

Publisher



African Journal of Social Work

Afri. j. soc. work

© National Association of Social Workers Zimbabwe/Author(s)

ISSN Print 1563-3934

ISSN Online 2409-5605

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial 4.0 International License

Indexed & Accredited with: African Journals Online (AJOL) | University of Zimbabwe Accredited Journals (UZAJ) | SCOPUS (Elsevier) | Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) | Society of African Journal Editors (SAJE) | Asian Digital Library (ADL) | African Social Work & Development Network (ASWDNet) | Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) - South Africa | SJR | CNKI - China | Journal Publishing Practices & Standards (JPPS) | EBSCO | DOI

The Ubuntu African perspective on the institutional and community contributory factors associated with substance use among rural high school learners in Limpopo, South Africa

Eric Mamukeyani, Takalani Joyce Mashamba, and Tshifhiwa Sinky Netshapapame

ABSTRACT

Substance use among high school learners is a major public health problem all across the world, and in South Africa. It has devastating effects on the health and social well-being of learners, as well as the educational process. This study sought to explore environmental contributory factors associated with substance use among high school learners in the Motetema circuit, South Africa. The study followed a qualitative research approach by employing the phenomenological research design. 10 learners from various high schools participated in the study, including 07 key informants using semi-structured interviews. Data were then analysed using a thematic approach. Institutional factors (bullying and the school setting), and community factors (availability of drugs in the community) are the main environmental contributory factors to substance use among learners in Motetema circuit. In terms of intervention, the Ubuntu African philosophy provides a structured and targeted intervention to tackle the problem through the collective contribution of families, key stakeholders, and communities. Furthermore, there should be school-based intervention services to help learners with their interpersonal problems and conducting anti-bullying awareness campaigns is essential.

KEY TERMS: factors, high school, learners, Motetema circuit, substance use

KEY DATES: Submitted: March 2024; Reviewed: July 2025; Accepted: October 2025; Published: December 2025

KEY DECLARATIONS: Funding: None | Conflict of Interest: None

AUTHOR DETAILS

- Mamukeyani Eric, (Corresponding author), Department of Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Limpopo, Polokwane, South Africa Email: ericmamukeyani@gmail.com
- Mashamba Takalani Joyce, Department of Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Limpopo, Polokwane, South Africa Email: joyce.mashamba@ul.ac.za
- Netshapapame Tshifhiwa Sinky, Department of Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Limpopo, Polokwane, South Africa Email: tshifhiwa.netshapapame@ul.ac.za

Current and previous volumes are available at:

<https://ajsw.africasocialwork.net>



HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

Mamukeyani E., Mashamba T. J. and Netshapapame T. S. (2025). The Ubuntu African perspective on the institutional and community contributory factors associated with substance use among rural high school learners in Limpopo, South Africa. *African Journal of Social Work*, 15(6), 12-19. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v15i6.2>

INTRODUCTION

Substance use among high school learners is a persistent problem globally and in South Africa. Substance use affects the physical health, psychological health and social well-being of learners. It also causes school dropout, truancy and poor academic performance among learners due to memory problems because the brain is still underdeveloped. As such, this study aimed to explore the environmental contributory factors to substance abuse by learners, as many other previous researchers delved into the personal and interpersonal contributory factors. The study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological research design whereby ten learners (five boys and five girls) from various high schools participated in the study, including seven key informants, using semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis method was used to analyse data, whereby the following themes emerged: institutional factors (bullying and the school setting) and community factors (availability of drugs in the community and peer pressure) as environmental contributory factors to substance use among learners in the Motetema circuit. This paper contains the introduction, background of the study, the Ubuntu Philosophy perspective on the problem of substance use among learners, the methodology section, the results section, the discussion, the conclusion and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Substance use among high school learners remains a public health concern because its effects are devastating to the users, and have an impact on schools, families and communities at large. Furthermore, this problem creates chaos, an unsafe learning environment, ill-disciplined, uncontrollable and disruptive behaviour in the classrooms, which also gives a burden to educators and other learners and also produces poor educational outcomes.

