

Teenage Boys' Resilience on Drug and Substance Abuse: A Case Study of Kabete High School in Kiambu County, Kenya

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Abstract

Research has shown that the trend of teenagers engaging in drug and substance abuse is on the rise. In spite of the increase of male adolescents abusing drugs, a situation that escalated during the Covid-19 break, it is perplexing that some boys have been resilient to overcome the challenge, though exposed to the same risk factors as those who abuse drugs and substances. Therefore, using an interpretive framework, the aim of this research was to document the lived experience of these teenage boys who have managed to avoid engaging in drug and substance abuse. The main research question was: How have male teenagers in Kabete High School in Kiambu County overcome the challenge of drug and substance abuse despite their vulnerability? The research adapted the Problem-Behavior theory of Jessor and Jessor in line with variables in the thematic framework. A public boys' high school was selected for this study. The sampled population comprised 5 male teenagers who were purposely selected for the interview. Further, a focus group discussion of 6 students was carried out and the deputy principal was interviewed. The methodology used was a qualitative case study which was anchored on lived experiences; observation guides and field notes which were used to collect data. Emerging themes that were identified are: Challenging home environment, parental control, positive self-concept of the participants, avoidance of negative peer influence, and faith in God. These themes have been discussed in the paper and recommendations given.

Keywords: male teenagers, challenge, vulnerable, overcome, drug & substance abuse, semi-urban, resilience

Introduction and Problem Statement

It is estimated that the total number of people who are abusing drugs in Africa is 60% and the projection is that it would grow to 86% by 2030 based on growth of the population (UNODC, 2021). The rise in this number is likely to be particularly pronounced in Africa because of its youthful population and the drug use is high amongst the young people.

Adolescence is a critical risk period for the initiation into drug and substance abuse, (United Nations Office Drugs and Crime, 2018). This is because, for one, the prefrontal

cortex, the part of the brain that controls judgment, self-control, and future planning is still developing and matures at young adulthood. As a result, the teen brain is wired for risk-taking and experimentation of life experiences. Another important reason why drug use frequently begins at adolescence is that teens are often strongly influenced by their peers, who may convince them that everybody around them is doing it. They also use drugs to cope with the social and psychological challenges that they may experience during their development process (UNODC, 2018).

According to the National Authority for the Campaign against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA, 2016), a survey on alcohol and drug use among secondary school students in Kenya showed the following prevalence rates: Alcohol 23.4%, prescription drugs 16.8%, khat 17%, tobacco 14.5%, cannabis 7.5%, inhalants 2.3%, heroin 1.2%, and cocaine 1.1 %. The commonly used tobacco products are cigarettes 9%, *shisha* 6.2 %, chewing tobacco 3.9%, *kuber* 3.9% and sniffed 3.0 %.

Due to the fact that drug and substance abuse is a global issue, policies have been formulated to address the challenge, from international to national level. The United Nation, Article 33, policy on children's rights states that, "Parties shall take appropriate measures including legislative, administrative, social and educational measures, to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances as defined in the relevant international treaties, and prevent the use of children in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances," (Convention of the Rights of the Child, United National General Assembly 20th November 1989; 2016). Sustainable Development Goals of September 2015, Goal No. 3.5 aims at strengthening the prevention and treatment of substance abuse including narcotic drug abuse and harmful alcohol. Vision 2030 in Kenya addresses the youth health, crime and drugs to protect the young people against harmful cultural practices, crime and drugs; this is with an aim to make the youth more productive for the achievement of the vision goals.

Kenya has taken several steps in the contextualization of international and regional policies on drug and substance abuse. The Ministry of Education, through the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), has integrated drug education components in the existing school curriculum in subjects such as: Religious education, life skills education, chemistry, biology, languages, and extra-curricular activities such as drama, music, physical education, etc. However, for effective implementation, content would need a teacher who is competent and passionate to be able to discuss it in-depth rather than just give it an overview and many teachers may be lacking the competencies. In addition, provision has been made for training of heads of schools, teachers and school quality assurance and standard officers on drug education through in-service courses (Mutumi, 2013). Despite the efforts, the problem of drug and substance abuse continues to be a major crisis affecting teenagers in high schools. There are several studies conducted, for instance by the National Authority for the Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA), that have focused on the teenagers who have the problem of drug and substance abuse; for instance, the effects of drug and substance abuse amongst the teenagers; the causes of adolescents' engaging in drug and substance abuse; how home and school environment influences drugs and substances abuse, and the most common drugs used.

