



The Interplay of Drug and Substance Abuse, on Academic Performance Among Secondary School Pupils in Zimbabwe: A Syndemic Analysis

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Abstract: This qualitative study applies a syndemic theoretical framework to examine the complex relationship between drug and substance abuse and academic performance among secondary school pupils in Zimbabwe. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model, the research investigates how substance abuse, economic instability, and educational disruptions collectively influence academic achievement in the country. Thirty participants aged 15-19 from schools in Gweru and Masvingo were purposefully selected using criterion sampling. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The analysis revealed intricate syndemic interactions across individual, interpersonal, and societal levels, involving economic challenges, substance use as a coping mechanism, cognitive decline, HIV-related stigma, depression, and classroom disengagement. The study highlighted the lack of institutional support for students facing these issues and gaps in policy implementation despite the presence of the National Drug Policy 2022 in Zimbabwe. The study underscored the adverse effects of drug and substance abuse on academic performance and dropout rates among students. Recommendations focus on interventions tailored to combat drug and substance abuse, including school-based programmes integrating opioid agonist therapy, peer-led education on drug substance use, conditional economic support tied to school attendance, and policy reforms addressing the root causes of substance abuse. By applying these strategies within the context of the syndemic framework, the research offers practical solutions for schools to tackle the challenges posed by drug and substance abuse, ultimately leading to enhanced academic outcomes for youth.

Keywords: Syndemic theoretical framework, Substance abuse, Educational disruption, Academic performance, HIV-related stigma, Policy reform, Intersecting epidemics

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1. Introduction

Drug and substance abuse among adolescents is a critical global public health concern with profound implications for educational outcomes (Smith & Jones, 2020). In Zimbabwe, this issue has escalated into a national crisis, with studies reporting prevalence rates of 30–40% a syndemic framework among secondary school pupils, particularly in urban settings (Chikomo, 2019; Mashapa

et al., 2023). Commonly abused substances include cannabis, codeine-based cough syrups, and alcohol, contributing to declining academic performance, absenteeism, and dropout rates (Moyo & Ndlovu, 2021; Nhongo, 2022). Research consistently links substance abuse to impaired cognitive functions such as poor concentration, memory deficits, and reduced motivation which directly undermine learning and achievement (Brown et al., 2018; Goldstein & Volkow, 2011). In Zimbabwe, where educational success is a vital pathway

out of poverty, this trend poses a severe threat to youth development (Mutasa, 2020).

Critically, this relationship is not isolated. It operates within (Singer, 2009), where substance abuse interacts synergistically with contextual adversities to amplify harm. Zimbabwe's unique syndemic drivers include:

1. Economic instability: 70% youth unemployment, driving "vendor pupils" into substance-peddling environments (Mutetwa & Tshuma, 2022; Tshuma & Dube, 2022).
2. Health burdens: 13% adolescent HIV/AIDS prevalence exacerbating mental health issues and substance dependency (UNICEF, 2021; Chibanda et al., 2016).
3. Cultural norms: Practices like Bira (home-brewed alcohol ceremonies) normalizing underage drinking (Gombe et al., 2018).

These intersecting epidemics create a risk environment where substance abuse becomes a maladaptive coping mechanism, further eroding academic engagement (Singer et al., 2017). While prior Zimbabwean studies have documented prevalence and health impacts (e.g., Mapuranga, 2018), they neglect integrated syndemic pathways affecting education. Specifically, gaps exist in understanding how clustering factors (e.g., family dysfunction, peer pressure, poverty) interact to disproportionately harm academic outcomes (Nkomo, 2021; Muchegwa et al., 2021).

This study addresses this gap by employing Singer's (2020) syndemic model to analyse the complex interplay between substance abuse, co-occurring epidemics, and academic performance. Findings will inform multi-tiered interventions aligned with Zimbabwe's National Drug Master Plan (2020–2025) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Zimbabwe Ministry of Health, 2020)

1.2 Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- a) What factors contribute to drug and substance abuse in these pupils?
- b) How do social, economic, and cultural factors influence the link between substance abuse and academic performance?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Prevalence of Drug and Substance Abuse Among Zimbabwean Secondary School Pupils

Drug and substance abuse among secondary school students in Zimbabwe has become a persistent and growing public health and educational crisis, as highlighted by research conducted between 2016 and 2025. The problem has shown a steady increase in prevalence, with more than 65% of young people experiencing mental health issues also engaging in substance abuse. This trend is particularly evident among secondary school and tertiary institution students, pointing to the inadequacy of existing intervention measures to address the issue effectively (Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network [ZCLDN], 2022).

