



The effects of substance abuse on the academic performance of adolescent female learners in Secondary Schools in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province

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ABSTRACT

Substance abuse has become a growing global concern, silently eroding the futures of many young people. The study aimed to explore the effects of substance abuse on the academic performance of female learners in secondary schools in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. The study adopted a qualitative approach using an exploratory research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The population of this study was adolescent female learners from selected schools in the Vhembe district. For this study, purposive sampling was used to select participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method to identify key themes and patterns. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed to protect participants' rights and well-being. The findings revealed that adolescent female learners engaged in substance abuse experience declining academic performance and cognitive impairments, behavioral problems and disciplinary issues, and emotional and psychological challenges. In line with the findings of this study, the study recommends that schools should implement comprehensive substance abuse education programs and that parents should at all times become more involved in monitoring and engaging with their children to prevent and address substance abuse effectively. This study provides empirical insights into substance abuse and the academic, behavioural, and psychological well-being of adolescent female learners. The study opens the avenues for future research to explore long-term effects of substance abuse on educational attainment and to examine the intervention strategies that effectively support vulnerable female adolescents in school.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Adolescent, Substance Abuse, Female, Learners

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse among adolescents in high schools has increasingly emerged as a concern in most parts of the world, especially in South Africa, where the rate of drug and alcohol abuse by learners is ever-increasing.¹ Adolescence is a very crucial period in development and is marked by physical, emotional

¹ Matthew H. Beristianos et al., "Trauma Exposure And Risk Of Suicidal Ideation Among Ethnically Diverse Adults," *Depression and Anxiety* 33, no. 6 (June 2016): 495–501, <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.22485>.

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and social changes, and as such, the youths are more susceptible to experimentation with dangerous substances. Substance abuse at this age is serious because it can disrupt brain development, make the user incapable of judgment and cause dependency.² Substance abuse in government secondary schools is alarming and is increasing rapidly. Substance abuse is the extreme and harmful use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and other illicit substances that modify the mental and physical functioning of the user.³ Substance abuse has been linked to various adverse effects in learners, such as lack of concentration, absenteeism, falling grades and the result, which is dropping out of school.

Studies have found that learners who indulge in substance use are more likely to perform poorly academically than their non-using counterparts. This shows that drug abuse is a major obstacle to the academic performance and general growth of students, particularly females, who may face other effects from society.⁴ Studies show that among the over 190 million substance abusers, 60 million are teenagers. In the statistical data found by the South African National Youth, over 33.7% of learners in grades 10-11 abused alcohol and 10.6% were found to be using cannabis. The engagement of learners causes a serious problem for the country.⁵ The negative impacts of substance abuse among learners are multidimensional as they not only affect the performance of a learner but also the emotional stability, discipline, and social relationships in the learning institution. Substance abuse among female learners tends to hamper their ability to coordinate between their studies and other personal and social issues caused by taking drugs. Research has established that substance abuse causes low levels of motivation, decreased cognitive ability and low self-esteem, all of which are detrimental to academic performance.⁶ Moreover, students who misuse drugs are more susceptible to disciplinary measures and stigmatization by educators and their counterparts, increasing their educational challenges even more.

Although the problem is increasingly becoming known, the literature is still very distinct, especially in matters pertaining to the particularities of the female learners living in rural and semi-urban settings in the Vhembe District in Limpopo Province. Brassard, Hart and Glaser state that this is because most of the available literature on substance abuse and academic performance is usually generalized on adolescents or male students, and thus, there is no deeper insight into specific attributes of substance abuse that affect female learners.⁷ In addition, there is scant research on the interaction of cultural, socioeconomic and educational environments in determining substance use behaviors and academic achievements among this group.⁸ This gap is important in combating the situation by implementing gender-sensitive interventions and policies to adequately address the learners who are affected.

This study aims to explore the effects of substance abuse on the academic performance of female learners in secondary schools in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. The study seeks to understand how different forms of substance use influence academic achievement and to identify the underlying factors that contribute to substance abuse among female learners. The central research question that guides this study is: What are the effects of substance abuse on the academic performance of female learners in secondary schools?

² Bhoodeo Taukoor et al., "Substance Use in Adolescents with Mental Illness in Durban, South Africa," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Mental Health* 29, no. 1 (May 31, 2017): 51–61, <https://doi.org/10.2989/17280583.2017.1318395>.

³ Kwaku Oppong Asante, "Cannabis and Amphetamine Use and Its Psychosocial Correlates among School-Going Adolescents in Ghana," *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 13, no. 1 (December 29, 2019): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-019-0293-0>.

⁴ Marla R. Brassard, Stuart N. Hart, and Danya Glaser, "Psychological Maltreatment: An International Challenge to Children's Safety and Well Being," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 110 (December 2020): 104611, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104611>.

⁵ Chika Remigious Ezeugwu and Oluyinka Ojedokun, "Masculine Norms and Mental Health of African Men: What Can Psychology Do?," *Heliyon* 6, no. 12 (December 2020): e05650, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05650>.

⁶ Masego Rantao and Olalekan A. Ayo-Yusuf, "Dual Use of Cigarettes and Smokeless Tobacco Among South African Adolescents," *American Journal of Health Behavior* 36, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 124–33, <https://doi.org/10.5993/AJHB.36.1.13>; R. Terry Furst and Douglas N. Evans, "An Exploration of Stigma in the Lives of Sex Offenders and Heroin Abusers," *Deviant Behavior* 36, no. 2 (February 1, 2015): 130–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2014.915673>.

⁷ Brassard, Hart, and Glaser, "Psychological Maltreatment: An International Challenge to Children's Safety and Well Being."

