

Exploring School Counsellor's Role in Substance Abuse Intervention amongst Adolescents in Secondary Schools: The Case of Seychelles

Ayuk, N. O.

Counsellor, Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, Republic of Seychelles

Abstract: *Substance abuse (drug abuse) is a prevalent problem and a call for concern in Seychelles today. Adolescents and children in drug use families often tend to believe its normal and therefore are prone to use drugs due to this fallacy. While in school such adolescents can influence other students to abuse drugs. Although, the reasons for abusing drugs may differ among adolescents in schools, generally substance abuse has negative effects (academic/career disruption, personal/social issues, emotional and physical health) on the development of adolescents. In tacit recognition of the social and health risk of substance abuse on adolescents, school counsellors have a crucial role to play in the life of students facing substance abuse. This paper addresses the problem of substance abuse amongst adolescents in secondary schools by exploring the role of school counsellors in assisting and intervening with students that abuse substances. The article also identifies potential challenges that school counsellors can face in the intervention process and proposes recommendations as to ways in which school counsellors in Seychelles can effectively intervene, support and contribute to curbing the growing rate of substance abuse among adolescents in secondary schools so as to improve the wellbeing and health of student populations in the country.*

Keywords: Substance Abuse, Adolescents, School Counsellors

1. Introduction

Substance abuse (also here after referred to as drug abuse in this paper) continues to present a significant problem in Seychelles society in recent years. About 10% of the working population are addicted to heroin (Saigal, 2019) while many others use cannabis (Alwan et al, 2011). A challenging issue is the emerging use of drugs among adolescents and young people. According to existing data substance use pose as a significant problem among adolescents in Seychelles (Alwan et al, 2011). This fact by Alwan and his colleagues (2011) was authenticated by the Global Youth Tobacco Survey (GYTS) conducted in Seychelles 2015 which showed that most adult smokers of tobacco started smoking as teens and the prevalence of initiation to smoking in students aged 13 or younger was rated at 23% in 2015 compared to the 2007 GYTS which was 22% (Chacon et al, 2015).

However, more striking is the impact of drug use on adolescents in families using drugs who more often believe it is normal. While in school (secondary school particularly), such adolescents from drug abusing families can greatly influence other students to abuse drugs through peer pressure. Peer pressure has been identified as one of the underlying cause of adolescent misbehaviour. It has been accounted as one of the major factors for adolescent risk taking, because most risky behaviours in which adolescents engage, such as substance use, delinquency and reckless driving, take place in the company of peers (Simons-Morton, Lerner & Singer, 2005). According to Laurence Steinberg and Kathryn Monahan (2007), there is little doubt that effects of peer influence are stronger during adolescence than in adulthood (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). This justifies the fact that children coming from families involved in drug abuse can actually influence their peers in school to explore drug use. It is for these reasons that schools are

recognized as important sites for prevention efforts and school substance use policies are key component of health promotion in schools.

In Seychelles, there is a document designed by the Ministry of Education known as "*The Drug and Alcohol Use Policy*" which has been in existence since the mid-1990s. Though currently under review by the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, the *Drug and Alcohol Use Policy* aims to assist schools (teachers, school management and other staff), outside agencies and communities on procedures to deal with students who use drugs and alcohol on school campus or in activities organized by school out of its premises. This policy outlines the clause that all schools shall adopt a 'zero tolerance' policy to drugs and alcohol use and institute mandatory drug prevention programmes for all students with the assistance of Personal and Social Education (PSE) teachers, Deputy Head Pastoral (Deputy Head – Student Support under the current school management structure), school nurse, school counsellor, parents and outside agencies. The term 'zero tolerance' according to the *Drug and Alcohol Use Policy* implies that first time offenders (a student using or in possession of illicit drugs) are suspended for 5 days, but returns to the same school and has mandatory counselling sessions, either by the school-based counsellor, staff of student welfare unit or by an outside agency.

While the *Drug and Alcohol Use Policy* indicates a zero tolerance to drug use in schools, more and more students are still involved in substance abuse in secondary schools. My experience as a school Counsellor in Seychelles with the Ministry of Education & Human Resource Development, has led me to work with many of such children facing drug abuse issues on a one-on-one basis. Besides, I have accompanied some who were apprehended with drugs to the police station while awaiting the arrival of their parents and

also to the juvenile court to offer support to them during trial/court sessions.

