

# Innovations

## Strength of peer counseling strategy in curbing drug abuse among secondary rural learners in Chivi, Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

*This qualitative paper examines the strength of a peer counselling strategy for alleviating drug abuse in Zimbabwean marginalized rural learners. There is an increase of drug abuse in Zimbabwe rural learning environments. Learners under the influence of drugs are engaging in unprotected sex, criminal activities, failing academically, committing suicide, mental problems among others. To mitigate effects of drug abuse there is a need to implement a peer counselling strategy for alleviating drug abuse in Zimbabwean rural schools through active participation of all stakeholders. This paper anchored on Critical Emancipatory Research theory. A qualitative phenomenological design was used with face to face interviews as data-collection instruments, to purposively selected fifteen school learners participants ( 8 females and 7 seven males) from three Chivi rural secondary schools. This paper established that there is no specific peer counselling strategy that was formulated collectively by rural citizens to mitigate drug abuse among rural learners. It was also noted that, the current peer counselling strategies that are being used to assist rural learners are Eurocentric that are devoid of rural cultural values and expectations. On the way forward, counsellors, rural learners, parents, educational policymakers, Non-Governmental Organizations, Government and the general public should collectively formulate and implement locally accepted peer counselling strategy that deals with drug abuse among secondary school learners.*

**Keywords:** 1.drug abuse; 2.peer counselling strategy; 3.rural learners; 4.rural learning environments; 5.Zim

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### Introduction and contextualization of the problem

Drug abuse causes learners to fail in their academic studies, as substantiated by Muchetu (2023:1), who found that, "Examination pass rate for Bulawayo schools in Zimbabwe are now lowing owing to drugs and substance abuse as well as a culture of gangsterism with a measly two schools making it into the top 100 schools in the country in 2022." In Binga, Matebeleland North province in Zimbabwe, 18 secondary schools had zero pass rate at secondary school 'O' level results in 2022, because learners were abusing drugs and engaging in other unwanted behaviors (From the above citation, due to drug abuse among learners in Bulawayo province in Zimbabwe only two schools made it in top 100 nationally). Recently one learner at one high school in Zimbabwe was killed by learners who were under influence of drugs (Sunday News, 2023). In addition, some learners and adult community members are selling drugs to learners in Zimbabwe schools (Herald, 2023). It has been noted that, drugs influence learners to rape other learners exposing them to unwanted early pregnancies, abortion, suicide, sexual transmitted diseases and emotional breakdown (Chronicle, 2023). Furthermore, Change Radio (2023) reported that in Zimbabwe 18 916 learners dropped out of school due to drug abuse, early pregnancies, under age marriages, sexual abuse among other causes. On 14<sup>th</sup> February 2023, the Zimbabwe Republic Police launched an operation to deal with drug abuse after discovering the high usage of illegal drugs in Zimbabwe schools and communities and they arrested 2175 drug deals (NewsreportZim, 2023). These sudden raids, stop and search blitz by police are strategies to stop

drug abuse and bring awareness about dangers of drug abuses. The above research studies show that Zimbabwe schools are heavily affected by drug abuse therefore there is need to formulate a viable peer counselling strategy that is effective to mitigate drug abuse among learners in rural areas. The next phase focuses on theoretical framing of this article.

### **Theoretical framing**

This paper is framed on Michel Foucault's Critical Emancipatory theory position is explained in Demirovic (2013:10) who explains that "that emancipation means to liberate the individual from any bonds to its identity, conceiving the individual subject itself as the effect of disciplinary and inquisitorial power to constitute an individual by registering, observing, educating and normalizing it, giving to it a personal history, guaranteeing its identity". Foucault's unpacks power relations and discipline in education, Dube (2016:15) comments that "Foucault highlights issues of power dynamics that end to dominate others in society and to emancipate means to engage in forms that liberate people from oppressive structures". The important aspect there are oppressive structures in Zimbabwe that does not recognize rural communities in solving drug abuse using peer counselling strategy, this should be challenged in order to bring total transformation. Foucault's (1976:36) view on power relations is "power is not only the ability to dominate others but also a relationship of influence between different agents. Power is directly related to knowledge: power defines what counts as authentic knowledge and capitalizes on it." Foucault poses a question: "How have we come to accept the types of knowledge that we presume to be legitimate, valid and true?" In application, to this study, I asked the question, "Is peer counselling strategy able to alleviate drug abuse in Zimbabwean rural learning ecology?" Foucault's question was answered by Stromquist (1998:4) who argues "multiple forms of power that takes from in macro-level of institutions to the capillary of person-to-person transactions...where people are aware of many ways to see an event and the large variety of voices among social actors, including voices that become suppressed." This shows that there is power contestation and domination in education circles, therefore we need to use Critical Emancipatory Research to challenge power imbalances in peer counselling strategy formulation, bring social justice and emancipation. To summarize, Critical Emancipatory Research gives the disadvantaged rural communities' space to air their views on peer counselling strategy. The following section deals with research methodology.

