

## The Links between School Violence and Drug Usage in Schools: External or Internal Factor?

M. Z. Ramorola<sup>1</sup> and Taole Matshidiso Joyce<sup>2</sup>

*University of South Africa*

*E-mail: <sup>1</sup><Ramormz@unisa.ac.za>, <sup>2</sup><Taolemj@unisa.ac.za>*

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**ABSTRACT** Drug abuse in schools is a global problem that poses a severe threat to the goal of establishing peace and democracy. Schools are not inaccessible fortresses, but rather relatively open spaces where children and adults, who are often vulnerable, play and work. This parallels our increasing concern about the extent and sources of drug abuse by learners. If schools and community can work together in fighting the distribution of drugs, the risks of drug abuse by learners will be reduced. The basic question concerning drugs in the schools is whether drugs are a reflection of community problems or are a function of the internal characteristics of the schools themselves. This article explores the sources of drugs in schools using data from six provinces in South Africa. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and observations. Purposive sampling of four schools in each province was used to select participants of the study. The findings to this study revealed five themes in relation to drug abuse at school, namely: types of drugs used by learners at school; corrective measures schools put in place; evidence of drugs and the relationship to violence; sources of drugs; and reasons for students' intake of drugs. The study recommends cooperation of stakeholders such as education leaders, the government, law enforcement agencies and community leaders to overcome drug abuse in schools.

### INTRODUCTION

The drug phenomenon represents one of the biggest public health problems in the world today. Around 230 million people, or 5% of the world's adult population, are estimated to have used an illicit drug at least once in 2010, with problem drug users projected at 27 million individuals (UNODC 2012). For example, the results of a study conducted in Mexico by the National Addiction Research show that more than 200,000 teenagers between 12 and 17 years old use drugs (Garcia de Jesus and Ferriani 2008). Drugs are in many cases linked to violence in schools, which has also increased rapidly in recent years. Research examining possible links between violence and drug use has consistently found a strong relationship among adolescents and young adults (Ellickson and McGuigan 2000; Elliot et al. 1989; Kingery et al. 1991; Valois et al. 1995). Elliot et al. (1989) have revealed that not only was there a relationship between delinquent behaviour and drug use in America, but that there was an escalation from minor delinquency and "gateway" drug use to more serious offences and increased use of illicit substances. Kingery et al. (1991) surveyed 1 004 eighth and tenth grade students in 23 rural communities and found that youths who took drugs also took more risks, carried weapons more often, engaged in more fights, and were more likely to be victimized.

Adolescence is a transition phase between childhood and adulthood. This transition phase is characterized by physical, psychological, emotional and social changes, together with internal and external physical development (Garcia de Jesus and Ferriani 2008). The phase results in adolescents experimenting in all sorts of activities. The activities may include smoking, taking alcohol and drugs. It actually is a period in which adolescents are vulnerable because from a personal perspective, they face changes within themselves; changes within the family dynamics; and changes from their social interactions with others. This stage is therefore crucial not only for the teenagers, but also for their families, friends, and teachers, who must know how to deal with the conflicts the teenagers, experience (Garcia de Jesus and Ferriani 2008).

The abuse of drugs by teenagers is observable in South Africa too as in other countries. In light of the foregoing information, it may be assumed that the abuse of drugs may be one cause of learner violence in the South African schools. To overcome learner violence and to establish a safe school environment requires the cooperation of leaders in education, the government, law enforcement agencies and community leaders. Lawlessness in and out of school context must be eliminated. Substance abuse by South African youth is alarmingly high and many perceive the practice of using drugs as

merely participating in a common social practice. Drugs pose a serious threat to the goal of establishing peace, democracy and economic progress from a South African schools perspective. However, research in this domain has either been ignored or discouraged. This paper explores the links between school violence and drug usage using data from six provinces in South Africa. The basic question concerning violence in the school is whether it is a reflection of community problems or a function of the internal characteristics of schools themselves. The objective of this study was to identify the types of drugs used by learners at school; explore measures used by schools to decrease drug abuse; investigate the relationship between drugs and violence; identify the sources of drugs and explore the reasons for taking drugs. The paper further underscores the urgent need to address the problem so as to salvage the lives of victims and minimize incidences of abuse.