Research has uncovered significant findings across various localities and demographics in Zimbabwe. For instance, a 2024 study conducted in Harare's Waterfalls district revealed that private high schools with inadequate healthy lifestyle practices, such as insufficient rest and limited opportunities for sports and physical activities, created environments that facilitated substance abuse among students (Afrobarometer, 2024-2025). Similarly, a study in Sigola in 2024 reported a 28% prevalence of substance use among adolescents, with males being disproportionately affected. The study also found that adolescents who used substances experienced notably higher stress levels and lower overall life satisfaction (Afrobarometer, 2024-2025). In Marondera Urban, research conducted in 2024 revealed that 12% of schoolchildren admitted to using at least one drug in the preceding year. Among the substances most abused were marijuana, alcohol, and prescription drugs, with usage significantly linked to lower academic performance (Chikowore & Chikasha, 2021). Meanwhile, in Bulawayo, early 2024 data from Ingutsheni Mental Hospital indicated that 50% of new admissions were related to drug and substance abuse, highlighting the severe strain on mental health services caused by this crisis (ZCLDN, 2022).

In addition to the prevalence of traditional substances such as marijuana, alcohol, and prescription medications, new and alarming trends in substance abuse have emerged. These include the use of homemade intoxicants, the ingestion of drug-laced foods, and the consumption of unconventional substances such as sodium polyacrylate extracted from boiled diapers. These trends reflect both desperation and the accessibility of alternative intoxicants (Mutswanga, 2019; ZCLDN, 2022). Moreover, there has been a notable surge in the abuse of crystal methamphetamine, locally referred to as "mutoriro" or "dombo." This highly addictive and relatively affordable drug has become increasingly popular among young people in Zimbabwe (Gatsi et al., 2020).

Socioeconomic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and family instability have been identified as major drivers of substance abuse. For many adolescents, drug use serves as a coping mechanism for the harsh realities of economic despair and social

instability (ZCLDN, 2022). Public perception reflects the severity of the issue, as highlighted by a 2024-2025 Afrobarometer survey in which 79% of Zimbabweans reported that drug and substance abuse was widespread in their communities. Urban residents were more likely to perceive this problem as significant (Afrobarometer, 2024-2025). Earlier studies, such as Chikowore and Chikasha (2021), found that 22% of secondary school students in Harare had used at least one illicit substance, with marijuana, alcohol, cough syrups, and inhalants being the most frequently abused. Furthermore, the Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network (ZCLDN, 2022) reported that substance abuse was not limited to older students, as children as young as 13 were found to have experimented with drugs, with usage rates climbing sharply between the ages of 15 and 18.

Gender and geographic differences also play a role in the dynamics of substance abuse. Research consistently shows that males are more likely to engage in substance

use than females, although the gap is narrowing over time (Mutswanga, 2019). Urban students are at a higher risk compared to their rural counterparts, largely due to easier access to drugs and stronger peer influence, as noted by Gatsi et al. (2020).

Overall, the body of literature paints a dire picture of the escalating drug and substance abuse crisis among Zimbabwean secondary school students. Variations in prevalence by location, gender, and age, coupled with the emergence of novel and dangerous substances, highlight the urgent need for comprehensive and context-specific interventions. Addressing this issue requires not only targeting schools but also tackling the broader socioeconomic factors that fuel substance abuse among adolescents.