### **Methodology Participatory Action Research**

The history of Participatory Action research was centered on the active involvement of grassroots members in decision making. Some scholars hold that Participatory Research was propagated by Greek philosophers, as Lykes (2016:44) elaborates that "some argued that Participatory Action Research approaches to knowledge generation and social change can be traced back to early Greek philosophers or to indigenous communities." However, Hngigginbotton and Liamputtong (2015:4) explains that "the development of PAR in North America and Europe evolved in reaction to the predominant modes of inquiry: empiricism and positivism, the goals of PAR focus on the production of alternative forms of knowledge, and its ontology and epistemology foundations are divergent from those of elitist or convention research." His Action Research had an agenda to solve predicaments such as discrimination, segregation and helped in solving societal problems. It is evident that Participatory Action Research is liberating in nature, as alluded by Lykes (2016:45), who argues that "Most Latin Americans and their colleagues in Africa and Asia who engage in participatory and action research trace the origin of their work to anti-colonial and liberators' initiatives of Freire (1970), Flashboard (1985), and Rahman (2004)." One of the proponents of Participatory Action Research was Paulo Freire, who was an adult educator and author, who contributed to the development of Participatory Action Research. His writings challenged power relations and dominance in education, as expounded by Higginbotton and Liamputtong (2015:3), who holds that "philosophies of Paolo Freire and his propositions with respect to education as a liberating force, the acquisition of knowledge as a challenge to the oppression the poor by elite, the ideologies of Freire are that the marginalized within the society are able to

construct knowledge in valuable ways, and that such knowledge is meaningful and significant for those social groups and their communities.” Furthermore, Chidarikire, Hlalele and Tarisayi (2021:7) states that “The origins of Participatory Research can also be traced back to the perspectives espoused by Letwin (1946) who focused on action research and minority”. Participatory Action Research and Critical Emancipatory Research have similarities in that they both empower the oppressed. There are different terms used interchangeably with Participatory Action Research. These terms include Participatory Research, Community – based participatory research. In this study, Participatory Action Research was used to develop knowledge in formulating a peer counselling strategy to alleviate drug abuse in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies.

The above is supported by Padilha, Sousa and Pereira (2015:1), who write that “Participatory Action Research (PAR) facilitates the change process in clinical practice and promotes knowledge development.” This Action Research allowed us – the main researcher and community co-researchers to be action researchers in formulating a peer counselling strategy to alleviate drug abuse problems in Zimbabwean, rural, learning ecologies. This entails that Participatory Action Research has a social change agenda. To accomplish our social change agenda, we had engaged in discourse, critical analysis of data to negotiate meanings and contextualized them as pronounced by Zuber-Skerrit (2015: 9) “It’s a holistic approach to learning, research and development, recognizing and dealing with our emotions, feelings and intuitions, as well as our logical, rational, analytic, and critical thinking, and with social influences, contexts, and conditions of social realm. Within our social relationships, we negotiate meanings through dialogue, dialects, paradoxes, and discussions among critical friends who trust and respect one another as equals, while each has unique talents and viewpoints.” Participatory Action Research consists of three major aspects which are: shared ownership of the research study, the involvement of communities in analyzing the research problem and, advocating for community action in solving the problem.