⁸ Meredith C. Joppa, "Dating Violence in Adolescence: Implications for Girls' Sexual Health," *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology* 33, no. 4 (August 2020): 332–38, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpap.2020.02.007>.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prevalence of Substance abuse among adolescent Female learners in Secondary School

The abuse of substances amongst female learners in South African secondary schools has, in the recent past, been a source of concern, with various literature pointing to a worrying trend of increasing frequency and a wide range of substances used by school-going adolescents. Substance abuse is prevalent amongst this group for a few reasons, including social, cultural, and economic forces. Drugs such as alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and more dangerous drugs such as heroin and methamphetamine are widely consumed by secondary school learners. Jorgensen and Wells claim that peer pressure and experimentation represent typical aspects of the childhood-to-adolescence transition and often lead to abuse initiation.⁹ As stated by Amini Pozveh and Saleh, girls, rather than boys, are more prone to use drugs as a form of defense against stress, pressure caused by peers, and family issues.¹⁰

Although substance abuse has always been a male-oriented phenomenon, the growing number of substance abuse incidents among adolescent female learners signifies a tremendous change in the issue, with gender-specific issues influencing the character and scope of the problem. Substance abuse is tolerated in most societies and notably in certain peer groups, which promotes experimentation amongst the schoolgirls.¹¹ This peer pressure is compounded by high levels of stress that young girls undergo due to family or emotional pressure, as well as academic pressure, exposure to violence or abuse. Because they may find substance abuse as a way to escape their problems or be more accepted by others, girls often resort to using drugs such as alcohol or marijuana to help them cope with these concerns.¹² Moreover, numerous girls acknowledge that they often get in contact with drugs or alcohol in their social groups, which indicates the strong peer influence on behavioral patterning of substance abuse.

The prevalence of substance abuse among secondary school adolescent female learners, according to Jorgensen and Wells, is also related to other issues in society, such as poverty, lack of parental control, and limited access to the support system in South Africa.¹³ The environment with a high rate of poverty and fewer educational resources exposes learners to a greater risk of engaging in dangerous activities, including substance abuse.¹⁴ Moreover, underrepresented adolescent female learners are often exposed to hazardous chemicals at a younger age, which may affect them in the long run into adulthood in terms of educational achievement levels and health.¹⁵ The situation is exacerbated by the absence of a community outreach program and parental supervision and participation that leaves most of the young girls without the necessary tools to make healthier decisions.¹⁶ Despite such factors, some activities to give awareness and support to the adolescent female learner have been initiated, though more still have to be put in place to deal with the causes of substance abuse and offer preventive strategies.

Dominant Substances Abused by Female Secondary School Learners

Adolescent female learners in secondary school in South Africa have access to a wide variety of substances that are both legal and illegal.¹⁷ Alcohol remains one of the most abused substances among

⁹ C. Jorgensen and J. Wells, "Is Marijuana Really a Gateway Drug? A Nationally Representative Test of the Marijuana Gateway Hypothesis Using a Propensity Score Matching Design" (J. Exp.: Criminal, 2021).

¹⁰ Amini Pozveh Z. and Saleh Z., "The Role of Social Skills in the Prevention of Drug Addiction in Adolescents, Advanced Biomedical Research." 9, no. 1 (2020).

¹¹ Ioannis Angelakis, Jennifer L. Austin, and Patricia Gooding, "Association of Childhood Maltreatment With Suicide Behaviors Among Young People," *JAMA Network Open* 3, no. 8 (August 5, 2020): e2012563, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.12563>.

¹² Dan Anderberg et al., "Unemployment and Domestic Violence: Theory and Evidence," *The Economic Journal* 126, no. 597 (2016): 1947–79.

¹³ Jorgensen and Wells, "Is Marijuana Really a Gateway Drug? A Nationally Representative Test of the Marijuana Gateway Hypothesis Using a Propensity Score Matching Design."

¹⁴ G Kpae, "Illicit Drug Abuse and Criminal Behaviour among Adolescent: The Rivers State Experience," *J. of Res. Opin* 6 (2019): 2516–25.

¹⁵ Emily J. LoBraico et al., "Constellations of Family Risk for Long-Term Adolescent Antisocial Behavior.," *Journal of Family Psychology* 34, no. 5 (August 2020): 587–97, <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000640>.

¹⁶ Marek A. Motyka et al., "Helping Women Suffering from Drug Addiction: Needs, Barriers, and Challenges," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 21 (October 28, 2022): 14039, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192114039>.

¹⁷ Wakgari Deressa and Aklilu Azazh, "Substance Use and Its Predictors among Undergraduate Medical Students of Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia," *BMC Public Health* 11, no. 1 (2011): 660.

female learners because it is readily available and socially acceptable in numerous societies. Alcohol is usually placed at social gatherings such as family meetings and gatherings, as well as parties, where it is often tolerated as a measure of relaxation or even social acceptability.¹⁸ A good number of these young learners might initiate consuming alcohol in their early teens; the affordability of drinking such alcoholic beverages, such as wine or beer, makes it attractive. Pozveh and Saleh state that frequent drinking by adolescent female learners compromises academic achievement because they will develop problems with focus, memory, and cognition, all of which are necessary to achieve effective schooling.¹⁹ Moreover, binge drinking may provoke involvement in other risk behaviors, especially unprotected sex or violence.

Another drug that is prevalent amongst South African secondary school girls is marijuana, in addition to alcohol. The consumption of Cannabis is widely associated with relaxation or de-stressing by learners who may be under strain due to social problems, family problems, or even academic demands.²⁰ Marijuana is relatively accessible in most societies, and it is one of the preferences of the youth who are struggling to cope with their circumstances. Although marijuana abuse and access are illegal in South Africa, the widespread abuse of this drug is a major concern. According to Bava and Tapert, some of the negative effects of the abuse of marijuana among female learners include poor short-term memory, poor school performance and increased rates of absenteeism.²¹ In addition, it affects motivation which can also lead to a decline in academic performance due to disengagement or uninterested people in their learning.²²

In South Africa, methamphetamines, localized as “tik,” and various other illegal substances such as heroin and ecstasy, are also becoming more popular among female secondary school learners.²³ In particular, methamphetamines have grown in popularity due to their potent stimulant effects, which result in feelings of increased euphoria and energy.²⁴ But among female learners, methamphetamine abuse carries serious health risks, such as addiction, cognitive decline, and increased susceptibility to mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. Methamphetamine abuse has increased in both urban and rural areas, frequently due to peer pressure, a need for social acceptance, and a desire to escape from difficult personal situations.²⁵ Other illicit substances, such as heroin and ecstasy, while less common, are also found among certain groups of learners, particularly those in more urbanized or economically disadvantaged areas.

