



## Drug abuse: A Hindrance to Optimal Functioning of the Rural Learner's Cognitive Capabilities

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 10.46303/ressat.2023.25

### Article Info

Received: May 18, 2023

Accepted: August 22, 2023

Published: September 18, 2023

### How to cite

Chidakwa, N., Modise, M. A., & Khanare, F. P. (2023). Drug abuse: A hindrance to optimal functioning of the rural learner's cognitive capabilities. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 8(3), 155-175. <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2023.25>

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### ABSTRACT

The article investigates form four vulnerable learners and their histories of drug misuse in rural schools. The purpose of this study was to conduct a situational analysis to understand the current drug abuse situation in Zimbabwean rural schools and give some recommendations on what needs to be done to lessen its effects. The study's mode of investigation was qualitative. As a means of gathering data, focus group discussions were used. The participatory research design employed by the study unearthed evidence that indicates that drug abuse has an adverse effect on a learner's cognitive optimal functioning both in the community and school contexts. The study's findings point to the necessity of teaching parents how to prioritise their responsibilities and liberate them from the mental poverty they currently experience, which is a societal construct that keeps them from finishing their work with their learners. The study further found out that the absence of guidance and counselling exposes learners to more drug abuse cases and culture, thus having a two-pronged impact on the optimal functioning of rural learners. The study makes some recommendations for how the school and the community should work together and coordinate their efforts to manage the experiences of vulnerable students to achieve cognitive optimal functioning for rural learners in Zimbabwe.

### KEYWORDS

Cognitive capabilities; drug abuse; quality education; rural learner; optimal functioning.

## INTRODUCTION

To support students who are heavily exposed to diverse and harsh situations, such as the community, excellent education is a process that draws resources and support from a variety of systems (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). In Zimbabwe, government intervention is often used as a platform to help rural learners achieve their educational goals up to the tertiary level. Many rural learners struggle to get access to quality education, given the relationship between rurality and quality education success in relation to socio-economic backgrounds. Vulnerable learners engaging in drug and substance abuse in rural communities have low chances of attaining quality education due to the different circumstances they face. According to Gunda and Mbwirire (2020) and Jakaza and Nyoni (2018), rural learners engaging in drug and substance abuse face problematic or complex situations that psychologically, socially, culturally, and emotionally prevent them from attaining quality education. For the most part, these students exhibit problematic situations in life, including (i) affective (depression, hopelessness, worry, shame, frustration, enmity, and loneliness); (ii) cognitive (low feelings of worth, self-reproach, powerlessness, and feelings of unreality); (iii) behavioural (agitation, tiredness, and societal withdrawal); and (iv) emotional (moody behaviour, aggression, and signs of frustration) (Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2021; Mukwenha et al., 2022; Murewanhema et al., 2022; Pillay, 2018; ZIMVAC, 2019). Such complex situations usually expose rural learners to more challenging situations like early marriages, drug and substance abuse, and all forms of abuse, thus creating a vicious cycle of problems. Even though not much attention has been paid to what informs rural learners engaging in drug and substance abuse to behaviourally, emotionally, and cognitively engage in resilient practises that make them think of achieving quality education, instead, a large portion of the research and studies focus on the elements related to supporting orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC) or learners, the learner with a disability, and the poor learners in the education system, forgetting the vulnerable learners who are engaging in drug and substance abuse (Berejena & Lombard, 2020; McGee & Lin, 2017; Theron & Van Rensburg, 2018). This study redresses the historic inattentiveness that enables vulnerable rural learners to engage in substance and drug abuse activities that make them fail to achieve quality education. Such redress is overdue. Given the lack of literature to promote quality education among vulnerable rural learners engaging in drug and substance abuse, there is a need to prioritise them coupled with an advanced understanding of their experiences. Collaborative strategies that empower and promote quality education in them despite their background will go a long way toward achieving a brighter future. Even though most rural areas lack the human capital to solve the problems that arise from their location and socioeconomic conditions, they nonetheless confront many hurdles. The use of the critical consciousness theory helps the affected learner reflect and strive for change.