The fifteen rural secondary school participants (eight females and seven males’ learners) were purposively selected. Patton (2012:169) urged that, “The logic and power of purposeful sampling depends on selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. The information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry.” All of the secondary school learners had abused drugs at one point in their lives were elected to participate in this study because they had first-hand experience with drug abuse and professional peer counselling. The selected rural schools serve learners from marginalized backgrounds from lowest socio-economic backgrounds that may led them to drug abuse. The sample was homogeneous only in so far as that all the participants were from rural secondary schools in Chivi, Zimbabwe. These learners were sampled because their age, gender, skills and knowledge and experience with drug abuse and peer counselling.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

To facilitatedata collection I employed interviews with open ended questions. As a result, relevant issues which were not included in the interview guide but arose during the process of conducting the interviews were explored and noted and in cooperated (Hlalele, 2018). This was in line with the flexible nature of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Follow-ups and probing questions were also asked for elaboration or in order to seek clarification during interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

The main method that was used to analyze qualitative data from interviews was thematic content analysis (Chikuvadze, 2022). This involved identifying, coding and categorizing patterns in data. In order to make sense of collected data, the researcher applied the Braun and Clarke’s (2006:10) open coding method of data analysis to identify themes and categories. This Braun and Clarke (2006:10) method is a systemic process of

examining, selecting, categorizing, comparing, synthesizing and interpreting data to unpack the major research question of the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the three rural secondary school headmasters in Chivi District, Zimbabwe, from parents of the learners and secondary school learners. The participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the interviews if they were not comfortable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were assured of anonymity in the research report through use of numbers to identify participants (Dube, 2020). Validation/trustworthiness of data collected Strategies were applied to counteract validity threats. Information was obtained from individuals in their respective interviews, using different sources, cross-checking and verifying sources of information (Tarisayi, 2022).

### **Discussion and Research Findings**

This section deal with discussion and research findings

#### **Peer counselling's capacity to alleviate drug abuse**

The ability of a peer counselling strategy to alleviate drug abuse in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies was one of the strength uncovered in this research study through the empirical data generated. The research studies stated confirmed that peer counselling has power to alleviate drug abuse among adolescent learners (Chikuvadze & Chidarikire, 2021). To further strengthen the effectiveness of peer counselling, is the research study by Kisii University (2016:1), who concludes that "Peer Counsellors are trained to counsel on a wide range of issues such as; relationship concerns, sexual harassment, rapes, child defilement, unplanned pregnancies, stress, financial and time management, room-mate problems, academic problems, religious issues, alcohol and drugs abuse." This corresponds with data generated, which holds that peer counselling strategy, collectively formulated, is centered on the learners' ability to assist each other in dealing with life's problems, such as drug abuse issues in their environment (Chireshe, 2013). Participatory Action Research focuses on practicality and implementation (Hlalele, 2018).

Female learner 1 who submitted that:

*"My past experiences with peer counselling show that peer counselling is effective to deal with drug abuse, then let us implement our own peer counselling strategy to alleviate drug abuse in our schools."*

In support of the effectiveness of peer counselling, male learner 3 argued that,

*"Well trained peer counsellors can utilizes peer counselling strategy to help other learners deal with drug abuse pandemic that is affect their mental well-being".*

Furthermore, male learner 4 acknowledged the successes of the effective use of peer counselling strategies: *The workshops on student engagement have been helpful. The performance of the students has improved looking at the assignments and the projects that we give them".*

Analysis of the above citations showed that participants agree that they had peer counselling has capacity to help rural learners fight drug abuse among their peers (Chikuvadze et al, 2021). In addition, participants agreed that peer counselling training broadens the peer counselling knowledge base where learners can tap

into information and be mentored. However, there is need to improve quality of training material to produce quality counsellors as, Kamore and Tiego (2015:255) propound that “Literature review on peer counselling programmes vividly shows a big gap in the quality and scope of training student counsellors. The issue of training is controversial, due to lack of a harmonized training manual.” In spite of the lack of appropriate peer counselling literature, I agreed further with Moleko (2014:133)’s assertion, who confirm that “The trainings and workshops on the effective application of instructional strategies and student engagement helped students understand the course.”

### **Inclusion of Guidance and Career counselling in Zimbabwean National School Curriculum**

Guidance and Career Counselling is one of the subjects being taught in Zimbabwean schools (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2018). Peer counselling is one area of study or part of the content in Guidance and Career Counselling.