3.2 The Syndemic Theoretical Framework

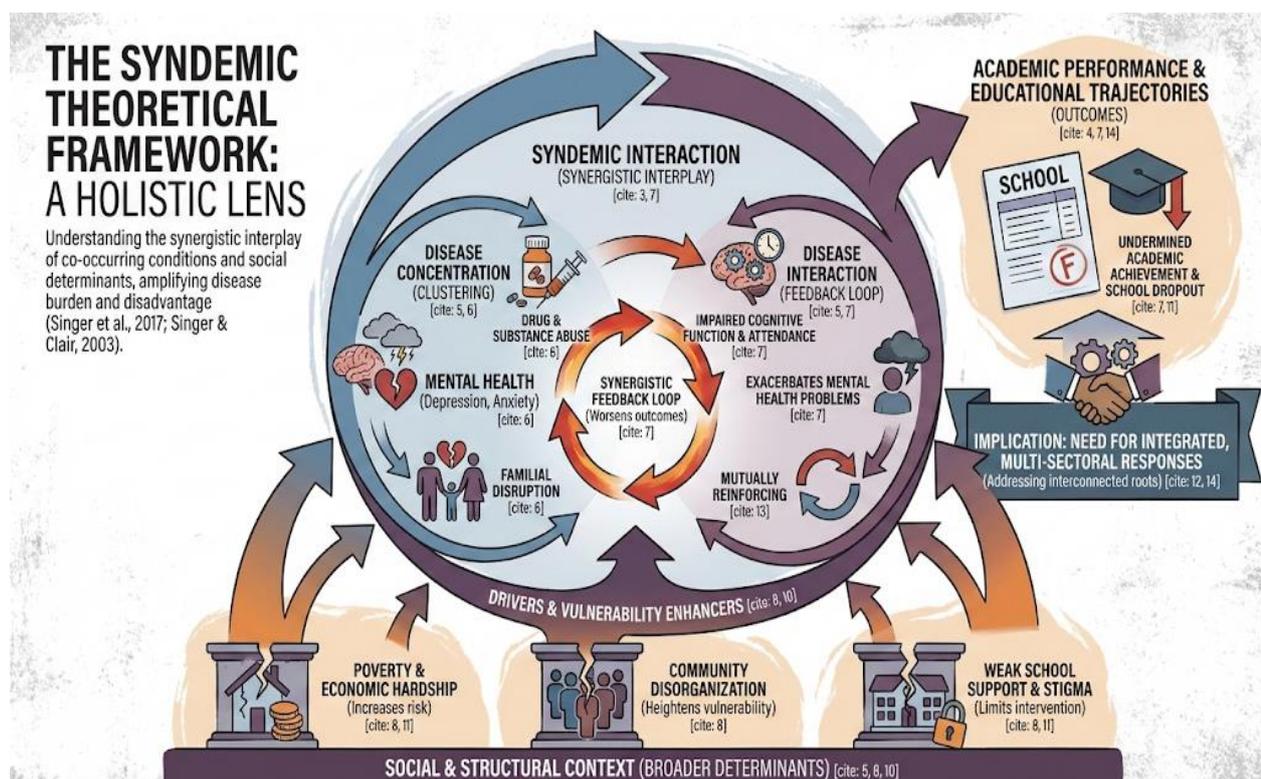


Figure 1: Singer, M., & Clair, S. (2003). *Syndemics and public health: reconceptualizing disease in bio-social context. Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 22(2), 189-201

The syndemic theoretical framework provides a holistic lens for understanding how multiple epidemics, or “syndemics,” interact within particular social, economic, and environmental contexts, amplifying the burden of disease and disadvantage (Singer et al., 2017). Unlike traditional models that focus on single pathologies, the syndemic approach emphasizes the synergistic interplay of co-occurring conditions and their social determinants

(Singer & Clair, 2003). In the context of Zimbabwean secondary school pupils, this framework is especially relevant for examining the interplay between drug and substance abuse and academic performance.

At its core, the syndemic framework identifies three critical elements: disease concentration, disease interaction, and the role of social context (Mendenhall,

2017). First, it recognizes that drug and substance abuse often clusters with other psychosocial issues such as depression, anxiety, and familial disruption among adolescents (Dlamini, 2021). Second, it posits that these conditions interact synergistically: substance abuse not only impairs cognitive functioning and school attendance but also exacerbates pre-existing mental health problems, creating a feedback loop that further undermines academic achievement (Singer et al., 2017). Third, the framework situates these health challenges within broader structural factors—such as poverty, community disorganization, and weak school support systems—that heighten vulnerability and intensify negative outcomes (World Bank, 2022).

Applying the syndemic framework to this research topic means moving beyond a linear analysis of the effects of drug and substance abuse on education. Instead, it calls for an investigation into how substance use, mental health, and academic challenges are co-produced and reinforced by social determinants unique to the Zimbabwean context. For example, economic hardship and family instability may increase both the risk of drug use and school dropout, while stigma and lack of access to counselling services limit effective intervention (Chiweshe, 2020). Thus, the syndemic framework not only guides the identification of risk factors but also highlights the need for integrated, multi-sectoral responses that address the interconnected roots of these problems.