Globally, the use of substances among adolescents is a grave concern. In 2023, 1.86 million adolescents between 12 and 17 years globally reported using drugs, with Cannabis remaining the number one most used illicit drug, and vaping increasing among young people (National Centre for Drug Abuse Statistics, 2025). In support of this, the study of Elflein (2022) found 30% cannabis prevalence among high school learners in the United States of America (USA). In Africa, substance use problems among high school learners are very concerning, as several studies indicated a very problematic prevalence of substance use, for example, the study conducted by the Department of Transport and Community Safety (2022), which indicated a 19% prevalence of binge drinking by high school learners. Also, a 31% prevalence of alcohol was reported by Mohale and Mokwena (2020) in Johannesburg high schools.

In Limpopo Province, Maserumule, Skaal and Sithole (2019) reported a worrisome 55.1% prevalence of alcohol among high school learners in Marblehall in Sekhukhune District. This shows that the use of substances by high school learners continues to be a daunting problem affecting learners, teachers, families and communities at large. In responding to the problem, the high schools in Motetema circuit always rely on social workers, police and health practitioners to render awareness campaigns to the learners, which deems it effective because they are one-off interventions. In addition, there is a Life Orientation subject in schools, which deals with addressing behaviour for learners, which is inadequate to address the root problem because it is an academic subject. As such, all these interventions have not been able to reduce the problem in high schools because it is persisting. This study was undertaken to explore the environmental and community causative factors of substance use among high school learners. The findings are addressed through the Ubuntu African Philosophy approach to improve prevention among high school learners in the Motetema circuit because of its holistic nature and structured principles of collective contribution and intervention. This assists in developing a targeted intervention suitable for high schools to address the substance use problem (Malejane, 2022).

The Ubuntu perspective in dealing with the substance use problem in Motetema circuit: A theoretical framework

Makhetha (2024) indicates that Ubuntu or *huntu* is an African philosophical worldview based on the values and practices of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion, ensuring a happy community and spiritual life. The Ubuntu application consists of six levels, namely: the individual, the family, the community, the society, the environment and the spiritual. This theory is about the notion that people are interdependent and need each other to succeed and prosper in whatever they do, as there is emphasis on the principle of unity and solidarity, which is central in this theory, as it directs strength through reciprocity and empowering other people (Mungubate, Mupedziswa, Twikirize, Mthethwa, Desta, & Oyinlola, 2024).

In this study, the Ubuntu Philosophy is a comprehensive guide for structured intervention, which is suitable to address the substance use problem in high schools across all levels of influence. As the Ubuntu African Philosophy seeks to empower the individual through the efforts of others, learners will receive counselling where they will be empowered with skills to make the right choices because they suffer stress and a high level of peer pressure, which propels them to use drugs. They will also be capacitated to develop resistance habits, empowering them to take

control of their lives and be productive in school and the community. This will be done by the professionals in collaboration with social workers and health professionals to uplift the individual learner.

The Ubuntu African Philosophy values the contribution of the family in resolving problems, so in this study, the family can play a vital role in assisting learners to fight substance problems. To ignite contribution by the families, support and empowerment programs will be rendered on a larger scale to invite the involvement of parents in the lives of learners and to improve parental care and supervision. This intervention will eradicate risk factors such as poor parental care through capacitating families with effective parental skills to be able to care, support, and discipline children in an effective way to prevent drug use at an early age.

The principle of collectiveness in Ubuntu is central, so the community will be encouraged to take action in combating substance use and providing safe school environments. As drug exposure is high in school premises and communities, the leadership in the community, as well as the school environments, will work collectively with various stakeholders to thwart the problem (Malejane, 2022). Furthermore, there will be strong advocacy in fostering compliance with drug control policies placed by the Department of Education. In addition, the schools will be assisted to develop internal substance abuse policies and control measures, which will increase preventive actions and reduce the exposure (Mokwena, Mokwena, Van Der Heever, and Mokgatle, 2020).