On studying Guidance and Career Counselling, Female learner 7 commented that,

*“I have learnt the importance of helping other learners with information on how to deal with drug abuse, stress, depression, early pregnancies during Guidance and Career lessons.”*

Also, another male learner 5 explained that,

*“I commend our Guidance and Counselling teachers for impart peer counselling skills and knowledge among learners. This information and skills empowers us to effectively help our classmates deal with drug abuse.”*

The above verbatim quotes summarize the inclusion of Guidance and Career Counselling, as explained by Chimonyo, et al (2015:143) who write that “following in the adoption of the recommendations of the 1999 Presidential Commission of Enquiry into Education and Training, the Ministry of Education, Sport, Art and Culture, in the year 2005, came up with Director Circular Minute Number 23, which sought to strengthen and institutionalize Guidance and Counselling in Zimbabwe schools.” This implies that the Zimbabwean curriculum developers infused peer counselling into the Guidance and Counselling programme, subject to imparting knowledge that will bring about quality peer counsellors to deal with drug abuse and other problems bedeviling our learners. I argue that, inclusion of Guidance and Counselling in the Zimbabwean school curriculum is one of the pillars of strength of peer counselling, in that it is taught to all learners and teachers at teachers’ colleges and universities.

### **Zimbabwe Government legally permits Zimbabwean rural school Development Committees to actively participate in education sector**

The strength of peer counselling strategies is that there are legal instruments to support active participation of Zimbabwean rural School Development Committees (SDAs) in the Education sector. The School Development Committees were legally established through the laws enacted in parliament. Harris (2010:2) states, “Dr Ndlovu said the SDA was a necessary branch of the education system because of the role that it plays. He said the bodies’ mandate was to build, develop and maintain school buildings and grounds and support teaching and learning.” SDAs know the needs of the school, as they work closely with the school authorities. The SDA knows what type of work needs to be done at the school, be it on the school grounds, how many books are needed to fill the library, and so on”. The Zimbabwe Education Act of 2006 gave parents the mandate to run schools through School Development Committees.

On importance of involvement of parents in supporting peer counseling, male learner 6 posits that,

*“We thank our parents who believe in our ability to help other learners solve drug abuse. My mother taught the importance of love and caring for others. She encouraged me to be source of hope to those in difficult situations. She has inspired me.”*

On appreciating the role of parents in support peer counsellors, Female learner 9 noted that,

*“Our parents financially and materially support us in executing our duties as peer counsellors. Without our parents’ support implementing peer counselling strategy will not be implemented.”*

In agreement, the parents support school programs such as peer counselling that are beneficial to their children, Mahoso and Kuyayama-Tumbare (2014:252) argue that, “Parents are most likely to support schools that offer a curriculum that is acceptable to them. The value they attach to the curriculum is enhanced if the curriculum is in line with their expectations and if the curriculum does not meet their expectations, support for it by the parents is compromised.” I have also observed that, in South Africa, there is the South African Schools Act (S.A.S.A.), which states that parents should actively participate in the teaching and learning of their children. Many research studies proved that parents and community participation were on the rise and that there are some challenges affecting community participation, for example, Obrien (2012:1) argues that, “According to the recent Metlife Survey of the American Teachers, teachers, parents and students all agree that parent engagement in schools has increased over the past 25 years.”

### **Emancipation of voiceless Zimbabwean rural learners in the formulation and implementation of a peer counselling strategy to reduce drug abuse**

It is one of their rights that rural learners should actively participate in utilizing peer counselling to help other learners deal with drug abuse. Mushunje and Kuyayama – Tumbare (2014:128) are of the view that: “Children have the right to participate in communities in which they reside and have programmes and services for themselves. Participation includes access to libraries, involvement in community programs, youth voice activities and decision making processes.” This proves that the views of Zimbabwean rural learners have the right to be heard and actively participate in peer counselling implementation.

Male learner 11 observed that,

*“It is evident that Zimbabwean teachers and other co-researchers are now consulting rural learners when formulating and implanting peer counselling policy was being formulated and implementing peer counselling. Our involvement in peer counselling processes empowers to have full ownership of it and make sure it succeeds.”*

In this article, I employed Participatory Action Research to give rural learners platform to actively participate in implementing peer counselling to deal with drug abuse. Sithole (2016:1) explained that, “Participatory Action Research is one method that allows researchers to put authorization theory into practice by making sure that everyone who has a stake in the outcome of the partnership (i.e., stakeholders) has an expression in the process of decision.”

This was supported by the female learner who submitted that

*“The peer counselling strategy formulated and implemented through combined community efforts is a powerful tool that can be used to alleviate drug abuse in Zimbabwean rural learning schools and many success stories have been recorded in other countries that use peer counselling strategies.”*

In explaining further, Castro (2014:12) asserts, “I have learned the importance of collaborating with the students when solving a problem. Asking students to produce solutions can bring great results since, by doing so, the teacher can take into account the different points of view on a problem, and different solutions can be proposed. This way of solving problems is a way of taking into account the needs of all the students and their different ways of learning.”