School counsellors who form an integral part of guidance and support to enhance student welfare in secondary schools therefore have a crucial role to play in interventions aimed at prevention as well as in counselling as indicated by the policy document earlier mentioned. The Seychelles system of education has made provision for school counsellor positions in primary and secondary schools in order to ensure a variety of services for student populations. Such services that include guidance offer support and foster improvement in various aspects in order to enhance student wellbeing as well as academic improvement. Guidance entails services that help students in solving problems, making decisions, capacity building and acting responsibly (Oertle & O'Leary, 2017).

Generally, school counsellors deal routinely with complicated situations in which students have acute counselling needs, including cases of severe depression and suicidal ideation, pregnancy, substance abuse, school violence, and child abuse (Page, Pietrzak, & Sutton, 2001). Also, Goodman-Scott and Grothaus (2017) highlight that the role of school counsellors have evolved and have since included mental health counselling, evaluation and psychometrics, career guidance, coordination, collaboration and education among others (Goodman-Scott & Grothaus, 2017). Hence the importance of schools counselling cannot be overemphasized especially with adolescents facing substance abuse.

It is against this backdrop that exploring the role of school counsellors in Seychelles in the intervention processes for adolescents abusing drugs in secondary schools is useful, given the scarce literature in this area and the alarming use of illegal drugs for a low populated country. Due to their significant contributions to adolescents' personal and social development in secondary schools, school counsellors therefore have a valuable role in the lives of students undergoing substance abuse. It is in this light, that this paper, addresses the problem of substance abuse amongst adolescents in secondary schools by exploring the role of school counsellors in intervening with students that are involved in substance abuse. The paper also identifies potential challenges for school counsellors in the intervention process and proposes recommendations as to ways in which school counsellors in Seychelles can effectively intervene, support and contribute to curb down the growing rate of substance abuse amongst adolescents in secondary schools on the islands.

1.1 Substance Abuse amongst Adolescents in Secondary Schools: An Overview

Adolescence is an explorative phase that entails social, behavioural, cognitive, physical and emotional changes (Gray & Squeglia, 2018). During this developmental stage, much unhealthy behaviour that is a public health challenge commences (Das et al, 2016). Substance abuse being one of such unhealthy behaviours among adolescents has been identified as a major health risk (Comerci & Schwebel, 2000) associated with adverse consequences (Gray &

Squeglia, 2018). Several adolescents despite their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds are caught in the web of substance abuse. Timko, Sutkowi, Pavao and Kimerling (2008) had earlier stated that whereas adults use substances in order to ease their psychological pain of trauma and abuse, and to overcome stress, children also use substances for those same reasons.

While some students use substance to calm their psychological pain of trauma and abuse just like adults do, others go into substance abuse due to peer pressure (as earlier mentioned), low-self-esteem, the need to belong as well as to experience getting high, to express autonomy and also to model the behaviour of adults in their lives (Sharma, 2015). In Seychelles, between 5,000 to 6,000 people out of 94, 000 (i.e., about 10%) of the working population are addicted to heroin according to the Agency for Prevention of Drug Abuse and Rehabilitation in the country (Saigal, 2019). Thus there is potential for adolescents to also become addicts because at this tender age, children are more likely to model such behaviours from parents/adults (see Sharma, 2015) or peers. This fact had been highlighted by Duncan and his colleagues (2006), who remarked that risk factors of substance use by children typically include substance use in the family or by peers (Duncan et al, 2006).

Studies conducted in Seychelles by Alwan et al (2011) on substance use and psychosocial characteristics at individual and family levels among adolescents suggest that several individual level characteristics (e.g. suicidal ideation and truancy) and family level characteristics (e.g. poor parental monitoring) were associated with substance use among students (Alwan et al, 2011). But substance abuse among adolescents in schools is especially detrimental to mental health as adolescent brains are not fully developed. Given these circumstances adolescents who find themselves in such families can also influence peers in schools. As such, it is only but obvious that school counsellors found in schools to offer guidance and support have a crucial role to play with students abusing drugs.