The Ubuntu African Philosophy emphasises the connectedness of humans with their spirituality because it provides hope, strength and foundation for societies. Religious leaders are essential in creating a huge moral and spiritual influence among families and communities in increasing prevention through imparting effective moral behaviours among the learners and families. Churches and other faith organisations will be involved to form part of the prevention, where they will provide a strong support system for individuals with drug problems and addiction to give them a sense of spiritual belongingness and comfort and help them achieve drug recovery (Rural Health, 2025).

METHODS

The study followed a qualitative research approach with the aim of using words and narratives to describe the findings. The phenomenological research design was used in this study to describe, explain and contextualise the learners' experiences as well as those of key informants such as social workers, SGB, educators, nurses and police who were involved with learners daily. A purposive sampling was used to select learners in various high schools under the Motetema circuit because they were known to possess information about substance use in high schools. These learners were identified in the schools and then approached to participate in the study until data saturation was reached at the 10th learner. Those 18 years and above gave consent to participate in the study, and those below 18 gave assent, and parental consent was also obtained. The key informants were also approached purposefully and requested to participate in the study voluntarily as they were known because they participate in the awareness campaigns in the nearby schools. After being requested, they voluntarily participated in the study until data saturation was reached at the 7th participant. In total, the sample consisted of seventeen (17) participants, ten high school learners aged 13-21, and seven key informants aged 39 to 79 years of age.

The study excluded learners who did not want to participate, those who were absent as well and those who did not bring the parental consent forms back. The study included learners who were interested and willing to participate in the study, who also gave informed consent to participate in the study, as well as learners whose parents gave informed consent in writing. Other key participants were excluded because they changed their minds, and some had a busy schedule and could not participate in the study, but those who consented and were available and willing to participate were included.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from learners and key informants. A recording device was used to record the interviews, whereby permission and consent from participants were sought before the interview. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data cleaning was performed, and thematic data analysis steps by Braun and Clarke (2013) were applied, such as familiarising and generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and writing a research report. Additionally, there was triangulation of the findings with existing research literature and the use of field notes. The analysis brought two recurring themes, namely, the institutional factors (bullying and the school setting), and the community factors (availability of drugs in the community and peer pressure).

To ensure that the data collection is credible, a pilot study was done on separate participants to ensure that the questions were clear and relevant to be answered by participants. The interpretations of findings were derived from the raw data. There was no prior knowledge or personal relationship that could have influenced the results of the study. The analysed data were submitted to the professional coder, who verified and validated the themes. The ethical codes were adhered to during the study, such as informed consent from all the volunteering participants, confidentiality, and privacy of personal information and safeguarding of data in the password-encrypted laptop. Ethical clearance from the University of Limpopo Turf Research Ethics Committee (TREC) was obtained with reference number: TREC/84/2024: PG. Ethical clearance from the Department of Education and Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee (LPREC) with reference number: LPREC/29/2024: PG was

obtained before undertaking the study.

RESULTS

Demographic details of participants

10 learners between the ages of 13 and 21, 05 boys and 05 girls participated in the study. Two from grade 08, three from grade 09, and three from grade 10, and two from grade 11. Seven key informants aged 30 to 79 also participated in the study, consisting of an educator, principal, SGB, parent, social worker, nurse, and police officer. Four were males, and three were females with four to 20 years of working experience.

Table 3: Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Institutional contributory factors	• Bullying
	• The school setting
Theme 2: Community contributory factors	• Availability of drugs in the community
	• Peer pressure

Theme 1: The institutional contributory factors

The study found that bullying and the school environment are the main institutional contributory factors to substance use by learners, as indicated below.

Bullying

Bullying contributes to substance use among learners because it affects their mental health, causing them significant stress, which makes them take drugs to cope with the problem, as attested below.

“They can either feel that they experience bad things, such as bullying. The learners are having a problem because they suffer a lot of bullying from other learners who do not like them” - L1

“Bullying can lead a learner to engage in drugs because he or she feels worthless and pained. The bullies do not care about how one feels; they only care about themselves, so it is very painful” - L2

“If they are beaten or if they are bullied and made fun of in the street and call them names. Remember, the bullies stand for you at the gate, they call you names and attack you, then you get stressed, and that makes you use drugs because you are stressed and pained”. - L5

The school setting

The school environment presents significant risks for learners to take drugs due to poor academic performance and achievement, as attested below.