### **Substance or Drug Abuse**

Substance use and abuse problems take a terrible toll on the productivity of the nation's youth and further undermine the role of the school as a place of learning (Brady 2007). Substance abuse is recognized as a major issue in education due to increases in student dropout rates, truancy, misconduct, fighting, and general lack of concern for others (Nelson et al. 2010). It is reported for instance by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (2002) that students who use drugs are statistically more likely to drop out of school than their peers who do not. In comparison, younger students appear to be more at risk for taking chances with illegal substances, being influenced by peers in a negative way, and not following the rules and suggestions of authority figures than their older peers (Nelson et al. 2010). Drugs sometimes may be considered to be 'soft' and their use may be perceived to have no real consequences. However, findings of a study conducted in Arizona indicate that marijuana use is a 'gateway' behaviour to harder drug use and escalating violence (Bosworth et al. 2011). Drugs serve as a catalyst for a large number of violent crimes, while drug dealing exhibits an organized dimension, and crimes are often committed by drug addicts for the sake of satisfying their expensive addictions.

### **The School as a Safe Environment for Effective Teaching and Learning**

The constitution of the Republic of South Africa declares that everyone is entitled to live in a safe environment, yet this safety is not entirely realized in South African schools due to violence. In essence, violence is a problem in schools globally and is commonplace in South African schools (Zulu et al. 2004). Media reports often reveal horrific incidents of different forms of violence that occur in South African schools. School violence is defined by Van den Aardweg and Van den Aardweg (1988) cited in Zulu et al. (2004) as any behaviour of learners, educators, administrators or non-school person, who attempt to inflict injury on another person or to damage school property. Peguero (2008) argues that a definition of school violence should encompass student victimization, property damage and violence, student fear, and formal disciplinary sanctions.

School violence impacts negatively on a culture of learning and teaching (Zulu et al. 2004). As a result of violence in schools, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) has suggested that teachers should be paid a danger allowance because some learners go to school carrying weapons. The union further argues that teachers work in a dangerous situation like the police (SAPA 2011). However, while school violence is increasing alarmingly around the globe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, violence in schools is not a new phenomenon. Two books on education in post-conflict societies by Paulson (2011) and Nicola (2009) included chapters on South Africa, reflecting both the effects of serious levels of political violence on education during apartheid and civil violence subsequently. Apart from political violence and war, other forms of external violence can impact upon educational provision. For example, drugs can extend from the surrounding community and streets into the schools where students are seen as fair game. This can take place on the way to and from school and inside school as well when gang members enter school to sell drugs (Harber 2001; Le Roux and Mokhele 2011).

School administrators are challenged to create learning environments in which children are free to study and grow without the pressure of drugs and exposure to violence (Russell et al. 2005). The challenge to create free learning

environments means in essence that schools should be safe environments for learners, teachers and support staff. However, this invariably is not the case because schools have become highly volatile and unpredictable places where violence has become a part of everyday life (Zulu et al. 2004). It is imperative then to look at and to understand the concept of a 'safe school'. A safe school is defined as a school that is free of danger and where there is an absence of possible harm; a place where non-educators, educators and learners may work, teach and learn without fear of ridicule, intimidation, harassment, humiliation, or violence (Prinsloo 2005). A safe school could be characterized as one without physical violence (Bosworth et al. 2011). A safe school is characterised by features such as the presence of physical features like secure walls, fencing and gates; buildings that are in good state of repair; well-maintained school grounds; good discipline; professional educator conduct; good governance and management practices; as well as the absence crime and violence (Squelch 2000).

Safe schools are not an imaginary concept but an attainable reality. For instance, United States studies have reported about schools as safer places than anywhere else (Cornell 2006; Limbos 2008). About this, it is reported that in the United States (US) violence in schools declined by 50% between 1992 and 2003 (Limbos 2008). It is also reported that between 1992 and 2000, school-aged children were more than 100 times more likely to be murdered away from school than on school property (Cornell 2006). In spite of the decline, there are still threats to safety in schools (Bosworth et al. 2011). One of the threats to safety in schools is the presence of drugs. For instance in a study in the US among Grade 8 and Grade 10 learners it was found that drug users were more inclined to engage in physical altercations with their peers, take more risks that made them susceptible to assault, and were also more likely to be assaulted at school and victimized outside of school supervision (Kingery et al. 1992). Furthermore, in California substance use on school property was found to be significantly associated with school violence (Furlong et al. 1997).

### **Preventive Strategies for Drugs in Schools**

Preventive strategies are critical if the problem of and prevalence of drugs is to be curbed

at schools. In this regard, numerous preventive strategies have been explored as possible options to address drug use by young people in the US for instance (Nelson et al. 2010). Some of these strategies include education programs whose purpose is to teach learners about the dangers, consequences as well as why they should not participate in drug related activities. The promotion of school education programs is important, because schools are environments for students to develop a healthy way of living, involving cognitive, emotive, affective, cultural, behavioural, and social patterns (Garcia de Jesus and Ferriani 2008). Some of the programs have utilised evidence-based practice where demonstrations on single drug types, marijuana and alcohol were showcased (McLeod 1997; McBride et al. 2004).