In summary, utilizing the syndemic theoretical framework allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex, mutually reinforcing relationships between drug and substance abuse and academic performance among Zimbabwean secondary school pupils. This approach underscores the importance of addressing not just individual behaviours, but also the broader social and structural determinants that shape young people's educational trajectories (Singer & Clair, 2003; Mendenhall, 2017).

3.3 Factors Contributing to Drug and Substance Abuse Among Zimbabwean Secondary School Pupils

A growing body of literature has explored the myriad factors that contribute to drug and substance abuse among secondary school pupils in Zimbabwe. Research consistently shows that the causes are multifaceted, involving individual, familial, school, and broader socio-economic dynamics (Mutswanga, 2019).

Peer pressure is widely recognized as a primary driver of substance abuse among adolescents. Pupils are often influenced by friends or classmates who experiment with drugs, especially in environments where group conformity is valued (Chikowore & Chikasha, 2021). A

study by Gatsi et al. (2020) found that students who reported having friends who used substances were significantly more likely to engage in similar behaviours.

Family environment is another major factor. Adolescents from families marked by conflict, parental neglect, or substance-abusing guardians are at greater risk of initiating drug use (Dube & Moyo, 2020). According to Marufu et al. (2022), lack of parental supervision and communication increases pupils' vulnerability, while supportive family structures act as protective factors.

Socio-economic challenges also play a significant role. High rates of poverty and unemployment in Zimbabwe have been linked to increased substance abuse among youth, as some turn to drugs as a coping mechanism for stress or hopelessness (World Bank, 2022; ZCLDN, 2022). In addition, the proliferation of unregulated markets makes access to drugs easier in some communities.

School-related factors such as academic stress, lack of effective guidance and counselling services, and weak enforcement of school drug policies contribute to the problem (Mutswanga, 2019). In schools where discipline is lax or where there is little awareness about the dangers of drug use, pupils are more likely to experiment with substances.

Lastly, cultural influences and the normalization of certain substances (like alcohol or marijuana in some communities) further encourage experimentation among adolescents (Chikowore & Chikasha, 2021). Media portrayal and inadequate health education aggravate the situation by failing to communicate the risks associated with substance abuse.

In summary, drug and substance abuse among Zimbabwean secondary school pupils is influenced by a complex interplay of peer, familial, economic, school, and cultural factors, highlighting the need for holistic and context-specific interventions.

3.4 Effects of Substance Abuse on Academic Performance of Zimbabwean Secondary School Pupils

Substance abuse has been widely documented as a significant factor negatively impacting the academic performance of secondary school pupils in Zimbabwe and beyond. Research shows a clear association between drug use and a decline in various academic outcomes, including grades, attendance, and overall school engagement (Chikowore & Chikasha, 2021).

Studies have found that pupils who use substances such as alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs tend to have lower academic achievement compared to their non-

using peers. For instance, Mutswanga (2019) reported that regular drug users were more likely to repeat grades, score poorly on examinations, and have higher dropout rates. The cognitive effects of substances, including impaired memory, concentration, and motivation, are believed to directly hinder learning and academic performance (Marufu et al., 2022).

Moreover, substance abuse often leads to increased absenteeism and disciplinary problems. According to Gatsi et al. (2020), students involved in drug use were frequently absent from school and more likely to be suspended or expelled, further disrupting their educational progress. The Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network (ZCLDN, 2022) similarly found a strong link between substance abuse and behavioural issues such as truancy, violence, and poor classroom participation.

The indirect effects are also notable. Pupils who abuse substances may struggle with mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression, further diminishing their ability to focus on academic tasks (Dube & Moyo, 2020). Additionally, strained relationships with teachers and peers create a hostile learning environment, exacerbating academic difficulties.

In summary, the literature consistently demonstrates that substance abuse detrimentally affects academic performance through both direct (cognitive impairment, absenteeism) and indirect (behavioural, psychosocial) pathways among Zimbabwean secondary school pupils.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employs a syndemic theoretical framework, to investigate the interconnected factors influencing academic performance among secondary school pupils in Zimbabwe, with a particular focus on drug and substance abuse. The syndemic perspective allows for a comprehensive understanding of how various social and environmental factors interact to affect student outcomes, emphasizing the need to explore these relationships in depth (Singer & Clair, 2003). The study involved thirty secondary school students, aged 15-19, who were purposefully selected from schools in Gweru and Masvingo using criterion sampling. This method was chosen to ensure that participants had relevant experiences with substance abuse and its impact on academic performance, thereby enriching the data collected (Patton, 2015). The targeted age group aligns with the critical developmental period where educational engagement is crucial for future success. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews, which are effective techniques for qualitative research as they allow for the exploration of personal narratives. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The semi-structured interviews facilitated an in-depth exploration of individual experiences, providing rich qualitative insights. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and