“The pressure when a learner realises that he or she is not doing well in school and other learners tell them so, things like that can push them to drugs. This is because of stress that you are not passing, and others are passing in front of you” - L2

“In school, the learners dodge classes and sit at the back of the toilets to smoke because they are not performing well. They do not care about lessons; they just want to smoke and forget that they are not passing well” - L7

Grade 10 class presents many more risks for learners to use substances because of learner developmental challenges and a high failure rate.

“In school, grade 10 is a big problem. It is the one with the most drug use, the way I see it, because most learners start to experience a lot of things in that grade, so they use more drugs. This grade carries learners who are very problematic and uncooperative, so learners smoke a lot in this grade, and it is

very problematic” - L2

“I think grade 10 gives the school lots of problems because it is where learners start to experience lots of things which they could not experience in the past grades. Every teacher and school management complain a lot about grade 10s because they do not listen, and they trouble learners with their drug tendencies” - L1

Theme 2: The community contributing factors

The study found that easy accessibility and peer pressure are the main community contributing factors for learners to use substances, as indicated below.

Availability of drugs in the community

The nearest *spaza* shops, especially the ones owned by foreign nationals, present a major risk for learners as attested below.

“Mostly they get drugs from the Indian shops, I always see them giving it to them, not where I work in school, but in our village, I always see the Indians selling certain papers to them that are red in colour, but inside they are white”. - SGB

“The learners access drugs from the shops nearby. These shops sell drugs to learners, especially tobacco or cigarettes. They buy it and share amongst themselves, which is a problem with what they do” - L3

Law enforcement finds it hard to curb the selling of drugs because of the high mobility of dealers in the community.

These days, people who are selling it are mobile; they are just walking around the streets. It is only a few people who can identify them; they know that this one is selling. So, this gives us a huge challenge as police that it is difficult to arrest and prosecute them due to that problem” – Police

Peer pressure

Peer pressure influences learners to engage in gangsterism, which continues to affect the community and increases substance use and crime, as attested below.

“There are some who go with gangster groups, so those groups can make drugs available. Those gangs hang out somewhere, in their own spaces, such as abandoned buildings and rivers. They have their own names, and they become a big problem to the community.” - L10

“Gangsterism is the biggest problem we have in our communities, which leads learners from schools to join those gangs and smoke, and they form them within the schools and do drugs. They not only smoke, but they also commit crimes that affect the community. As police, we have dealt a lot with gangs, and they are a big threat to children these days because those gangs can be led by older youth, and the children just follow them, not knowing the consequences that come” -Police

DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Institutional contributory factors

Bullying

Bullying was found to play a role in causing learners to engage in substance abuse. This is supported by the study of Ramokone, Modise and Sepeng (2022), which found bullying to be causing lower and unsatisfactory academic performance in learners. This act of bullying involves a violent activity whereby another learner purposefully harms another learner physically or verbally through manipulation, mocking and bad-talking, even on social media, resulting in emotional and mental well-being damage. The study of Raffee, AI-Qudah, Hayajneh, Alawneh, Mahasneh, Alomari, and AI-Mistarehi (2021) found that bullying happens because of child abuse in the family, harsh child rearing, and harsh disciplinary techniques, leading to aggressive behaviour in children who bully others.

Cyberbullying is also gaining a lot of momentum due to the high use of smartphones. The learners use social media and the internet to taunt, offend, disparage and humiliate each other, which also has devastating effects on the victims, causing them to experience severe stress, thoughts of suicide, fear and anxiety leading to substance

use and abuse (Mamukeyani, 2023). They may also skip classes and drop out of school to avoid bullies or subsequently commit suicide. As a form of intervention, this problem requires an increased awareness about the dangers of bullying involving other stakeholders, providing support for bullying victim learners, and public engagement to reduce the incidences of bullying, which has an effect on learners and also establish anti-bullying policies in schools.