To provide these vulnerable rural learners who abuse drugs and alcohol with a decent education, the study calls for the integration of collective approaches that promote positive skill development. Literature has shown that collective approaches work well in different situations

and yield positive results (Kabugi, 2019; Maraire & Chethiyar, 2020; Mtemeri & Nhamo, 2019). Proposing collective approaches enables participants to engage in meaningful activities, experience control and autonomy, and feel connected to their community, thus contributing to the development of quality education and resilience. The two topics—vulnerable rural experiences and the impact of drug and alcohol misuse on a learner's best functioning—are combined in this study. As a result, the two are seen as mutually exclusive conceptions. To advance education for all, it is necessary for all rural community stakeholders to collaborate. As a result, the goal of this study was to conduct a situational analysis to comprehend the existing drug usage scenario in Zimbabwean rural schools and to make recommendations for how to decrease its consequences. The study aimed to answer the following research question:

*What causes drug abuse and how does it hinder the optimal cognitive functioning of Zimbabwean rural learners?*

### **Vulnerable Learners and Drug Abuse in Rural School Communities**

The prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse among vulnerable learners in rural areas is significant, and they are exposed to a variety of risk factors. (Ayodele et al., 2018; Okafor, 2019). The first step towards helping such learners who struggle with substance use is to understand how drug abuse optimally affects the learner. While rural communities may have greater resources than urban and suburban regions, it is crucial to identify the issues that prevent Zimbabwean rural learners from achieving their full cognitive potential (Chidakwa, 2020; Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2021). The prevalence of drug and substance abuse among Zimbabwe's student population is especially worrying. It has been established that the practise is harmful and a big issue in many countries. The use and misuse of drugs hurt people's lives, households, and societies. These effects accumulate over time and can cause problems with people's mental, physical, and social well-being (Gwarisa, 2022; Murewanhema et al., 2022). For these and other problems, Mukwenha et al. (2022) state that the whole spectrum of care, from substance and drug misuse treatment to supportive wrap-around services, is not available to rural learners. According to a study conducted by Nwagu et al. (2020) in Nigeria, drug use prevention should begin at home and spread to the community. Involving communities in drug misuse prevention can help reduce the rate of drug and substance abuse by using a more learner-friendly as well as culturally acceptable approach.

Currently in Zimbabwe, drugs ranging from alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine, commonly referred to as crystal methamphetamine as "*mutoriro*," "*dombo*," or "*guka*," and many others have reached alarming levels as they are being taken by vulnerable rural learners, thus making them culprits of social immoralities in the society (Mangeli et al., 2017). According to Gwarisa (2022), the problem of alcohol and drug misuse among school-aged youths is recognised globally as one of the greatest challenges of our day. As stated by Mukwenha et al. (2022), the use of illicit substances has spread at an unprecedented rate over the previous decades, reaching every area of the world. The report by Zvira (2016) in Zimbabwe shows that the flooding of cases pertaining to dealing or possession closely reflects the flooding of drug-

induced mental illness, which is threatening the country. A considerable number of studies show that most of those developing mental illness from drug and substance abuse are not in hospitals or being treated as outpatients. The majority of them can be seen wandering in rural communities, with others behaving abnormally at shopping centres (Chen, 2018; Gwarisa, 2022; Murewanhema et al., 2022). The prevalence of these dangerous substances, according to Dlamini and Makondo (2017), is becoming an increasing physical and social problem among vulnerable rural learners. As a result, the extent to which substance and drug addiction is increasing among rural learners appears to be harmful to Zimbabwe's culture, society, and moral beliefs, necessitating an informed response.

In addition, in most rural communities, the vulnerable rural learners who abuse dangerous drugs and substances have changed their behaviour, although they remain a part of the school community. According to Gunda and Mbwirire (2020) and Nhapi (2019), the current upsurge in substance and drug addiction among rural students has a negative impact on learners that might include physical, psychological, and social problems as well as mortality. Numerous studies conducted nowadays show that there is a high society plagued by drug and substance addiction (Chidarikire et al., 2019; Dlamini & Makondo, 2017; Mukwenha et al., 2022). Studies have shown that vulnerable rural learners who misuse drugs do not receive a quality education. Despite the fact that most rural communities appear to have a code of conduct, these research studies show that rural learners with behavioural issues related to drug use are more common (Alexander, 2016). As a result, vulnerable rural learners' problematic usage of harmful medicines and substances has significantly hampered their ability to learn effectively (Gunda & Mbwirire, 2020; Jakaza & Nyoni, 2018). It is in this context that the study looks at the effects of drug abuse on the optimum functioning of the vulnerable rural learner by engaging participants in meaningful activities that connect their communities, thus contributing to the development of quality education for themselves.