The issue of resilience to substance abuse is one of utmost importance. Walsh (2012) recommends a shift of investigation to change from adolescents who have problems to those who have succeeded to overcome in some way. In spite of difficult circumstances that they could be exposed to, it is perplexing that some teenagers manage to grow and apparently prosper. Important lessons can be learned from examining this group. Therefore, this paper focused on the teenage boys who, though exposed to difficult circumstances, have overcome the challenge of engaging in drug and substance abuse.

The purpose of the study was to explore how, in spite of exposure to risk factors, some teenage boys have managed to overcome engaging in drug and substance abuse. The research was guided by the following research questions, “How have teenage boys in Kabete High School in Kiambu County overcome the challenge of engaging in drug and substance abuse despite their vulnerability? The discussion in this paper provides a brief overview of the theoretical framework underpinning the problem behavior theory; the research methods, the research findings and a discussion thereof; and conclusion and recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

The premise of this study is that in spite of an increase in the number of teenagers engaging in drug and substance abuse it is perplexing that there are those who refrain. This behavior is explored from a constructivist approach. The problem-behavior theory, which was coined by Jessor and Jessor (1977) states that, adolescents' behavior is a product of complex interactions between individuals and their immediate environment. The adolescent who is less likely to engage in problem behavior is one who values academic achievement; who is not concerned much with independence, who treats society as unproblematic rather than as deserving of criticism and reshaping, who maintains a religious involvement and is more uncompromising about transgressions, and who finds little that is positive in problem behavior relative to the negative consequences of engaging in it; such a one is more likely not be influenced into drug and substance abuse.

On the contrary, the adolescent who is more likely to engage in problem behavior reflects an opposite personality pattern. They are concerned about their independence, they demonstrate a relative lack of interest in the goals of conventional institutions (such as school and church), and have a more tolerant attitude about transgression. They suggest the character of a problem-prone environment; adolescents who are likely to engage in problem behavior perceive less compatibility between the expectations that their parents and their friends hold for them, they acknowledge greater influence of friends relative to parents, they perceive greater support for problem behavior among their friends, and they have more friends who provide models for engaging in problem behavior (Jessor & Jessor, 1977b, p. 237). This suggests that they have more trust in their peers than the people who have authority over their lives and are therefore more likely to be recruited into drug and substance abuse.

Research Methods

This research was conducted within the constructivist paradigm, the purpose being exploratory and descriptive (Babie, 2007). The goal was to rely as much as possible on the participants' views and their lived experience on how they had overcome engaging in drug and substance abuse. A qualitative research methodology was adopted to answer the research question. The research study was guided by multiple case studies, whereby the procedure is replicated for each of the participants sampled by asking them the same interview questions.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit the participants; this was important to enable the researcher get a “thick” description from the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The participants were identified through a snowball sample whereby 2 key participants from whom most information was collected were requested to refer other participants who would be most resourceful. The male students sampled were drawn from Form 3 and 4 as they were believed to be more resourceful based on the fact that they had been in school for a longer period of time compared to those in Form 1 and 2. Most participants were classified as vulnerable to the situation of drug and substance abuse and therefore it was important to understand how they overcame it. Five male students were sampled. In case study research,

the recommendation is to include 4 or 5 cases in a single study. This number should provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis (Creswell, 2007). Only male participants were sampled because the school is a boys' school. Further, the researcher has a special interest in boys; in understanding the challenges affecting them and developing working solutions.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to collect the data; however the biographical profile data was gathered using closed-ended questions. Some of the questions used were, "Could you explain to me how you have managed to keep off from drug and substance abuse?"; "Tell me the story of your background." After the 5th interview the interviewer realized that data saturation was reached as the same information was repeated by participants (Creswell, 2013). The data was recorded using a recorder. It was transcribed and open coding was done by highlighting the lines that the researcher felt they had interesting, relevant, and important information and jotted down the observation on the margin adjacent to the line either using own words or the exact word on the line. Different color codes were used to classify the information; the open codes were grouped into categories from which the themes emerged.