1.2 School Counsellors Role in Addressing Substance Abuse in Secondary Schools

The school counsellor's role entails enhancing a conducive and positive school environment for students. They are community collaborators and advocates (ATICI, 2014). They enable a caring school atmosphere through the implementation of a comprehensive, preventative and developmental intervention to enhance inclusion of all students. Lindwall and Coleman (2008) specifically point out that school counsellors employ various strategies to develop a caring school community by recognizing students in a positive manner, focusing on relationship building, providing developmental guidance lessons, conducting evaluations and needs assessments, and utilizing problem-solving techniques (Lindwall & Coleman, 2008). It is in this same capacity and duties that school counsellors can intervene in issues which are related to substance abuse amongst students. By using same practices in which they were trained as well as years of experience, school counsellors can impact the lives of students who are addicted to drug use.

Although students with substance abuse disorder may also need help from other agencies dealing with mental health or drug-specific counselling, school counsellors are at the forefront to play an earlier role than outside agencies. This is as a result of the fact that school counsellors are in a unique position and they interact with students on a daily basis. School counsellors therefore are ideally also situated to provide intentional support to students that possess risk factors that could lead to substance use and misuse. Intentional support involves the school counsellors' ability to identify students' risk factors and barriers to personal, social, and academic development (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). School counsellors can link acquired knowledge and skills to potentially "high risk" students (Stacy & Ames, 2001). Research indicates that these students need specific support and school counsellors can facilitate this support (American School Counsellor Association [ASCA], 2005). Hence, school counsellors can either identify changes in students on their own or with collaboration from teaching staff and management of the school.

Following identification of students using drugs, school counsellor's role may include preventive and counselling interventions. For preventive interventions school counsellors can advocate by conducting drug abuse education sessions with students as well share resources on drug abuse consequences with students, families and the community in order to empower them with knowledge related to this issue. Counselling interventions entails the school counsellors developing rapport and therapeutic relationships with students and be able to identify signs and symptoms in students who abuse drugs. These preventive and counselling interventions are discussed in detail below;

1.3 Preventive Interventions

Prevention sets out to predict and avert prospective negative consequences of drug abuse amongst students. Basically preventive programming in terms of substance abuse is primarily delivered to the whole school population, including the whole school system regardless of particular students at risk. School counsellor's role in prevention can be done through the personal and social skill enhancement approach aimed at enhancing positive attitudes in students. This could be done by offering drug use educative sessions to students and families as well as through resource sharing and advocacy.

a) Resource Sharing (with Students, Families and Community) and Advocacy

It is only normal that school counsellors should be in possession of resources which are both in-house and community resources that can serve as a source of education in different topical issues. An example of in-house resources in the case of Seychelles is the school *Drug and Alcohol Use Policy* earlier mentioned while a community resource could be leaflets offered by the Agency for Prevention for Drug Abuse and Rehabilitation in Seychelles (APDAR). These resources should specifically discuss issues related to drug addiction. The resources can also include emergency numbers and sites that cater for the needs of students. Furthermore, the school counsellors should be able to efficiently collaborate with community organizations who

work with children who have substance abuse issues and should be able to effectively provide referrals for students to these outside agencies. An integral part of this collaboration encompasses communication between families, community organizations and the school as they work together to help the student. It is therefore important that school counsellors approach students and parents in a positive manner (without blame) which will enhance communication between student, parent and school counsellor (Lambie and Rokutani, 2002). Another approach to advocacy and resource sharing can involve the school counsellor encouraging families to attend information sessions, training or parental sessions that can help support families and ultimately students. They can also invite people from community to offer educational talks in school on drug addiction issues.

b) Educative Sessions

Knowledge is power. Getting the right education/knowledge on substance use and abuse from the right source makes all the difference. Some students go into drugs also as a result of the fact that they lack the knowledge about the consequences of those particular drugs they use. For example, some people tend to have the belief that cannabis cures cancer. This myth was admitted by one student who argued for this fact during one of the drug abuse class sessions I offered while at work. However research indicates that cannabis long-term use has tremendous effects on individuals as it can cause psychotic disorder and even mental illness like schizophrenia (Hall et al, 2008). Considering the negative effect on adolescents' mental and physical health and the fact that drug use is a major social problem, it is important for school counsellors to educate the student populations on the effects and consequences of drug use. Besides, due to addiction as well as dependence of such drugs some adolescents tend to start stealing, being truant and violent. Organizing educative session with students is crucial in addressing such problems, for gone are those days when school counsellors only sit in the office to do counselling. Nowadays, school counsellors are more proactive contributing in educating students.