Psychosocial factors contributing to substance abuse among female learners

The psychosocial factors that affect the substance abuse engaged by South African female learners are complexly related to the bigger scope of social, economic and cultural context.²⁶ Among the most visible reasons that influence the initiation and maintenance of substance abuse, peer pressure is at the top of the list. Adolescent years are particularly vulnerable, as social belonging and acceptance are of great importance to adolescent female learners who are especially vulnerable to peer pressure.²⁷ Substance abuse is condoned or even promoted within most school settings, which makes most learners difficult

¹⁸ Yong-Chun Bahk et al., “The Relationship between Childhood Trauma and Suicidal Ideation: Role of Maltreatment and Potential Mediators,” *Psychiatry Investigation* 14, no. 1 (2017): 37, <https://doi.org/10.4306/pi.2017.14.1.37>.

¹⁹ Amini Pozveh Z. and Saleh Z., “The Role of Social Skills in the Prevention of Drug Addiction in Adolescents, *Advanced Biomedical Research*.”

²⁰ Motyka et al., “Helping Women Suffering from Drug Addiction: Needs, Barriers, and Challenges.”

²¹ Sunita Bava and Susan F. Tapert, “Adolescent Brain Development and the Risk for Alcohol and Other Drug Problems,” *Neuropsychology Review* 20, no. 4 (December 19, 2010): 398–413, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11065-010-9146-6>.

²² AK Hamdulay and R Mash, “The Prevalence of Substance Use and Its Associations amongst Students Attending High School in Mitchells Plain, Cape Town,” *South African Family Practice* 53, no. 1 (January 15, 2011): 83–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20786204.2011.10874065>.

²³ Wenyu Zhang and Hui Wu, “The Relationship of Socioeconomic Factors and Substance Abuse Treatment Dropout,” *Healthcare* 13, no. 4 (February 10, 2025): 369, <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare13040369>.

²⁴ Deressa and Azazh, “Substance Use and Its Predictors among Undergraduate Medical Students of Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia.”

²⁵ LoBraico et al., “Constellations of Family Risk for Long-Term Adolescent Antisocial Behavior.”

²⁶ Matthew James Fagan, Krista Glowacki, and Guy Faulkner, “‘You Get That Craving and You Go for a Half-Hour Run’: Exploring the Acceptability of Exercise as an Adjunct Treatment for Substance Use Disorder,” *Mental Health and Physical Activity* 21 (October 2021): 100424, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhpa.2021.100424>.

²⁷ Bahk et al., “The Relationship between Childhood Trauma and Suicidal Ideation: Role of Maltreatment and Potential Mediators.”

to resist. The urge to fit in or be conforming is often much more powerful than the risks of drug use. This peer pressure also may not just be limited to alcohol and marijuana use and other more harmful chemicals, such as methamphetamines or ecstasy, because adolescent female learners want to identify themselves with behaviors that they feel are acceptable in their peer circles.²⁸

Also, according to Asante, family dynamics contribute to the psychosocial factors predisposing adolescent female learners to substance abuse to a large extent.²⁹ Households with a history of substance abuse or general negligence and lack of parenthood are often a cause of these young girls. When families do not have robust structures in place, or there is substance abuse by the parents or any other caregiver, there are increased chances of certain learners trying out drugs or alcohol.³⁰ Emotional instability or insecurity can also be informed by family factors such as divorce, domestic violence or money, which can lead some adolescent female learners to take drugs as a getaway. Homes with substance abuse problems possessed by the parents/caregivers present a lack of direction and authority that exposes girls to greater risks of indulging in risky behaviors, among them substance abuse.³¹

According to Bava and Tapert, academic pressure and social expectations are two examples of psychosocial stressors that have a big impact on female learners' substance abuse.³² There is a lot of pressure on young learners in South Africa to perform well academically, which can cause stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem. This pressure increases when academic obligations and family duties must be balanced, especially in homes where young women are expected to provide care. Some adolescent female learners may turn to drugs like alcohol or marijuana as a coping strategy to manage the stress and anxiety that come with their academic lives.³³ Social norms around gender roles can also cause feelings of inadequacy and a desire to rebel or use drugs as an escape. The media and popular culture often glamorize substance abuse, portraying it as a form of freedom or empowerment, which can further fuel the desire among adolescent females to experiment with drugs and alcohol.³⁴

Among the psychosocial factors that contribute significantly to substance abuse among South African female learners, traumatic experiences and abuse that are apparently prevalent in multiple communities can be distinguished.³⁵ Many adolescent female learners are affected by trauma in the form of physical assault, sexual abuse, and witnessing violent crimes, who are highly prone to substance abuse. Kpae notes that young girls who have experienced trauma often turn to drugs to either temporarily alleviate their dire situation or to decrease emotional pain.³⁶ This is particularly problematic when resources, counseling provisions or emotional well-being are not enough to assist young girls to cope with the trauma. Drugs in such cases provide a temporary relief, yet only to increase the negative emotional and psychological outcomes of the traumatic experience that can turn into a vicious circle of drug abuse.³⁷ A multicomponent approach incorporating trauma-informed care and focused prevention and intervention projects is required to relate trauma, abuse, and substance abuse in their complex interconnection. The ill effects of these drugs, such as methamphetamines, on the health and well-being of young learners are horrible and often lead to subsequent addiction and social incoordination of the exploited young beings.³⁸ The desperate need for comprehensive drug prevention and intervention programs in the secondary schools of South Africa is indicated by the increased prevalence of dangerous substances.

²⁸ Motyka et al., "Helping Women Suffering from Drug Addiction: Needs, Barriers, and Challenges."