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to get the lived reality of drugs in schools. Data was collected through interviews and observations. The interviews included the semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, principals, members of the non-teaching staff and members of the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) as well as focus group interviews with students. These strategies allowed the researchers to get a feel for the flesh and blood and more nuanced and detailed reality of what happens inside schools. These allowed researchers to obtain insights and understanding of the how and why of drugs in schools based on the perceptions and experiences of those involved. The aim was to obtain in-depth, first hand, information from schools in order to get a real picture about the phenomenon.

#### **Selection of Schools**

A convenient sample of four schools in each of the six South African provinces was followed in this study. These provinces include Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, KZN, North West and Western Cape. The convenient sample was chosen on the basis of its proximity to and convenience of travel for the researchers. The criteria used for selection was based on anecdotal evidence of incidences as garnered from media reports and other conversations with critical friends such as teachers, principals, ward managers, school governors. The schools were cho-

sen on their basis of being seen as violent, as per discussion with the critical friends. Based on the criteria, all the schools identified were put on a short list in each province.

### Sampling Procedures

A purposive sample was selected to gather more in-depth information for the research study. The rationale behind the use of purposive sampling is to select a sample of similar cases so that the particular group represented can be studied in-depth (Gall et al. 1996). The sample comprised of students, teachers, school governors and support staff. In selecting the students, only fourteen year olds who have been affected by violence and those who have perpetrated violence were purposively sampled for the study. To supplement the data from the students, two teachers (the school principal and the life orientation teacher in grade 9), two representatives of school governing bodies (the chair of governing body and the chair of school discipline, safety and security committee) and two members of support staff (general assistant and a security guard in the school) participated in the semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed through thematic extraction and the use of grounded theory to saturate categories (Corbin and Strauss 1990).

### Ethical Consideration

A number of ethical issues as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990) were taken into account in this study. Both the schools and students consented to participate in the study. The permission to visit schools and collect data was sought from the district office. In addition, teachers, SGBs and non-teaching staff signed the consent forms. For students, parental consent and minor assent to participate in the focus groups were obtained. Participation was voluntary, which suggests that participants have a choice to withdraw from the study for any reason and at any time. Participants were assured that their responses will be treated with confidentiality and pseudonyms will be used instead of real names.

### Research Findings

The findings of data collected from the semi-structured and focus group interviews generated

five themes, namely: types of drugs used by learners at school; corrective measures schools put in place; evidence of drugs and the relationship to violence; sources of drugs; and reasons for students' in-take of drugs. Each of these themes are quoted verbatim, interpreted and further supported by literature.

### Types of Drugs Used by Learners at School

It is clear from the interviews that learners are under the influence of drugs while participating in school activities. Different types of drugs are popular in different provinces. From North West and Gauteng provinces the common and popular drug used is '*nyaope*'. This was supported by one of the students who participated in the interviews: "...we have '*nyaope*', *dagga*, *ecstasy*, *seluwan*...I got busted for weed three weeks back I think the police found weed on me three weeks back". Drug abuse was also found to be rife in the schools of the Western Cape. The most drugs identified were *dagga* and '*tik*' because they are cheap and easily accessible. One of the principal interviewed in this research explained the common drugs used in schools as follows: "...*dagga* smoking I think that one we have the biggest problem with if I would open my drawer now you will smell *dagga* confiscated from the learners, so if the police can come here now they'll take me. we tell the security to bring the kids that are smoking or caught with *dagga* and the problem that we have is that the parents will always cover for their children and I think they sell or something but I think the outside people use them to sell it and I think they sell cigarette also and it's like there is territories here and the other boy stabbed the other because of territory."

### Corrective Measures Schools Put in Place

From the finding it is evident that schools have corrective measures in place, hence the use of police in searching drugs. One of the principals in this study had this to say about students and drugs: "This has become a problem in the school such that the police and community have been informed by the school...they smoke...and most of them went to high school...this year...we had a trip to Boksburg. So in the morning we had to search their bags so that we can make sure that there is nothing...then I called

them. By that time they didn't even have time to hide their bags...there was a bottle in disguise and they put the benzene in a tin of fresh milk. When I opened that container there was only benzene inside...so they stayed behind." A security participant in one of the schools explained that after noticing strange behaviour from one of the learners, they took the learner to the doctor and found that the learner was using a drug called *nyaope*. Similarly, the Life Orientation teacher from another school further indicates: "...one learner went to spy another learner who had *dagga* in his socks so some teacher went to find them but they didn't arrest them but drugs were handed to the police because police comes several times in a year."

