. Mayo Clinic, 2022, Prescription drug abuse

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/prescription-drug-abuse/symptoms-causes/syc-20376813#:~:text=Abusing%20prescription%20drugs%20can%20cause,or%20illegal%20or%20recreational%20drugs.>

16. Young S.E., Corley R.P., Stallings M.C., et al. Substance use, abuse and dependence in adolescence: prevalence, symptom profiles and correlates. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 2002;68:309–322. [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

17. Lundahl, L.H. & Cannoy, C. (2021). COVID-19 and Substance Use in Adolescents. *Pediatric Clinic North Am.* 2021 Oct;68(5):977-990. Epub 2021 May 18. PMID: 34538307; PMCID: PMC8445753.

18. Prowse R, Sherratt F, Abizaid A, Gabrys RL, Hellemans KGC, Patterson ZR, et al. Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic: examining gender differences in stress and mental health among university students. *Front Psychiatry.* 2021;12.

19. Kumari A, Ranjan P, Chopra S, Kaur D, Kaur T, Upadhyay AD, et al. Knowledge, barriers and facilitators regarding COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination programme among the general population: a cross-sectional survey from one thousand two hundred and forty-nine participants. *Diabetes Metab Syndr Clin Res Rev.* 2021;15:987–92.

20. Smith BT, Brumage MR, Zullig KJ, Claydon EA, Smith ML, Kristjansson AL. Adverse childhood experiences among females in substance use treatment and their children: a pilot study. *Prev Med Reports.* 2021;24.

21. Viner RM, Ozer EM, Denny S, Marmot M, Resnick M, Fatusi A, et al. Adolescence and the social determinants of health. *Lancet.* 2012;379(9826):1641–1652. [PubMed]

22. Sen LT, Siste K, Hanafi E, Murtani BJ, Christian H, Limawan AP, et al. Insights into adolescents' substance use in a low-middle-income country during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Front Psychiatry.* 2021

23. Yu, M. 1 , Arlene R Stiffman, A.R (2022). Rise in prescription drug misuse and abuse impacting teens. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Updated April

24. Drug myths and facts, 2023

<https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/2023-03/drug-myths-and-facts.pdf>

<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/mentalhealth/psychosocial/principles/Pages/holistic.aspx#:~:text=%E2%80%8BAt%20a%20glance,emotional%2C%20social%20and%20spiritual%20wellbeing>

25. Sheppardpratt, 2018. Five (5) Myths about drug and alcohol use.
<https://www.sheppardpratt.org/news-views/story/5-myths-about-drug-and-alcohol-abuse/>

26. Hawkins EH. A tale of two systems: co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders treatment for adolescents. *Annu Rev Psychol.* 2009.

27. Moss HB, Chen CM, Yi H ye. Early adolescent patterns of alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana polysubstance use and young adult substance use outcomes in a nationally representative sample. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 2014;136:51–62.

28. Windle M, Zucker RA. How to address critical drinking problems during this developmental period. *Alcohol Res Heal.* 2010;33:29–44. [Google Scholar](#)

29 Beauvais, F. (1998). *An integrated model for prevention and treatment of drug abuse among American Indian youth.*
https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=Beauvais+F&author_id=1627667

30. Onrust, S. A. , Otten, R., Lammers, J. & Smit, F. (2016). *School-based programmes to reduce and prevent substance use in different age groups: What works for whom? Systematic review and meta-regression analysis*

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S027273581500152X>

32. https://nida.nih.gov/sites/default/files/nida_shatterthemyths_508_final.pdf

31, Bronfenbrenner U. *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design.* Harvard University Press; Cambridge, MA: 1979.

33. Small, S. A., & Huser, M. (2016), Family-based intervention programs. <https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/whatworkswisconsin/files/2014/04/Small-Huser-Family-Based-Prevention-Programs-2016.pdf>
34. Kristjansson AL, James JE, Allegrante JP, Sigfusdottir ID, Helgason AR. Adolescent substance use, parental monitoring, and leisure-time activities: 12-year outcomes of primary prevention in Iceland. *Prev Med.* 2010;51:168–71.
35. Atherton OE, Conger RD, Ferrer E, Robins RW. Risk and protective factors for early substance use initiation: a longitudinal study of Mexican-Origin youth. *J Res Adolesc.* 2016;26:864–79. [Article](#)
36. Melgosa, J. (2016) *To adolescents and parents*. Madrid (Spain): Editorial Safeliz.
37. SAMHSA. 2022, <https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/rise-prescription-drug-misuse-abuse-impacting-teens>
Rise in Prescription Drug Misuse and Abuse Impacting Teens