The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation. The research evidence was corroborated from different sources to shed light on a theme of perspective. The researcher used multiple methods to triangulate the study; what the participants were sharing in the interview, was checked against the researcher's observation of the participants' character over their period in high school. Since the participants had been drawn from Form 3 and 4 the researcher had observed their behavior in a period of 3 to 4 years in school. In addition, the information collected from a focus group discussion was checked against the information from individual interviews and was found to be congruent. Jessor and Jessor's theory of problem-behavior theory seemed to agree with the information that was shared by the participants on how they had managed to keep off from engaging in drug and substance abuse.

Ethical considerations, such as the avoidance of harm, informed consent by adolescents, voluntary participation, and no deception of participants, privacy, and confidentiality informed the research (Strydom, 2011). Before the data was collected, the researcher obtained permission from the school administration to conduct the interview with the students. The participants were identified and the request was made if they would consent to be interviewed. The researcher declared the intentions of the research and assured the participant of their confidentiality.

Research Findings

For the contextualization of the research findings and the discussions, biographical data of the participant was provided. The research findings were presented as themes.

Biographical Information

A total of 11 adolescent males participated in the study- 5 were interviewed individually and the 6 were a part of the focus group discussion. The participants were drawn from Form 3 and 4 classes. The participants were between the ages of 16-19 years. The deputy principal of the school was interviewed; he was viewed as the most appropriate due to his experience of handling drug-related issues directly.

Themes

Challenging Home Environment

Most of the participants came from families that were experiencing some challenges. The first respondent described how he was orphaned from 2019 after the passing on of the father and the mother had died earlier in 2010. He was being raised by the grandmother and life had been very tough, he stated, "In 2019, my dad passed on... from that time life became very tough." (Respondent 1). Meeting even the basic needs had been a challenge; he described how the power bill had accumulated over time due to financial constraints. The elder brother was an alcoholic and though he made a good income from working in the slaughterhouse, he did not support in meeting their basic needs. When on break from school the participant had to get a job to sustain the family. He says, "You see, when we were on break during the Covid-19 I really worked... I couldn't stay at home because now if I did, what would we eat? I have to assist my grandmother". (Respondent 1)

Then the issue of negligence by the father came up; "Our father left us when I joined Form 1, in second term, so we are just being brought up by my mother and she is going through so many challenges at her place of work", (Respondent 3). Further, one of the participants explained how he lost his father through a road accident while in class 6. He also had a physical disability of a missing limb; he had gone through amputations 5 times since the problem began when he was 2 years old. He is still in pain but has had to persevere; "Sometimes it hurts, that is why I like walking around because when I sit for long I feel pain," (Respondent 5).

The issue of the environment also came up; the environment can influence behavior. The researcher had observed that one of the respondents came from the slum where drug peddling and abuse was very high. Most of the teenage boys from that environment had dropped out of school yet the boy was in Form 4 completing school. Another described how, before they relocated to the new environment, they used to live in the slums but managed to overcome. Life in the slums was very challenging since they were expected to prove themselves through abusing drugs and substances. Studies have shown that socio-economic stress, and particularly early exposure to stress, is linked to early drug use and later drug problems. It is amazing how the respondents had demonstrated resilience despite the challenges.

Parental Control

Parental guidance on drugs played a critical role in the respondents keeping off from the drugs. Respondent 2 commented, "My mother and father insist on me not using the drugs because they are not good. They can affect my performance and are not good for my health." The parenting style also contributed to the boys' avoidance of drugs and substances. Respondent 2 said, "I cannot take drugs... I may not have a home to go to. They (my neighbors) even know that my mother is very strict." Respondent 4 said, "My dad is a retired police officer. He is very tough. If he gets you in mistake, you will be in trouble, so I cannot imagine doing such a thing. So out of fear for my father I cannot do such a thing."