²⁹ Oppong Asante, "Cannabis and Amphetamine Use and Its Psychosocial Correlates among School-Going Adolescents in Ghana."

³⁰ Mats Anderberg and Mikael Dahlberg, "Gender Differences among Adolescents with Substance Abuse Problems at Maria Clinics in Sweden," *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 35, no. 1 (February 19, 2018): 24–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1455072517751263>.

³¹ Caroline Jackson et al., "Interventions to Prevent Substance Use and Risky Sexual Behaviour in Young People: A Systematic Review," *Addiction* 107, no. 4 (2012): 733–47.

³² Bava and Tapert, "Adolescent Brain Development and the Risk for Alcohol and Other Drug Problems."

³³ Hamdulay and Mash, "The Prevalence of Substance Use and Its Associations amongst Students Attending High School in Mitchells Plain, Cape Town."

³⁴ Fagan, Glowacki, and Faulkner, "'You Get That Craving and You Go for a Half-Hour Run': Exploring the Acceptability of Exercise as an Adjunct Treatment for Substance Use Disorder."

³⁵ Oppong Asante, "Cannabis and Amphetamine Use and Its Psychosocial Correlates among School-Going Adolescents in Ghana."

³⁶ Kpae, "Illicit Drug Abuse and Criminal Behaviour among Adolescent: The Rivers State Experience."

³⁷ Anderberg and Dahlberg, "Gender Differences among Adolescents with Substance Abuse Problems at Maria Clinics in Sweden."

³⁸ Samantha M. Brown and Audrey M. Shillington, "Childhood Adversity and the Risk of Substance Use and Delinquency: The Role of Protective Adult Relationships," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 63 (January 2017): 211–21, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.11.006>.

Policy and Legal Framework Surrounding Substance Abuse in South African Schools

The South African Schools Act (SASA), passed in 1996, is critical to the creation of secure and supportive atmospheres in schools in South Africa. One of the primary characteristics of SASA is the requirement for schools to develop conduct codes that explicitly prohibit the use, possession or distribution of illegal substances on school premises, such as alcohol and drugs.³⁹ SASA ensures that there are clearly defined procedures for dealing with incidents that involve substances by providing guidelines on the disciplinary measures that apply to substance abuse. This framework also adds to the overall safety and well-being of all learners because it gives schools the legal means through which a drug-free environment is maintained, and appropriate measures are taken against learners who abuse drugs.⁴⁰

SASA highlights the importance of making education on substance abuse and instruction on this issue part of the curriculum. According to Khalil, Woldesenbet and Munir, it promotes the introduction of drug prevention lessons, which enlighten the learners about the hazards of using the substances.⁴¹ The prevention strategy is also advocated by implication that schools also educate learners about the adverse impact on the body, mind and society of substance abuse. SASA also has plans to integrate local communities, parents, schools, and health services to help address substance abuse.⁴² This collaboration is key to ensuring that the support for prevention and intervention efforts does not end with the school environment.

To further protect learners from the risks associated with substance abuse, several SASA's shortcomings must be fixed. According to Dowell, Haegerich and Chou, there is an absence of a comprehensive, uniform strategy for implementing drug abuse prevention initiatives in all schools.⁴³

The Act promotes substance abuse education, but it does not make explicit recommendations for a national curriculum or organized programs. As a result, there are disparities in the quality and extent of drug education between schools, which affect the efficacy of prevention initiatives.⁴⁴ Furthermore, although the Act requires conduct codes and sanctions for substance abuse, it offers insufficient direction on how to help learners who are already battling addiction. More precise guidelines regarding counseling, support services, and rehabilitation are required in schools to guarantee that learners dealing with substance abuse receive proper care and direction instead of merely harsh punishment.⁴⁵ By bolstering these areas, SASA would be better able to protect learners and offer them a more comprehensive approach to substance abuse prevention and intervention.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the effects of substance abuse on the academic performance of female learners in secondary schools in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. According to Creswell, qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.⁴⁶ This approach was appropriate for this study because it allowed researchers to explore the personal experiences, perceptions, and emotions of adolescent female learners who abuse substances and how these experiences affect their academic performance. The qualitative approach allowed the collection of in-depth data that reflects the

³⁹ AS Muula, S Siziya, and E Rudatsikira, "Prevalence and Correlates of Cigarette Smoking among Adolescents in Malawi: Results from the Global Youth Tobacco Survey 2005," *Tanzania Journal of Health Research* 10, no. 3 (September 24, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.4314/thrb.v10i3.14357>.

⁴⁰ Emily C. Serrell, Caprice C. Greenberg, and Tudor Borza, "Surgeons and Perioperative Opioid Prescribing: An Underappreciated Contributor to the Opioid Epidemic," *Cancer* 127, no. 2 (January 15, 2021): 184–87, <https://doi.org/10.1002/encr.33199>.

⁴¹ Mujtaba Khalil et al., "Long-Term Health Outcomes of New Persistent Opioid Use After Gastrointestinal Cancer Surgery," *Annals of Surgical Oncology* 31, no. 8 (August 18, 2024): 5283–92, <https://doi.org/10.1245/s10434-024-15435-1>.

⁴² BS McCrady, "The Role of the Family in Alcohol Use Disorder Recovery for Adults," *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews* 41, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.35946/arcv41.1.06>.

⁴³ Deborah Dowell, Tamara M Haegerich, and Roger Chou, "CDC Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain—United States, 2016," *Jama* 315, no. 15 (2016): 1624–45.

⁴⁴ Khalil et al., "Long-Term Health Outcomes of New Persistent Opioid Use After Gastrointestinal Cancer Surgery."

⁴⁵ D. Mays et al., "Parental Smoking Exposure and Adolescent Smoking Trajectories," *PEDIATRICS* 133, no. 6 (June 1, 2014): 983–91, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-3003>.

⁴⁶ John W Creswell, "Research Designs. Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches," 2009.

complexity of the phenomenon, which could not be effectively captured through quantitative means.⁴⁷ Thus, the approach was valuable for understanding the lived realities of these learners within their educational and social contexts.