### **Evidence of Drugs and the Relationship to Violence**

This study also found evidence of drug use in schools and a relationship to violence. Participants from all provinces in this study see drugs as a key source of violence in South African schools. Of the four schools visited in one of the provinces, two schools had vandalized toilet seats. Some students blame this on students who are taking drugs and one of the students said: "...last time Mr X was asking us why are we vandalizing the toilets and it was like no sober person would jump on a toilet seat up and down, it is virtually impossible to jump on a toilet seat that you are going to use, for five minutes jump on while you are sober." Drugs seem to be mainly a problem with boys. For example, one teacher, states: "...the boys...go out during break time and have these drugs '*wunga*' which is most common drug that they are using at the moment...they come back after break being arrogant and they don't want to listen to teachers. When you are trying to calm them down they try to be more aggressive to the teachers and at the end of the day you end up not knowing how to control them...they can hit you. Sometimes they do carry knives in their bags".

Indeed, drugs can influence the behaviour of even some of the more potentially responsible students such as the head of the representative council for learners. One of the principals who participated in this study explains: "...yesterday the president of the representative council for learners...attempted to stab one fellow who is in grade 12...this fellow slapped the presi-

dent across his face and the president went to...and opened his bag and took a knife and attempted to stab this fellow. For your information Prof, this fellow (the president) takes drugs...which suggest the damage that is caused by this "*wunga*" drug to the learners." Drug use can also cause problems in the home from which the students comes. One of the teachers who participated in this study states: "...ya, our learners are extremely violent because from the other cases, most of the time we have cases that are committed by these learners out of the school parameters in the location and so on. Where you find that the learner for example was arrested in terms of drugs or something and now maybe they were unable to trace the location or something they were able to trace them here in the school, so those are some of the things. We have learners who stay with their grandmothers and abusing grandmothers to an extreme that they even seek protection order... and the child is abusing substances and at the same time is also abusing the old lady...like assault when he needs money and so forth...and these are kind of violence."

### **Sources of Drugs**

Participants from all provinces in this study put blame on the community as the main source of drugs. One of the participants in this study explains: "...the school is located inside a rough community; it's easy for learners to get anything illegal or prohibited in the school premises when they want to." Another participant from the principals' interviews supported this blame and explains: "...just across the road about 15 to 20 meters from the school is a bottle store and most of the people who sell drugs, "*wunga*" in particular, are there. So, during break learners will just go there and pretend to be going to buy something or anything to eat yet they are doing to access those drugs." *Wunga* is not the only drug however that is identified as a problem in schools, there are other drugs used. For example, one participant mentioned the issue of some students selling another drug in the disguise of muffins. He states: "...we had an incident where some learners were selling something called the muffins...when they mix dough, they mix with the *dagga* inside...when they come and sell it to the kids, the kids feel drowsy...some of them get sick until you take them to the clinic and

then they find that there is a drug in their food...until the principal stopped them from selling the muffins.”

### Reasons for Students to take Drugs

There are some interesting interview responses that suggest that schools are failing to provide an environment that gives students the feelings of security, confidence and sense of personal worth and wellbeing they need and as a result they resort to drugs. When asked why they take drugs, students gave personal reasons. One of the participants from the focus group interviews states: “...it helps me to get the guts to do things that I couldn’t do before. It makes me stronger and much more confident to ill-treat some people and tell them that what they did to me then wasn’t right.” The results showed that drugs give learners a boost and also the guts to do things that they would not do under normal circumstances. However, it should be noted that the boost is not permanent, it will fade as soon as they are sober.

## DISCUSSION

Drug usage in schools is a common occurrence. This study highlighted the corrective measures schools put in place in an attempt to curb the drug problem. These measures include the administering of drug test to learners, discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. These findings are supported by both the Sunday Times newspaper report as well as Bosworth et al. (2011). The Sunday Times newspaper reported that “hundreds of schools across South Africa are subjecting their pupils to drug and breathalyzer tests because of the widespread problem of drug use in schools (The Sunday Times April 1 2012). According to Bosworth et al. (2011) measuring police reports or discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions are ways of gauging school safety.