1.4 Counselling

a) Developing Rapport and Therapeutic Relationships

An important characteristic for anyone in the school counselling profession is to have a demeanour that is affable so students can feel comfortable in talking with them about various challenges in their life. Developing rapport is necessary in creating trust between the school counsellor and the student. Students are more willing to talk with school counsellors who they trust and to whom they have developed a good relationship with. Therapeutic relationships are imperative between students and the school counsellor. Malik Henfield and Ahmad Washington (2016) describe 'therapeutic relationship' as the feelings and attitudes therapists and clients have towards one another and the manner in which these feelings and attitudes are expressed (Henfield et al, 2016).

In therapeutic relationships, the school counsellors can use behavioural and cognitive-behavioural approaches with students that are at risk of substance use. Sussman et al (2008) elucidate that this approach can help school

counsellors to focus on decreasing the frequencies of behaviours compatible with drug use and increase the frequency of behaviours incompatible with drug use (Sussman et al., 2008). Other methods school counsellors can use are modelling, role playing, and assertiveness training into their work with at risk populations. In addition, by using behavioural and cognitive behavioural techniques, school counsellors can use positive affirmation, thought stopping, social contracting, anger management, problem solving, and decision making skills (Weinberg et al, 1998) which can aid in interventions for drug using students.

However, school counsellors need to remember that when dealing with cases of substance abuse, even the most trusting of students may be afraid to report their drug abuse issues. That is why school counsellors must be non-judgmental towards their students in order to help create trust so students can easily approach them.

b) Identifying Signs and Symptoms

Taking into consideration that some warning signs of drug abuse could also be for other reasons other than drug abuse, it is pertinent for a school counsellor dealing with students' in substance abuse to develop rapport and a therapeutic relationship with students as mentioned above. Through the therapeutic relationship, counsellors can identify signs and symptoms of substance abuse and take appropriate measures to intervene as well as support such students. Physical warning signs according to Shubin, Robinson, Smith and Saisan (2016) involve smell of marijuana in their breath or school uniform, dilated pupils, bloodshot eyes, tremors, impaired speech and coordination, changes in appetite, weight loss or gain and deterioration in appearance and grooming (Shubin, Robinson, Smith & Saisan, 2016).

On the other hand, for behavioural signs the school counsellor can see observable changes like student engagement in illegal activities, absenteeism, skipping classes, association with negative peers and an increased need for money. Other behavioural signs include poor academic performance, truancy, fighting, defiance, and withdrawal and when sent to principal's office such students often show signs of aggression, low self-esteem, engage in health compromising activities, have low social skills, engage in secretive behaviours, have a sudden change of interests, and show behavioural signs of a substance abuser (Shubin, Robinson, Smith & Saisan, 2016; Lambie & Rokutani, 2002).

Psychological signs of substance abuse entail an increase in anxiety, mood changes, a change in one's personality, irritability, hyperactivity, demotivation or lethargy (Shubin, Robinson, Smith & Saisan, 2016). In view of the fact that some symptoms may also fit into other disorders or issues that students face such as abuse, it is important for school counsellors to focus on all possible symptoms and use a holistic approach in handling the issue at hand especially if students do not willingly admit to drug abuse. With some identified signs and symptoms school counsellors can proceed to invite parents and recommend testing for drugs for confirmation.

c) School based Intervention by Counsellor: Creating Peer Support Groups

Here the school counsellor can create substance abuse peer support groups within the school. Such peer groups could be set up with students who abuse substances or those who are in a group of students with substance abuse. According to Yalom and Leszcz (2005), when developing this group, it is crucial to screen the potential members and establish the rules of the group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). School counsellors can also do after-school educational interventions with these students. Similarly, they can also develop after school activities that help students work on their coping skills and participate in creative and exciting endeavours that can prevent relapse and lessen the influence of negative peers.

Another method of school based intervention is for the school counsellor to encourage students to get involved in the school culture. Research shows that children and adolescents who feel "invested and emotionally connected" to the school they are attending are less likely to get involved in substance abuse than students who feel disconnected from their school (Botvin, Baker, Dusenber, Botvin, & Diaz, 1995). Specifically, prosocial activities such as sports can protect against substance use and misuse (Pate, Trost, Levin, & Dowda, 2000).