The study used an exploratory research design. An exploratory research design is used to investigate a problem or situation that is not clearly defined and aims to gain new insights into an under-researched topic.⁴⁸ This design was chosen because there is limited research on the impact of substance abuse on the academic performance of female learners in the Vhembe District. The exploratory design allowed the researcher to identify new patterns, ideas, and relationships from participants' experiences. As Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill explain, exploratory studies are flexible and adaptive, allowing the researcher to adjust to new findings as they emerge.⁴⁹ Therefore, this design was essential to guide the study toward a deeper understanding of the problem and to generate foundational knowledge for future research in this area. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative data collection method that uses a predetermined set of open-ended questions while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions based on participants' responses.⁵⁰ This method was selected because it provided a structure to ensure that key themes were covered while also giving participants the freedom to express their experiences and opinions in detail. The researcher developed a research interview guide to direct the conversation about substance abuse and academic performance. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, private setting to ensure participants' comfort and confidentiality. This method ensured rich, explorative data collection, capturing participants' authentic voices and experiences relevant to the study objectives.

The study utilized a purposive sampling technique, which is a form of non-probability sampling. Purposive sampling is defined as the deliberate selection of participants based on characteristics or qualities that are central to the research objectives.⁵¹ This technique was appropriate for the current study because it specifically targeted adolescent female learners with direct experiences of substance abuse. A total of seven participants were purposively selected from secondary schools in the Vhembe District. Their experiences provided valuable information on the ways in which substance use affects academic engagement, attendance, and performance. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim note that purposive sampling enables researchers to gain a deep understanding of the research phenomenon by focusing on participants who can provide the most relevant and information-rich data.⁵²

The study used thematic data analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework.⁵³ Data analysis involves the systematic examination and interpretation of data to identify meaningful patterns and relationships.⁵⁴ Thematic analysis, specifically, is a method used to identify, analyze, and report recurring themes within qualitative data.⁵⁵ The six stages of thematic analysis familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report- were meticulously followed to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Ethical principles guided every phase of the study. Informed consent, defined as the process through which participants voluntarily agree to participate after being fully informed about the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study, was obtained from all participants.⁵⁶ Furthermore, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing data on

⁴⁷ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2018).

⁴⁸ Robert A Stebbins, *Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences* (SAGE publications, 2025).

⁴⁹ M., Saunders, P., Lewis, and A. Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 8th ed. (Pearson, 2019).

⁵⁰ Hanna Kallio et al., "Systematic Methodological Review: Developing a Framework for a Qualitative Semi-structured Interview Guide," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 72, no. 12 (December 23, 2016): 2954–65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>.

⁵¹ Lawrence A Palinkas et al., "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42 (2015): 533–44.

⁵² Ilker Etikan, Sulaiman Abubakar Musa, and Rukayya Sunusi Alkassim, "Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling," *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1–4.

⁵³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

⁵⁴ Matthew B Miles, A Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis* (sage, 2014).

⁵⁵ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology."

⁵⁶ Angelica Orb, Laurel Eisenhauer, and Dianne Wynaden, "Ethics in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 33, no. 1 (March 23, 2001): 93–96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1547-5069.2001.00093.x>.

a password-protected computer. Only the researcher had access to the data, and information was used solely for academic purposes, ensuring adherence to ethical research standards.⁵⁷

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Demographic details of the participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Study level	Name of schools
Sub 001	18	Female	Grade 10	Marude Sec School
Sub 002	19	Female	Grade 11	Marude Sec School
Sub 003	18	Female	Grade 11	Mubalanganyi Sec School
Sub 004	17	Female	Grade 10	Khangale Sec School
Sub 005	17	Female	Grade 10	Mubalanganyi Sec School
Sub 006	18	Female	Grade 12	Mubalanganyi Sec School
Sub 007	18	Female	Grade 12	Marude Sec School

Annotation of demographic details of participants

All participants were adolescent female learners from the selected secondary schools situated in the Vhembe District of Limpopo province. The participants were between the ages of 17 and 19 years, representing the late adolescent stage. In terms of the study level, this study included learners from three different grades: two participants were enrolled in grade 12, two were enrolled in grade 11, and three were enrolled in grade 10. This composition provided a diverse range of perspectives from female learners at varying stages of their secondary school education.

Theme 1: Declining Academic Performance and Cognitive Impairments

The participants share a very concerning pattern of poor academic achievement and cognitive deficiency in adolescents involved in substance abuse, especially cannabis and alcohol. Individuals report relevant hardships in memory impairment, inattention, and lower understanding, which have directly compromised their learning capacities and academic drive. As soon as the high-achieving and goal-oriented students are no longer mentally active, distracted, and lose their interest in the schoolwork, implying the corrosive impact of substance abuse on their cognitive abilities and commitment to school. The testimonies of the learners show the role of frequent intoxication, fatigue and absence in the initiating gradual decline in grades and classroom involvement. In addition to academic effects, their accounts reveal emotional woes, such as anxiety, confusion, and apathy, which further contribute to learning problems. This trend highlights the impact that substance abuse has on not only the neurological mechanisms that are critical to the learning process, but also the psychosocial stability that is a prerequisite for academic achievement. Below are the narratives of the participants:

“After I started smoking weed with my friends, I noticed I couldn’t concentrate in class. When the teacher explains something, I hear it, but I don’t understand. My memory also became weak. Sometimes I forget simple things like what we were taught the previous day. Even during revision, I get easily distracted. It feels like my brain is slow. Before, I used to read and understand fast, but now I must read many times and still don’t get it.” Sub 001

“I used to be serious about school because I wanted to pass matric and go to university. But since I started drinking alcohol almost every weekend, my performance has gone down badly. I come to school tired, and sometimes even skip classes. I used to get in my 70s and 80s, but now it’s just 40s. My teachers complain that I don’t submit assignments, and honestly, I just don’t feel like doing anything. It’s like I lost interest in school. Even when I want to study, I can’t focus for more than a few minutes.” Sub 002

⁵⁷ Georgia Fouka and Marianna Mantzourou, “What Are the Major Ethical Issues in Conducting Research? Is There a Conflict between the Research Ethics and the Nature of Nursing?,” *Health Science Journal* 5, no. 1 (2011): 3.