The school setting

The setting in schools provides an environment where substance use and abuse among learners thrive. The challenges that learners experience in the school setting encourage substance use, such as poor academic performance. The study of Richmond (2018) concurs that high school learners engage in substance use because they want to relieve stress resulting from poor academic achievements. According to this study, students who achieved more were less likely to engage in substance use compared to those who achieved less.

Another challenge in the school setting found by this study is that of the Grade 10 class. The class was found to be very risky compared to other classes. This is because of peer pressure, social influence and the pressures of developmental challenges, which are the crux of the matter in this class. This is exacerbated by the adolescent stage, which is at the apex in this class (Gunda & Mbwirire, 2020). This stage is characterised by a time of transition and increased vulnerability to peer influence, risk-taking and identity exploration exacerbating high failure rate. This indicates a dire need for structured intervention in schools, assisting learners with psychosocial support at a close range, and starting learner educational support programs (Department of Transport and Community Safety, 2022).

Theme 2: Community contributory factors

Availability of drugs in the community

It emerged that there is too much drug accessibility and availability in the community, especially shops near the schools. Most of these shops are owned by foreign nationals who pose a great risk to learners during school breaks, before school starts, and after school. The drugs are always said to be very cheap and affordable in these shops; for example, the study of Maluleke and Manu (2017) found that children get the drugs very cheaply outside the school premises or near the schools. This indicates a high level of exposure which the learners are faced with daily, indicating a serious challenge to be addressed. In response to this challenge, there should be strict drug control measures in schools to reduce the availability and usage of drugs (Mokwena, Mokwena, Van Der Heever, and Mokgatle, 2020).

The learners are also exposed in the community when they attend parties and events because they promote substance abuse. During these gatherings, young people consume lots of alcohol and smoke lots of drugs for the sake of fun, enjoyment and celebration. When drunk, young people often engage in irresponsible sexual behaviours, giving rise to teenage pregnancy and HIV/AIDS infection (Mashamba, 2021). As such, a robust community action needs to be done, encouraging community members to work with stakeholders and law enforcement in thwarting the drug problem.

Peer pressure

The learners are always pressured by their peers to join gangs to achieve a sense of belonging. This indicates their poor decision-making skills, which ultimately leads them to substance use and abuse. This is similar to the study of Van der Westhuizen and Gawulo (2020), who indicated that many young people get involved in gangs as social groups within geographic locations; they use their own language, symbols and names to express their belonging. Primarily, gangsterism is another form of peer pressure and influence where the idea is about needing to belong to a certain group for the sake of feeling appreciated and valued. Such pressures often precipitate initial substance use as mechanisms for achieving social acceptance or avoiding ostracism. According to Shuro and Waggie (2024), gangsterism is rising in South Africa, and it is a big problem in the communities because they increase criminality.

Gangsterism is associated with several factors such as poverty, child abuse and neglect, family discord and dysfunctionality. Furthermore, learners who engage in gangs use criminal means to survive, as they lack control, and they perform poorly in schools. As such; a strong intervention is needed to curb gangsterism in the communities through establishing healthy and safe entertainment platforms, attending to dysfunctional families and providing psychosocial services to them to be active in assisting their children to find a sense of affection and self-esteem which will reduce the desire to belong to gangs which will ultimately reduce the exposure to substances, so is the use (Gerson, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted the institutional and community contributing factors as environmental risk factors to substance use among learners in the Motetema circuit. These factors are perpetuating substance use despite the interventions in place, and this continues to have devastating consequences on high school learners and their educational future. The Ubuntu African Philosophy approach indicated its strength to address the problem by integrating the contributions of various stakeholders, empowering the learners, families and communities. The study was limited because of time constraints, as it could not receive perspectives from grade 12 due to exam preparations, which might affect the applicability and generalizability in all grades.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

- The schools should have functional health and school-based services that will ensure that learners receive appropriate assistance to address their interpersonal problems leading to substance use.
- Parents and families should be encouraged and empowered to be actively involved in the prevention of substance use among learners by giving support to their children and seeking help for those who have drug problems.
- There should be robust awareness campaigns on bullying, emphasising its consequences and assistance to victims.
- There should be anti-bullying policies in the high schools detailing procedures to handle bullying incidents and consequences for offenders.
- The community and various stakeholders should be actively involved in addressing the community and school availability of substances in taking a collective action. This includes the development of policies that curb drug availability and accessibility in the school premises and outside schools.