Parenting and the home environment continue to be important when adolescents begin to have more autonomy and opportunity from pro-social or risky behaviors, (Monique & Sven, 2008; UNODC, 2018). Parents who adopt propagative parenting styles are described as both demanding and responsive. Their children are more likely to be more focused, have a greater sense of self-esteem, self-reliant and are more independent. They are more likely to be

successful, and demonstrate a high sense of morality, for instance they demonstrate capability of avoiding drug and substance abuse.

Positive Self-concept

Self-concept is the adolescents' view of self and the value they attach to themselves. Those with a positive self-concept are likely to make responsible choices in regard to drug and substance abuse. The participants repeatedly said that they knew who they were and therefore could not engage in drug and substance abuse. Respondent 1 said, "I find those people abusing drugs right from our gate... some of them stand on the road chewing *khat*, but there is no way you will find me abusing drugs because I know myself. I cannot bring myself to that position. They call me plainer, which means a foolish person."

Respondent 2 stated that beyond the mother's strictness he had self-control. The mother is not always with him to police him but his moral compass helped him to resist drugs. One has to be a person who is guided by principles.

Down at the river we were washing clothes...so my friend told me to smoke, so I told him, 'I cannot do that'... beyond my mother being tough I also have my own self-control. Because even at the river my mother was not with me so if I wanted to use, I would have used.

Respondent 4's comment was, "I have to think about my life because even if I take and feel high after some time I will be back to the real world." The issue of one's legacy and how one will be remembered after finishing school was described, "What will people remember me for, somebody who was of character, somebody who was disciplined or how will I be remembered?" (Respondent 5)

According to the participants in the focus group discussion, one must demonstrate an understanding of self for them not to engage in drug and substance abuse; if one was aware of the consequences of drugs, they should avoid them at all cost. One of the participants in the focus group who reported to have abused drugs in Form 1 and 2 commented, "In this issue of drugs you can have been brought up in church like in my situation, it could be your parents are strict and don't allow you to go out, but the point is you have to make the decision yourself, because when you are in school your parents are not there with you, you are on your own." (Focus group Respondent 3)

Avoidance of Negative Peer Influence

The participants demonstrated a high level of deliberateness in avoiding negative peer influence from those who were abusing drugs. According to them, this ranked the highest contributing factor to drug and substance abuse. One of the participants commented how he had to remain in school up to 6:30 pm to avoid the company of those who abuse drugs. One of the respondents reported that he had been tempted thrice to abuse the drugs but had managed to say 'no'. In the environment and those surrounding him were abusers and peddlers, but he said that he tried to avoid their company. "I don't accept to go loitering with them. I spend most of the time at home... I have a friend who wanted to recruit me... So I told him, I could not do that." (Respondent 2) The lure into drugs was there. The participants described how it was difficult to avoid the drugs especially during the Covid-19 break when they had to be at home for nine months. One participant vulnerably admitted that at some point he faltered and took spirits due to peer pressure from his childhood friend but he tried to avoid those people who use drugs after that.

The issue of gangs especially in the slums who tried to recruit teenagers came up. The gangs enticed the teenagers with wrong information. For instance, Respondent 5 described a scenario,

I have a talent for drawing. There is a group that promotes young people with talents in art like acting, drawing, singing etc...most of them are drug dealers. Most of them belong to Rastafarianism and they rank people in levels; top 1, 2, and top 3...they can tell you to just take drugs so that you can be energetic to draw. So I try to avoid the temptation though it is very hard.

It was possible for them to help some of their friends who are on drugs. One of them described how he had made effort to help one of his friends to get out of drugs. "I have actually advised him to remain in school after school time because there is nothing he is going to do at home...he is not very stable... I advise him that there is no need for smoking bhang. I tell him the reason why he doesn't do well in exams is because of drugs."
(Respondent 1)

Faith in God

Participants mentioned their commitment to God and how it had helped them to keep off from drugs. This was affirmed through the following response, "I belong to the Orthodox Church...I am a Mass Server in our church, I assist the priest." (Respondent 1). Prayer was also seen as one of the strategies they used to overcome the temptation of drugs, "I avoid it through prayer," said Respondent 5. "I went to God and prayed to help me get out of the temptation. I don't want to be affected" (Respondent 3).