Similarly, other participants (Sub 003) shared a similar effect, that her involvement in substance abuse has led to the decline of her academic performance.

“When I first started drinking with my cousins, I didn’t think it would affect me in school. But now, I struggle to remember what I studied. My head always feels heavy, and I get confused easily in class. I also forget simple instructions from teachers. Sometimes I feel anxious or depressed, so I just keep quiet and don’t participate. My marks have dropped, and my parents keep asking what’s wrong. I know it’s because of alcohol, but it’s hard to stop because all my friends are doing it.” Sub 003

The findings coincide with the research results of Bahk et al., who assert that substance abuse, especially alcohol and cannabis, among adolescents is closely related to cognitive deficits and deteriorating academic achievements.⁵⁸ Participants always mentioned struggles with attention and memory, and loss of understanding, with the report of slow brain performance, inability to memorize information, and loss of concentration at school. These subjective cognitive impairments reflect neurocognitive studies that show that alcohol and cannabis interfere with the executive functioning, working memory, and information processing in adolescents, whose brain is in critical developmental stages.⁵⁹ Besides mental problems, the learners brought up serious deterioration in academic performance, such as bad grades, incomplete work, absenteeism, and demotivation towards schoolwork. These results are consistent with the previous research that has indicated a correlation between substance abuse and poorer academic activities, a higher risk of dropping out of school, and poor goal-directed behaviors.⁶⁰ In addition, subjects also identified secondary psychosocial elements, including peer pressure and anxiety or depression, that contribute to cognitive and academic failure, which is consistent with studies showing that a combination of substance abuse and emotional stress can further worsen educational performance.⁶¹ Altogether, the data indicate that not only is cognitive functioning affected by adolescent substance abuse, but it also leads to quantifiable decreases in academic performance, which makes implementing an early intervention, covering both neurocognitive and behavioral effects of substance abuse in school, particularly important.

Theme 2: Behavioral Problems and Disciplinary Issues

The findings point to a strong increase in disciplinary issues and behavioral problems of adolescents who use substances and show a shift in their previously adherent and respectful behavior to disobedience, aggressiveness, and violation of rules. The participants report more short-tempered reactions, verbal confrontation, and even physical fights with peers and teachers, which are triggered by intoxication. Absence of classes, coming to school intoxicated, and ignoring school regulations were established as repetitive trends, which are both manifestations of peer pressure and poor judgment. Drug abuse has also been shown to be associated with dishonesty, theft, and academic fraud, which are indicators of greater ethical and social implications. Most of the students said that such actions were a way to try to fit into the social life, showing that there was some kind of psychosocial aspect to the wrongdoing. The involvement in risk-taking and noncompliance behavior, as opposed to the previously obedient and goal-oriented learners, makes for a good discussion of the destabilizing effect of substances on emotional regulation and impulse control. Through these stories, alcohol and drugs destroy not only discipline but also moral judgment and social obligations. The repercussions include suspensions and warnings, and poor relationships with teachers, peers, and family, which cause a vicious circle of behavioral degradation. The following are extracts from the participants.

“Since I started smoking weed with my friends, I’ve become more short-tempered. If a teacher shouts at me or asks me to do something, I easily get angry. Sometimes I talk back or even walk out of the class. Before, I used to respect teachers, but now I don’t care much. I’ve been called

⁵⁸ Bahk et al., “The Relationship between Childhood Trauma and Suicidal Ideation: Role of Maltreatment and Potential Mediators.”

⁵⁹ Dowell, Haegerich, and Chou, “CDC Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain—United States, 2016.”

⁶⁰ Furst and Evans, “An Exploration of Stigma in the Lives of Sex Offenders and Heroin Abusers.”

⁶¹ Kpae, “Illicit Drug Abuse and Criminal Behaviour among Adolescent: The Rivers State Experience.”

to the office a few times to argue with teachers and fight with other students. I know it's wrong, but when I'm high, I just don't think properly." Sub 004

"Most of the time, I skip classes, especially after break. My friends and I go behind the school to smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol. When we come back, we can't concentrate, and sometimes we just don't come back at all. Teachers have reported me several times to the principal for being disrespectful and not wearing the full uniform. I've also been suspended once for coming to school drunk." Sub 005

"Yes, a lot. I used to be quiet, but after I started drinking and going to parties, I changed. I became rude to teachers and even to prefects. I've been caught using vulgar language, and once I almost fought with a teacher. My friends encouraged me, saying it's cool to challenge authority. Now, the principal has given me a final warning by the principal. They said that if I mess up again, I'll be expelled. Honestly, I regret starting all that because I was just trying to fit in." Sub006

"I never used to get into trouble before, but now I do. I started stealing money from home to buy alcohol. At school, I like the teachers a lot. I make excuses for being late or not doing homework. Sometimes I even copy other students' work. I was caught stealing from another learner's bag, and they called my parents. It was embarrassing. I think I've changed a lot because of alcohol." Sub 007

The findings of this study are consistent with the study findings reported by Campo, Mackie and Sanchez, who state that there is a strong correlation between substance abuse among adolescents and the development of more behavioral problems such as aggression, defiance and disciplinary behaviors among adolescents.⁶² The participants also reported being more irritated, aggressive, and disrespectful to the authority figure after using the substance, talking back to the teachers, arguing, skipping classes, and physically fighting. Learners also reported that they experienced more absenteeism incidents, missed classes, and lack of concentration after substance abuse, often coupled with violation of school rules such as not wearing the right uniform and coming to school intoxicated, and this is in line with earlier studies that substance-using adolescents are more likely to be school disengaged and engage in rule-breaking behaviours.⁶³ Furthermore, certain participants admitted to having engaged in theft, lying, and academic dishonesty, which is an expression of how the use of substances may lead to poor judgment and encourage risky or antisocial behavior.⁶⁴ The influence of peers also became another contributory factor, with learners stating that their peers influenced them to act defiantly and in an irresponsible manner, a phenomenon that is in line with the findings that peer pressure and the need to be accepted by their peer group contribute to the likelihood of substance-related behavioral issues.⁶⁵ All the above data show that adolescents who use substances are closely related to behavioral and disciplinary issues in schools, which necessitates substance abuse intervention that deals with substance abuse and its overall influence on student behavior, social interactions, and academic performance.