REFERENCES

- Braun, V & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: Sage.
- Department of Transport and Community Safety. (2022). *Investigating drug and substance abuse by school learners in the Limpopo province*. Police Research and Information Unit.
<http://policyresearch.limpopo.gov.za/browse?value=Drugs+and+substance+abuse+by+school+learners%2Cinsight+information+from+learners%2Cinformation+from+SMTs+and+SGBs%2Cinsight+information+from+Police+Officers+and+SANCA+Officials&type=subject>
- Elflein, J. (2022). *Adolescent drug use statistics in the US: Statistics and facts*. Statista.
<https://www.statista.com/topics/3907/adolescent-drug-use-in-the-us/>
- Gershon, O.K. (2024). *A review of peer influence and teenagers' antisocial behaviours in Africa*. *African Journal of Social Work*, 14(4), 194-206. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v14i4.3>
- Gunda, K., & Mbwirire, J. (2020). Causes of drug abuse in secondary schools. A case study of Zengeza 4 high school, Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Humanities, Art and Social Sciences Studies (IJHAS)* 5(1):41-47
- Mamukeyani E. (2023). Elias Motsoaledi social workers fight against cyberbullying. Limpopo Department of Social Development Newsletter. 2nd Quarter;23-24.: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23673.65121>
- Malejane, A.B. 2022. Using Ubuntu to deal with substance abuse among institutionalized youth. Presentation. <https://www.uapa.or.ug/sites/default/files/documents/USING%20UBUNTU%20TO%20DEAL%20WITH%20SUBSTANCE%20ABUSE%20AMONG%20INSTITUTIONALISED%20YOUTH.%20-%20Mr.%20Aobakwe%20Malejane.pdf>
- Makhetha T (2024). Ubuntu Ethics: A framework for rehumanising social research with young people. *African Journal of Social Work*, 14(6), 382-391. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v14i6.9>
- Maserumule, O.M., Skaal, L., & Sithole, S.L. (2019). Alcohol use among high school learners in rural areas of Limpopo province. *South African Journal of Psychiatry* PMC,17;25(0):1-6
- Mohale, D., & Mokwena, K.E. (2020). Substance use amongst high school learners in the South of Johannesburg: Is it a new norm? *South African Family Practice* 62(1):1-6
- Mungubate, J.R., Mupedziswa, R., Twikirize, J.M., Mthethwa, E., Desta, A.A., & Oyinlola, O. (2024) Understanding Ubuntu and its contribution to social work education in Africa and other regions of the world, *Social Work Education the International Journal* 43:(4):1123-1139, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2168638>
- National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics. (2025). *Drug use among youth: Facts and statistics*. <https://drugabusestatistics.org/teen-drug-use/>
- Raffee, L.A., Al-Qudah, M.A., Hayajneh, W.A., Alawneh, K.Z., Mahasneh, O.I., Alomari, M.M., Al-Mistarehi, A.H. (2021). Prevalence estimates of drug addiction among high-school students and its association with violence, and school behaviors: A cross-sectional study from Jordan. *Annals of Medicine and Surgery*;9;67: 102490.doi: 10.1016/j.amsu.2021.102490. PMID: 34168875; PMCID: PMC8209660.
- Rurah Health Information Hub. (2025). *Substance use and misuse in rural areas*. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/substance-use>
- Shuro, L., & Waggie, F. (2024). Trends in socio-demographic characteristics and substance use among high school learners in a selected district in Limpopo province, South Africa. *BMC Public Health*. 2024) 24:1407. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18927-7>
- Van der Westhuizen, M and Gawulo, S. (2020). *Youths in gangs on the Cape flats: If not in gangs, then what?* *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 57(1):117-132