Salvation was seen as one of the ways of helping those teenagers already in drugs. The following comment was made;

Most of them are not born again. I would advise them to come back to Christ. I would try to convince them to stop because drugs are affecting their lives and destroying their lives and their bodies. And their bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit
(Respondent 5).

One of the participants in the focus group affirmed that the school pastoral program helped him; especially when the speakers shared on topics that addressed drugs and their impact. In addition, one of the participants in the focus group mentioned how being brought up in a family that upheld Christian values helped him to avoid drugs and substances.

I have been brought up in church, so I am always on the church side and that is why I cannot engage in such... I have been taught about this issue of drugs even before I came to high school. So I knew what I was likely to encounter, these are some of the things we have been taught in church, so it was not difficult for me not to engage in drugs. (Focus group Respondent 4)

One of the participants from the focus group who acknowledged to have abused drugs in Form 1 and 2 said that God had helped him to stop engaging in drugs and his consistency in the walk of faith had helped him not to go back. The administrator's response was in congruence with the students' responses on the issue of faith. He stated, "The church, the society, the community, and the personal morality must change into the direction which we want, for us to save this generation."

Discussions, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The findings of this study point to the fact that participants' exposure to psycho-social and economic challenges made them vulnerable. Home-based factors were dominant; for instance, losing both parents, negligence by the father and death of one of the parents resulting in being raised by one parent. Environmental factors also made them vulnerable like growing up in the slums where exposure was very high. Despite this, they have managed to overcome. It has been noted that in spite of difficult circumstances some children manage to grow and prosper (Walsh, 2012).

Parental role and parenting style had played a pivotal role in the participants' avoidance of drug and substance abuse. Parents' involvement in counseling their son on the impact of drug abuse on their health and their academics made one of the participants to avoid the drugs. Parental involvement in communicating their expectation and the consequences of not meeting the expectation for their children was effective in keeping them away from the drugs and substances. Their strictness made the participant keep off drugs because they feared the consequences of what would follow if they were discovered. On the issue of peer pressure, they were proactive in avoiding the company of those who would influence them negatively. They took practical steps, like delaying in school to avoid being idle and therefore be tempted to join their peers. Further, the adolescents seemed to place value on self and for that reason they avoided engaging in drugs. Adolescents that are able to maintain an assertive refusal are less susceptible to the negative peer influence.

The participant affiliation to faith was very critical in helping them avoid engaging in drug and substance abuse. Prayer was viewed as most effective in resisting the drugs. Their biblical worldview on salvation that would lead to the transformation of the heart was seen as the remedy of helping those abusing drugs and the perspective of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit was seen as key in avoiding the drugs. The true transformation is the one that comes through salvation. Finally, other close relatives and having bad experiences with drugs made the participants make a decision never to engage in such.

Conclusion

Adolescents in Kabete High School in Kiambu were seen to be vulnerable due to the challenges that they are experiencing. The challenge has been compounded by the nature of the school which is a boarding/day school. This is because the boys who peddle drugs bring them to those in boarding, who in turn hide them in their dormitory. In spite of the risk factors they are exposed to, the participants demonstrated a high level of resilience and great lessons can be learnt from them. Some of the factors that have made them resilient are: avoidance of negative peer influence; their positive self-concept, their faith commitment; the parental influence and other people's bad experiences.

Recommendations

There is a need to empower the teenagers with life skills on knowing self. They need to be helped to answer the question of identity, to build their self-esteem and build assertiveness. They also need to be helped with skills on friendship formation and how to avoid peer pressure. The Christian teachers and chaplains in charge of the Christian program need to be intentional in inviting resourceful people who can address the issue of drugs from a gospel perspective.

Parents need to be empowered on the importance of their involvement in the lives of their adolescents especially during their teen years. They need to be helped to be aware of the authority they have over them. They also need to be empowered to know the need for

communicating their expectations and the consequences that would follow when those expectations have not been met.

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