Theme 3: Emotional and Psychological Challenges

The participants reported that there are substantial emotional and psychological problems in adolescents who use substances, which are characteristic of mood swings, anxiety, and depression. The subjects

⁶² Mickael Campo, Diane M. Mackie, and Xavier Sanchez, "Emotions in Group Sports: A Narrative Review From a Social Identity Perspective," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (March 29, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00666>.

⁶³ Sofia Buelga, Belén Martínez-Ferrer, and María-Jesús Cava, "Differences in Family Climate and Family Communication among Cyberbullies, Cybervictims, and Cyber Bully-Victims in Adolescents," *Computers in Human Behavior* 76 (November 2017): 164–73, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.07.017>.

⁶⁴ Edson Chipalo, "Is Trauma Focused-Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) Effective in Reducing Trauma Symptoms among Traumatized Refugee Children? A Systematic Review," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 14, no. 4 (2021): 545–58.

⁶⁵ Fatih Gür and Ganime Can Gür, "Is Exercise a Useful Intervention in the Treatment of Alcohol Use Disorder? Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *American Journal of Health Promotion* 34, no. 5 (2020): 520–37.

report that they are sad, empty, or worthless, and substance abuse only has a short-term ability to suppress negative feelings and emotions, but it only worsens them over time. Most of them complain of guilt, low self-esteem and loneliness, as their peer and family relationships become difficult. Sleep problems, obsessive thoughts and persistent stress also affect their capacity to cope and general well-being. The psychological effect is severe, as the lack of interest in activities and thoughts that she enjoyed before is highlighted, and the possibility of quitting school or even losing interest in school is raised. The use of substances becomes not only a coping strategy but also a cause of emotional degradation, and it turns into a dependency circle and distress.

“Sometimes I feel sad for no reason. When I’m not using it, I get anxious and angry easily. I also feel guilty because I know I’m disappointing my parents and teachers. I try to stop, but I feel empty without it. I just don’t feel like myself anymore.” Sub 001

“I’ve become very moody. One moment I’m happy, then suddenly I want to cry. I’ve lost interest in things I used to enjoy, like netball. I also feel lonely because some friends avoid me now that they know I drink.” Sub 002

“I feel stressed most of the time. I can’t sleep properly, and my mind is always racing. When I drink, I forget my problems for a while, but the next day I feel worse. I even think about dropping out sometimes because I feel I can’t cope.” Sub 003

“At first, it helps me relax, but later I feel depressed and worthless. I cry a lot and don’t talk to anyone. My confidence is gone, and I always worry that people are judging me.” Sub 004

The findings are in line with the study findings by Brown and Shillington which emphasize the close relationship between substance abuse among adolescents and emotional and psychological struggles, mood volatility, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.⁶⁶ The participants noted that they felt highly sad, guilty and empty without using the substances and were irritated, anxious, and with poor self-identity. Additionally, students reported strong mood swings, loss of interest in activities they enjoyed before, and having a sense of social isolation, which correlates with the findings supporting the idea that the use of substances can increase emotional dysregulation and social withdrawal in adolescents.⁶⁷ The rates of chronic stress, thoughts of dropping out, sleep disorders, and reports about the consideration of dropping out suggest that substance abuse as a maladaptive coping strategy temporarily relieves distress but ultimately results in the deterioration of psychological health.⁶⁸ Also, the participants reported a decrease in self-esteem, constant anxiety about being judged by others, and a lack of interpersonal support, which is congruent with the previous research findings that substance abuse is frequently accompanied by increased levels of self-consciousness, depression, and inadequate coping strategies.⁶⁹ Together, the data help to demonstrate that emotional and psychological stressors are not only a source of but also an outcome of adolescent substance abuse those precipitates further complex risks, which should be addressed through integrated mental health support and intervention methods in schools and communities.

Theme 4: Inadequate School-Based Support and Interventions

Participants reported a severe deficiency in adequate school-based support and interventions for learners who have been involved in substance abuse. Participants indicate that school reactions are mostly punitive, reactive and impersonal and are aimed at punishing rather than knowing and dealing with the underlying factors. Counseling, psychosocial support, or systematic follow-up are conspicuously lacking, and students are now left without any instruction on how to revert to their negative habits. Awareness campaigns are nonexistent, and they usually consist of short reminders at assemblies, no

⁶⁶ Brown and Shillington, “Childhood Adversity and the Risk of Substance Use and Delinquency: The Role of Protective Adult Relationships.”

⁶⁷ Bava and Tapert, “Adolescent Brain Development and the Risk for Alcohol and Other Drug Problems.”

⁶⁸ Zhang and Wu, “The Relationship of Socioeconomic Factors and Substance Abuse Treatment Dropout.”

⁶⁹ Anderberg and Dahlberg, “Gender Differences among Adolescents with Substance Abuse Problems at Maria Clinics in Sweden.”

regular education, workshops, and discussion sessions with experts about substance abuse and its effects. Students stress the need for available mental health specialists, social workers or psychologists who will be able to offer personalized counseling and mentorship. Inactive interventions are also a factor that creates an impression that the school does not take drug use seriously until devastating cases are realized. All the students also associate their substance abuse with stress, family issues, and emotional distress, which is why holistic support systems are needed.