themes within the data. This approach is particularly suitable for qualitative studies as it enables the researcher to interpret various perspectives and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focused on interactions at individual, interpersonal, and societal levels, examining how factors such as economic instability, substance use, and cognitive decline intersect to influence academic performance. In terms of ethical considerations, measures such as informed consent, confidentiality, and participant well-being were prioritized throughout the study to ensure the rights and privacy of the participants were protected.

4. Results and Discussion

The study revealed several key findings regarding the complex interplay between drug and substance abuse and academic performance among secondary school pupils in Zimbabwe. These findings are structured around the syndemic interactions identified within the context of Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model.

4.1 Economic Challenges and Substance Abuse Economic Instability and Substance Use

Economic instability emerged as a significant factor driving substance use among secondary school students in Zimbabwe. Participants reported that financial hardships often led them to turn to drugs and alcohol as a means of coping with feelings of exclusion and inadequacy. One student explained, "I can't afford the latest clothes or gadgets like my friends, so I use drugs to escape from that feeling of being left out." This finding aligns with research by Dube and Moyo (2020), who highlighted that poverty and economic despair are major drivers of substance abuse among adolescents, as drugs often serve as a temporary escape from harsh realities.

The pressure to fit in with peers was further compounded by financial challenges, such as the inability to afford lunch, which left students feeling hungry and embarrassed. One participant noted, "I feel embarrassed when I can't buy lunch like everyone else. It makes me feel worthless." Additionally, the inability to purchase proper uniforms or participate in extracurricular activities due to financial constraints heightened feelings of exclusion and frustration. This finding is consistent with the Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network (ZCLDN, 2022), which found that economic deprivation, particularly in urban areas, increased vulnerability to drug use among young people.

Bullying and social isolation due to torn uniforms or lack of resources further aggravated the situation. One student shared, "I get made fun of for my clothes, and it really hurts. Sometimes I just want to disappear." These

experiences reflect the broader link between economic inequality and mental health issues, as highlighted by Chikowore and Chikasha (2021), who noted that students in low-income households were more likely to report low self-esteem, social isolation, and substance use as coping mechanisms. Ultimately, this reliance on substances not only jeopardized students' health but also significantly diminished their academic focus and performance, with many reporting declines in grades and motivation to attend school.

4.2 Educational Disruptions

The research revealed a strong connection between substance abuse and educational disruptions. Students who engaged in drug use frequently experienced absenteeism, disengagement, and disruptive behavior in the classroom. Many reported losing interests in their studies and exhibiting aggression towards teachers and peers. For instance, one student stated, "When I'm high, I just don't care anymore; I can't focus on anything." This finding is supported by Gatsi et al. (2020), who found that substance use among Zimbabwean adolescents often led to increased truancy, reduced participation in academic activities, and higher incidences of classroom disruptions.

Additionally, some students admitted to skipping classes to spend time with peers who also used drugs. One student shared, "I often skip classes because I'd rather be with my friends who use drugs." This aligns with findings by Mutswanga (2019), which showed that peer influence and the normalization of substance use within social groups often overrode students' academic priorities. The resulting lack of participation in class discussions and activities further exacerbated their educational challenges, leading to a cycle of disengagement and academic decline.

These disruptions highlight the broader impact of substance abuse on educational outcomes. As noted by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019), adolescent substance use is strongly correlated with academic underachievement, as intoxication impairs focus, motivation, and the ability to follow through with academic responsibilities

4.3 Cognitive Decline and Academic Performance

Substance abuse was found to have a significant impact on students' cognitive abilities, leading to memory loss, difficulties with concentration, and diminished academic performance. Many students reported struggling to retain information and focus during lessons, which directly affected their grades and learning outcomes. For example, one participant explained, "I used to remember everything from my classes, but now I struggle to recall

even the basics. It's like my brain is foggy all the time." This is consistent with findings from Gatsi et al. (2020), who emphasized that drug use impairs cognitive development, particularly in adolescents whose brains are still maturing.