It is evident from the study that drugs are key sources of violence in schools. A violent behaviour is mostly observed where students vandalise school properties and fight fellow students. These behaviours are mostly manifest in boys. In most incidents, drugs are carried by either the outsiders or students themselves from the community to the school premises. Based on these findings, it is assumed that the com-

munity exerts a strong, independent influence on the abuse of drugs. There have been a number of national reports from both public and private schools. Among other common themes is the need for improved discipline in the public schools. According to Hellman and Beaton (1986), this call parallels the increasing concern about the extent and causes of school crime and violence. McDermott (1983) argues that it is important to view crime in the schools as a phenomenon that is not separate from crime in the community. Crime in the schools does not occur in isolation from crime in the rest of the society (Wilson 1977). Research by Hellman and Beaton (1996) highlights that school in high crime communities have to cope with both students and non-students causing behaviour problems and breaking the law.

In support of the above mentioned information, the study found that the sources of drugs are nowhere else except in the community. This might be due to the fact that schools are surrounded by social places such as the bottle stores whereby learners may be exposed to illegal substances which are then carried to and spread in the school premises. These findings are supported by Nelson et al. (2010). They purport that “the spread of drug use throughout a school is much like a spread of disease, it spreads by student-to-student contact, multiplying more rapidly as more and more students are affected. In view of this notion, drug use can quickly turn to dependence and addiction, trapping users in a vicious cycle that ruins lives and destroys communities. For example, Methamphetamine usage in Cape Town is widely documented; the drug is commonly referred to as ‘tik’. According to the West Cape News (20<sup>th</sup> March 2012) some of the basic ingredients in methamphetamine manufacture can include flammable and volatile solvents such as methanol, ether, benzene, methylene chloride, trichloroethane, toluene, muriatic acid, sodium hydroxide and ammonia. According to Garcia de Jesus and Ferriani (2008) the school environment is not a “protection factor”, but rather a risk factor, and it is also not appropriate for teenager, because it is located in a conflict zone of the city. The students are therefore influenced by the youngsters on the streets.

From the study, it is evident that students use drugs for various reasons. They believe drugs will help them to attain certain feelings such as

security, confidence and sense of worth and well-being. It is clear from the findings that drugs influence a person to act in a strange way, which will cause the very same person to regret at the end when sober. These findings correlate with the findings of a study conducted in Mexico which highlighted the reasons for students' usage of drugs as follows: defiance, liking it, lack of understanding from their families, and belonging to a friend's group, among others (Garcia de Jesus 2008). Drug use among students is associated with disapproval, family disintegration or low self-esteem (Garcia de Jesus 2008). According to Hellman et al. (1986) drug abuse may, in part, be due to the "intruder problem". Similarly, studies by Gold and Moles (1978) found that predictors of delinquent behaviour in the school were essentially the same as those of delinquent behaviour in the community.

### CONCLUSION

Drug abuse is indeed a menace in the South African schools and requires concerted efforts to overcome. From the findings and literature review we suggested that there are clear cut lines between what were the factors external to the school in causing violence and those that were internal. Drugs are case in point. Drugs are presented as a problem external to the school causing violence within and outside the school premises. This however, may still be associated with the influence of community on school violence in the sense that students acquire drugs such as 'wunga' and other drugs that were mixed with the dough outside school and come back to school in an arrogant and belligerent mood. It can therefore be assumed that should these students have remained inside school premises, they would have not been violent in school. Therefore, this particular problem of violence goes back to external influences on schools.

The categories of external violence impacting on schools and internal violence happening within schools or caused by schools are not necessarily watertight and clear cut. This study has several limitations that are common to qualitative research. While focus-group methodology provides an economical and timely way to obtain a rich body of information on students and faculty perceptions, the sample does not pro-

vide sufficient or appropriate data for statistical analysis. The degree of honesty that students, teachers and assistant personnel provided in various interviews may also limit the study. In some instances, participants may have provided what they consider to be socially acceptable responses rather than their true feelings. This study fits well into a behaviourist perspective, hence stimulus-response. Learners who abuse drugs are found to be violent at school. This would mean that drugs influence them to behave in an unacceptable way. At the same time, they become punished instead of being rewarded, if found having drugs in their possessions.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends full engagement and participation of the community in the school so as to decrease the distribution of drugs to learners. The more learners, parents and staff are involved in school policy and decision-making, the more there is a genuine community, the more the school can resist violence. Active safety and security committee which monitors violence, recommends violence prevention measures and which oversees implementation need to be established in schools.

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