“Honestly, there’s no real help. Teachers just shout or punish us when they find out we use drugs. No one sits with you to understand why you started. I think if there were counselors or talks about drugs, maybe some of us would change.” Sub 001

“When someone is caught, they get suspended or sent home. That’s it. There’s no follow-up or guidance. We don’t have a counselor, so most learners just go back to doing the same things. The school doesn’t really have a plan to help us stop.” Sub 004

“Not at all. We only hear about drugs during assemblies occasionally. There are no workshops or people who come to talk to us about the dangers. I feel like the school doesn’t take it seriously until someone gets into big trouble.” Sub 001

“I think they should have someone to talk to, like a social worker or psychologist. Sometimes we use substances because of stress or problems at home. Punishing us doesn’t help. We need someone who can listen and guide us.” Sub 007

Similar findings were outlined by Brown and Shillington, which indicate that schools tend to take punitive measures on substance abuse instead of offering supportive measures that can solve the underlying conditions.⁷⁰ The participants in the present study indicated that teachers react mainly to drug use by shouting, punishing, suspending, or sending the learners home without any follow-up guidance or counseling. This reactionary approach ignores the psychosocial causes of substance abuse, including stress, family issues, and peer pressure, which need sensitive and systematic assistance.⁷¹ Another issue raised by the learners was the absence of preventive strategies, as they believed that drug education is not provided on a regular basis, and no workshops or counseling events are conducted to educate and support students. This is congruent with Pozveh & Saleh, who believe that interventions based on punishment alone are very ineffective because they do not teach learners how to cope and get the motivation to alter the behavior.⁷² Besides, the need expressed by the students in terms of counselors, social workers, or psychologists can also be attributed to the literature, which implies that school-based support services are crucial in response to substance abuse and towards minimizing risk behavior and encouraging emotional wellness.⁷³ Taken together, the statistics and available studies suggest that the lack of school-based assistance is a continuing cycle of substance abuse, and the necessity to take active, organized, and compassionate measures in the educational facilities is acute.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the findings of this study, the researchers recommend the following.

- Schools should incorporate every aspect of substance abuse into their schooling programs to prepare adolescent female students with the right information concerning the harmfulness of drug and alcohol abuse. The interactive programs, peer-based education and mentorship

⁷⁰ Brown and Shillington, “Childhood Adversity and the Risk of Substance Use and Delinquency: The Role of Protective Adult Relationships.”

⁷¹ Deressa and Azazh, “Substance Use and Its Predictors among Undergraduate Medical Students of Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia.”

⁷² Amini Pozveh Z. and Saleh Z., “The Role of Social Skills in the Prevention of Drug Addiction in Adolescents, Advanced Biomedical Research.”

⁷³ Jorgensen and Wells, “Is Marijuana Really a Gateway Drug? A Nationally Representative Test of the Marijuana Gateway Hypothesis Using a Propensity Score Matching Design”; Baloyi Dzunisani Euginea and Khosa Priscalia, “Social Workers’ Perspectives on the Availability and Scope of Substance Use Disorder Treatment for Women in South Africa,” *Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions*, January 22, 2026, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533256X.2026.2613239>.

programs should be emphasized to develop open discussions and empower the learners to make informed choices. The schoolteachers and school counselors should be trained to be able to detect early signs of substance abuse and offer relevant intervention programs.

- Parents must actively participate in substance abuse prevention and intervention of substance abuse through open communication, clear boundaries, and positive examples. The training and support groups should be offered by the schools and community organizations to make parents realize the challenges their daughters encounter. Early intervention by detection of warning signs and early intervention through regular parent-learner conversations and joint workshops can help build trust and foster early intervention.
- Communities should come together to establish a supportive environment that does not encourage drug abuse and allows favorable youth progress. Local chiefs, religious groups, and youth clubs can work together to provide safe places, mentorship, and recreational services to the girls in the adolescent stage. Destigmatization of seeking help and early rehabilitation can be achieved through awareness campaigns, outreach services in the community, and the availability of counseling services. Effective collaboration between schools, health services, and community stakeholders will ensure that schools respond adequately to the issue of substance abuse.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following are some of the limitations that could be associated with this study.

- The small sample size of only seven participants limits the extent to which the findings can be considered representative of the broader population.
- This study focused exclusively on the adolescent female learners, thereby excluding male learners whose experiences and perspectives on substance abuse may differ, which restricts the comprehensiveness of the conclusions.
- The interviews were conducted in only three schools within the entire Vhembe District, which may not sufficiently cover the diversity of the effects on substance abuse, school environments, and socio-economic conditions across the district.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the thought-provoking qualitative findings in which four themes were developed and discussed with the support of the literature. The participants highlighted the detrimental effects of substance abuse on the cognitive and academic performance of female secondary school learners in South Africa. The findings have shown that substance abuse severely damages cognitive abilities such as memory, focus, and judgment, which are essential for success in school. Learners who abuse drugs have trouble focusing, solving problems, and finishing assignments, which affects their performance in a variety of subjects. Their capacity to succeed academically is further hampered by these cognitive impairments, which are exacerbated by behavioral and emotional outcomes such as mood swings, anxiety, and irritability.

The psychological effects of substance abuse led to a vicious cycle in which learners find it difficult to concentrate in class, which continuously reduces their academic performance. The study also underscored the critical role of peer pressure and social influence in the initiation and continuation of substance abuse among female learners. The strong desire to conform to peer expectations and social norms, especially within the school environment, compels many learners to engage in risky behaviors, including drug and alcohol abuse. To mitigate the negative effects of substance abuse on academic performance, the study emphasizes the importance of robust support systems and intervention programs. Schools that provide comprehensive support, including counseling services, mentorship, and peer support networks, can significantly reduce the impact of substance abuse on learners' academic outcomes. Additionally, the study reveals the profound impact of stigmatization and social isolation on the mental well-being of substance-using learners. The social exclusion and labeling of learners who use substances contribute to further emotional distress, decreased self-esteem, and disengagement from academic activities. Therefore, it is essential to create inclusive, supportive school environments that

reduce stigma and promote mental health, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their challenges, have access to the resources and care necessary to succeed academically and socially.

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