Nonetheless, in order to work efficiently school counsellors need adequate training to effectively apply these preventive and counselling care interventions with at risk children in drug abuse. Inability to get efficient training will pose as a challenge for school counsellors to intervene in drug abuse situations in the school environment and this is discussed below.

1.5 School Counsellors' Potential Challenges

Lack of training related to drug addiction and handling students with substance abuse is one of the main challenges school counsellors can face. Earlier studies conducted by Burrow-Sanchez and Lopez (2009) in the United States indicated that school counsellors felt ill-prepared to work with students abusing substance and needed training in areas of screening and assessment, individual interventions, consultations, curriculum development, group interventions and family interventions (Burrow-Sanchez & Lopez, 2009). This study is evident today even in certain local contexts and settings like Seychelles as the need for refresher courses and continuous on-the-job training is crucial to gain skills and to enhance the capacity of school counsellors to deal with students involved in drug abuse.

Besides lack of training, Young, Boles and Otero (2007) mentioned that school counsellors also face challenges with parents and guardians who are resistant to treatment, who are not supportive, and who are drug users themselves (Young, Boles & Otero, 2007). Some of such parents may be in denial that they or their children are abusing drugs. This can pose as a challenge for counsellors who may feel their efforts are a waste.

1.6 Recommendations to School Counsellors for Effective Intervention in Substance Abuse in Secondary Schools in Seychelles

Substance abuse is a major problem in Seychelles and different families regardless of social background are being affected. Adolescents in families that abuse drugs are highly at risk of substance abuse and the tendency is they can also act as peer influence on their peers in secondary schools. Considering the social (academic disruption, personal/social, career) and health (psychological, emotional, mental and physical health) effects of substance abuse on adolescents it is imperative that school counsellors have a critical role in the life of students abusing drugs or at risk of abusing drugs. School counsellors therefore can play a crucial role in intervening with students abusing drugs in secondary schools in Seychelles. Indeed, a need for proper recommendations is critical not only to assist school counsellors play their role but to help curb down substance abuse in schools.

To begin with, in order to reduce the impact of substance abuse in secondary schools, the student support service at Ministry of Education & Human Resource Development needs to conduct a proper assessment and outline the best course of action to see where school counsellors are lagging and select best ways to empower school counsellors in their role relating to the issue at hand. Clearly, in order to conduct such an assessment, the student support services should focus on proper evaluation of what was done in the past to enhance performance of school counsellors in this role of assisting victims of substance abuse among students and identify what needs to be done more to make them efficient.

Moving forward, based on the data from the assessment, the student support service section in charge should focus on training school counsellors on their role to work with students involved in substances abuse. This particular step will secure that every school counsellor is equipped with skills to deal with drug use issues.

In addition, given the changing nature of society and introduction of new techniques in this area, school counsellors can work with the Agency for the Prevention for Drug Abuse and Rehabilitation (APDAR) Seychelles to enhance their knowledge in dealing with the issue in current times. There is therefore a need for the development of substance abuse training curriculum for counsellors that entails such issues as first aid for drug over doze users.

2 Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper has highlighted the problem of substance abuse among adolescents in secondary schools by exploring the role of school counsellors in assisting and intervening with substance abuse among students. The article has also identified potential challenges for school counsellors in the intervention process and proposes recommendations to curbing the growing rate of substance abuse among adolescents in secondary schools in Seychelles. In my opinion, the role of school counsellors in curbing substance abuse cannot be overemphasized. As such they need to be empowered to work effectively and

efficiently when confronted with substance abuse cases in schools.

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Author Profile



Ayuk N. Orockis currently working as a School Counsellor for the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development Seychelles and also pursuing a PhD Sociology degree at the University of Buea, Cameroon. She has substantial professional experience working with the WHO in Cameroon as Field Monitor, Finnish Red Cross and the Finnish Refugee Council as Social Counsellor in Helsinki, Finland. In addition she has worked as Lecturer on Gender, Migration and Refugee Studies at the Pan African Institute of Development West Africa, (PAID-WA) Buea Cameroon. Ayuk is author to article titled "Labour Market Integration in Finland: Agency as Framework for Third Country Female Immigrants" published by International Journal of Science and Research. She is also author to "Towards Gender Inclusivity in Cameroon's Refugee Legislation" published by Refugee Law Initiative, School of Advanced Study University of London. She is also author to article titled "Exploring the Potential of Intersectionality for Enhancing Refugee Women's Research in Africa" published by IJSR.