### **Use of technology and social media by Zimbabwean rural peer counsellors and other community members**

The use of technology and social media in the formulation and implementation peer counselling strategies is the other strength observed after critical analyzing generated data.

The male learner 12 posed a thought provoking question in support of peer counselling, when he asked, *“Why can we not use e-Education for information dissemination about peer counselling strategies, and to bring drug abuse awareness to community members, most of the learners’ own computers and phones?”*

In addition, female learner 14 noted that, *“Due to COVID-19, online peer counselling via social media platforms such as WhatsApp is an effective tool to assist learners who abuse drug because face to face counselling has been stopped in order to avoid spread of Covid-19 pandemic.”*

The issue of the use of technology is empowering, and is promoted by Mthiyane (2015:7), who argues that, “Some approaches to empowerment focus on enabling individuals to gain access to assets, information, choices and opportunities so that they are able to improve their own situations”. I concur with above observations, that many Zimbabwe rural learning ecology learners have many information gadgets such as internet connected cell phones, laptops, and this implies that peer counsellors can learn and use peer counselling strategies to deal with drug abuse through these gadgets. The dissemination of information of peer counselling strategies for alleviation of drug abuse, is now easily accessible through these electronic gadgets (Dube, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

There is an urgent need to implement locally made peer counselling strategy to mitigate drug abuse among rural secondary school learners in Zimbabwe. This article noted that, there are strengths of utilizing peer counselling strategy to alleviate drug abuse in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies which are anchored on the following aspects, as shown by the empirical data generated in this research study, namely: Peer counselling’s ability to alleviate drug abuse, the inclusion of Guidance and Career counselling in the Zimbabwean National School Curriculum, the Zimbabwe Government legally permits Zimbabwean rural School learners and School Development committees to actively participate in the education sector, the Zimbabwean, the emancipation of voiceless Zimbabwean, rural, community stakeholders in the formulation of peer counselling strategies, and the collective and emancipatory use of technology by Zimbabwean rural peer counsellors and other community members.

### **Recommendations**

All schools in Chivi rural district should utilize Afrocentric peer counselling strategy to mitigate drug abuse problems among rural secondary school learners. The following are some of the suggestions:

#### **Formulation and implementation of indigenous peer counselling strategy**

Formulation of local peer counselling strategy that resonate well with cultural beliefs and expectations of rural secondary school learners This peer counselling can then be utilized to help learners who are abusing drugs.

#### **Use of online professional peer counselling strategy**

Due to increase of COVID-19 pandemic cases in Zimbabwe as of 21<sup>st</sup> February 2023, Minister of Primary and Secondary Education, have banned parents, relatives and other professional to visit schools to avoid spread of COVID-19 diseases (Herald, 2023). Therefore, I recommend that, peer counsellors in rural schools should effectively use online counselling to deal with drug abuse. As a result, the Government and internet providers should give free data and Wifi to rural schools to enhance use of online counselling.

#### **School Administration and School Development Committees to financial assist rural school learners**

Peer counsellors face challenges such as lack of financial resources to buy smart phones to use on online counselling, travelling allowances to visit learners struggling with drug abuse, buying peer counseling materials among others. Therefore, I encourage rural School Administrators and School Development Committees to set a budget to support peer counsellors’ work.

### **Researchers and policy makers to include rural learners in dealing with drug abuse**

There is need to involve rural learners in all processes of peer counselling such as formulation and implementation of peer counselling, drug abuse awareness programs, counselling sessions among others. This involvement enables the rural learners to take ownership of the peer counselling and implement it with high motivation. I have noted that, in most cases researchers and policy makers exclude rural community members in their programs.

### **Stakeholder to collaborate in dealing with drug abuse in rural schools**

The fight of drug abuse need all stakeholders to collectively work together to deal with drug abuse. For peer counselling to be successful there is need for learners to work hand in glove with Government, Non-Governmental Organization, teachers, counsellors and psychologists, policy makers, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, parents among others.

### **Deterrent punishments to drug sellers and drug users**

There courts should give stiff penalties to all people caught selling and those abusing drug. Drug abuse and selling of drugs should be treated as high offences that warrant tough jail terms. These stiff penalties were deter others from engaging in these acts.

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### **Data availability**

The author confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

### **Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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