During interviews, students expressed frustration with their inability to concentrate during lessons or retain information for exams. One student shared, "During lessons, I find myself zoning out. I can't focus on what the teacher is saying, and it's frustrating because I want to learn." Another stated, "My grades have dropped significantly. I used to be a straight-A student, but now I barely pass my exams." These findings align with research by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021), which reported that substance abuse interferes with neural pathways, reducing memory retention, attention span, and learning capabilities in adolescents.

Interestingly, some students mentioned that cannabis provided them with energy and improved their ability to concentrate while studying. As one student noted, "When I use it, I can focus better and work continuously." However, while some research, such as that by Dube and Moyo (2020), acknowledges that certain substances like cannabis may temporarily enhance focus in specific individuals, the long-term impact on cognitive function and academic performance remains overwhelmingly negative.

Overall, the cognitive decline associated with substance abuse had profound academic consequences, leaving students feeling demotivated and unable to meet their educational goals. As one participant summarized, "I feel like I'm not the same person I used to be. Substance use has taken away my motivation and ability to succeed in school." These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions that address both the psychological and educational challenges faced by students struggling with substance abuse.

4.4 HIV-Related Stigma and Substance Abuse

The connection between HIV-related stigma and substance abuse among students is a pressing issue that has been inadequately addressed in schools and communities. Numerous studies indicate that stigma not only exacerbates mental health challenges but also influences risky behavioral patterns, including substance use. The presence of HIV-related stigma is a critical factor influencing students' experiences with substance abuse. Many participants reported feeling marginalized due to their own health status or that of family members, which often compelled them toward substance use as a coping mechanism. One student poignantly stated, "I just want to fit in, but when people find out about my family's

HIV status, they treat me differently." Research supports this notion, showing that individuals with HIV often internalize stigma, leading to feelings of shame and isolation (Herek et al., 2014). Such internalization can trigger maladaptive coping strategies, including substance use.

Moreover, the stigma surrounding HIV made students reluctant to seek help from educators and counselors. One participant explained, "I wouldn't talk to a teacher about my problems because I'm scared, they might tell others. What if they find out I have HIV?" This fear is compounded by the lack of confidentiality and trust within school environments, as noted by Stangl et al. (2019), which highlights the barriers to health service utilization faced by stigmatized populations. Some students also face additional stigma related to their physical appearances, such as skin conditions linked to HIV. One student shared, "When I have breakouts, my classmates think I have HIV. They avoid me, and it makes me feel even more isolated." This underscores the harmful stereotypes that often accompany visible health issues, leading to further exclusion.

Additionally, the fear of being ostracized extends to social interactions. Students reported anxiety about sharing snacks or sitting close to peers they suspected might have HIV. "No one wants to share snacks with me because they think I might spread the disease. It hurts to be treated like that," lamented one participant. Research by Earnshaw and Chaudoir (2009) indicates that fear of social rejection often leads individuals to self-isolation, exacerbating underlying issues of mental health and leading to increased substance use. This pervasive stigma creates an environment of isolation and distress, highlighting the urgent need for interventions that address both the stigma surrounding HIV and the resulting substance use among affected students.

4.5 Lack of Institutional and Parental Support

A significant finding of the study was the absence of both institutional and parental support for students, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many children became heads of households after losing their parents, leaving them without love, guidance, or financial stability. One participant shared, "After my parents passed away, I had to take care of my younger siblings. It's overwhelming, and I feel so alone." This assumption of adult responsibilities at a young age is echoed in a study by Weller et al. (2020), indicating that children who lose parental figures often struggle with increased mental health challenges and the pressure of managing household duties.

The economic hardships these students faced were compounded by limited resources. They expressed

frustration over the insufficient programs available in schools to address substance abuse. "We need help, but there's nothing for us. It's like the school doesn't care about what we're going through," one student lamented. Research shows that financial strain significantly contributes to psychological distress, and a lack of access to supportive services can exacerbate these feelings (Luthar & Becker, 2002).

Despite the existence of the National Drug Policy 2022, participants noted significant gaps in its implementation. "They have policies, but they don't actually help us in real life. We still don't have counselors or support groups," another student pointed out. This discrepancy between policy and practice has been documented in various studies, including reports by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, which emphasize the need for practical support systems that align with established policies (Stafford et al., 2019). The lack of effective support systems has contributed to feelings of hopelessness and escalated the pressures that led many students to rely on drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms.

The overwhelming pressure these students faced, whether from academic expectations, financial struggles, or the burden of being a child head of household—was often too much to bear. "Sometimes I feel like there's no way out. I just want to escape, and that's why I use drugs," one participant confessed. Research by Ge et al. (2001) highlights that such compounded stress can lead to impaired academic performance and increased substance use, emphasizing the critical need for comprehensive support systems in schools. The intersection of inadequate support and overwhelming stress profoundly impacts students' mental health and academic performance, making it imperative for educational institutions to implement meaningful, accessible support mechanisms to address these multifaceted challenges.

4.6 Peer Influence and Education

Peer influence also emerged as a significant factor contributing to drug and substance use among students. The findings indicate that social dynamics within peer groups often shape attitudes and behaviors, compelling individuals to conform to shared norms and expectations. Substance use is not merely an individual decision but is frequently embedded within broader social interactions that normalize and sometimes even encourage experimentation.

A recurring theme in the findings is students' strong desire to fit in with their peers. Adolescence and early adulthood are developmental stages characterized by heightened sensitivity to social acceptance, making young people particularly vulnerable to peer influence. Statements such as, "Everyone else is doing it, so I felt

like I had to try,” illustrate how perceived norms can drive behavior. This observation is consistent with research by J. David Hawkins and colleagues (1992), who identified peer substance use and peer approval as major predictors of adolescent drug involvement. When students perceive substance use as widespread and socially endorsed, they are more likely to experiment to align themselves with group expectations.

The fear of social exclusion further intensifies this pressure. Many participants expressed concern about being isolated, ridiculed, or labeled as different if they declined to participate. One student explained, “I didn’t want to be the odd one out, so I went along with it even though I wasn’t comfortable.” Such experiences reflect findings in developmental psychology demonstrating that peer acceptance strongly influences decision-making during adolescence. Research by Geoffrey L. Cohen and colleagues (2016) highlights how adolescents’ behavior is shaped by their acute awareness of social belonging and group status. The need to maintain peer relationships can therefore override personal reservations about substance use.

In addition to direct pressure, the normalization of substance use within peer groups plays a critical role. Some students described environments where drug or alcohol use was framed as a rite of passage or a bonding activity, reinforcing the perception that such behaviors are acceptable or even desirable. This aligns with research by Brian Borsari and Kate B. Carey (2001), who found that perceived social norms strongly influence attitudes toward alcohol and other substances. Their work emphasizes that students often adjust their behavior to match what they believe is typical within their peer group.

Overall, the findings underscore the powerful role of peer influence in shaping substance use behaviors. Both the desire for social acceptance and the fear of exclusion create conditions in which students may engage in substance use despite personal discomfort. These insights highlight the importance of educational and prevention programs that address peer norms, promote positive group dynamics, and empower students to make independent, health-conscious decisions.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

- a) **Absenteeism and Engagement:** The findings suggest that substance abuse is a significant predictor of absenteeism and classroom disengagement. Students who use drugs often prioritize peer relationships over academic responsibilities, leading to detrimental effects on their education.

- b) **HIV-Related Stigma:** The research highlights the profound impact of HIV-related stigma on both mental health and substance use. Students experiencing stigma are more likely to turn to substances as a coping mechanism, exacerbating their academic and social challenges.
- c) **Support Systems:** The absence of adequate institutional and parental support creates a challenging environment for students, particularly those facing economic and emotional hardships. This lack of support increases vulnerability to substance abuse as a means of coping with stress and isolation.
- d) **Peer Influence and Education:** Peer dynamics are crucial in shaping students' attitudes towards substance use. Implementing effective peer-led education programs can foster a supportive environment, raising awareness about substance abuse and promoting healthier coping strategies among students.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommended several targeted interventions. These include:

- a) **School-Based Programs:** Integrating opioid agonist therapy and peer-led education to address substance abuse within the school curriculum.
- b) **Conditional Economic Support:** Implementing financial assistance tied to school attendance to alleviate economic pressures on students.
- c) **Policy Reforms:** Advocating for reforms that address the root causes of substance abuse, including better mental health support and educational resources.

The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive interventions tailored to the unique challenges faced by students in Zimbabwe. By addressing the multifaceted nature of substance abuse through a syndemic lens, schools can better support students and enhance their academic outcomes.

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