### **Marginality of Rural Communities and Experiences of Drug Abuse**

Marginality draws attention to how geographically remote the community is. It is described in terms of the degree to which the neighbourhood is in need on a social, cultural, economic, and political level (Clarry et al., 2020; Lenardson et al., 2020; Motsa & Morojele, 2019). Rural communities may have resources that can provide some advantages, but they still require concentrated support to be able to maximise what they have and get what they want. Their marginalisation has an impact on the kind of human resources they have access to or can use for support (Moody et al., 2017). For them to solve problems that concern them, expert knowledge is also essential for networking or organisational purposes (Ayodele et al., 2019; Dibia et al., 2020). Studies by Ehlers et al. (2020), Eze et al. (2017), Nwagu (2017), and Okafor (2019) demonstrate that when people living in rural areas are ignored, they are less likely to have access to basic amenities in important capital. Furthermore, as aforementioned, impoverished and marginalised groups are characterised by high-risk factors that may lead to drug and substance misuse due to a lack of parental supervision, early initiation of substance

use, and easy availability of drugs or alcohol (Olawole-Isaac et al., 2018). According to Nwagu et al. (2020), rural areas frequently experience poverty, economic failure, low levels of informal learning, and low levels of learner success. The research by Carroll et al. (2020) also revealed that most rural communities are either cut off from or hesitant to participate in wellness debates. Rural communities typically lack access to high-ranking officials at all governmental levels and even the capacity to take part in community-based initiatives (Gunda & Mbwirire, 2020; Jakaza & Nyoni, 2018). In addition, their attitude is "socially constructed" in that they respond to events as they happen by acting, thinking, and behaving like "laypersons." For them, "rurality" is a perpetual state that prevents them from ever achieving anything (Dibia et al., 2020). It is necessary to do a study on the consequences of drug and substance misuse by vulnerable rural learners since studies have shown that altering this attitude and perception involves programming skills and talents (Nwagu et al., 2020; Olawole-Isaac et al., 2018). The study contends that with such a dogmatic mindset and perception, this method may help reduce barriers cooperatively. Naturally, the approach's effectiveness depends on how willing the available members are. When a location is marginal, professionals are frequently unable to help the locals with their issues.

In addition, although not invariably, the homes of the less fortunate are situated in risky areas. The lack of resources typically has an impact on schools in vulnerable communities and places of extreme poverty (Nwagu, 2017). Furthermore, numerous illegal behaviours frequently occur in these schools as a result of the geographic location of rural learning environments. Long-distance travel deters service providers from frequently visiting the schools if there are difficulties to be addressed (Okafor, 2019), which has an impact on how issues are resolved (Lenardson et al., 2020). As a result, there are several obstacles that may restrict or prevent people in rural regions from seeking out counselling or therapy, but many of these may be addressed. Transportation issues, a lack of treatment facilities, and treatment costs have all been identified as barriers (Ehlers et al., 2020; Eze et al., 2017; Lenardson et al., 2020; Nwagu, 2017). The majority of the schools in the Chiredzi South District, Zimbabwe, are like this. The researchers were prompted to conduct the study as a result of the rise in drug and substance addiction among this vulnerable learner population. The geographical location of the community under study has a significant impact on how members abuse drugs and other substances, the researchers found. However, one should be aware that assistance is available regardless of where they reside. Addiction can be overcome, and one's control over their life can be reclaimed with the right care.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

Critical consciousness (CC) promotes social equality by drawing on Hegelian dialectics, Marxist theory, and the works of Nietzsche, Freud, and Max Weber. According to Myende (2017) and Cohen et al. (2018), it investigates the extent to which social and other systems support equality and democracy. The CC is based on essential ideas of student engagement and development,

with an emphasis on promoting protective variables that increase learner capacity and resilience (Jemal, 2017; Seider & Graves, 2020). Critical reflection, efficacy, and action are the three major components of CC, according to Pillen et al. (2020). Learners might feel comfortable rewriting their frames of reference or experiences through introspection and self-examination, which is also known as being "open-minded." Learners may realise that their ideas are not unalterable realities when they critically reflect on experiences that contradict their presumptions. They may then make an effort to comprehend how these ideas were created and who benefited from them. According to Shuster and Giesemann (2021), a learner gains a nuanced perspective of self and the universe that explains how and why transformation is possible as they get a deeper grasp of the surroundings and problems around them. As a result, the possibility that identities and fundamental beliefs can be altered is made possible by the explanation that personalities are not fixed but rather formed in context. The learner may subsequently change as a result of introspection, and they may also realise that they have the power to effect change in their community. This is what Jamal refers to as "critical agency," as it entails both a rise in self-efficacy perceptions and a dedication to change. As a result, the learner may demonstrate critical consciousness by acting against their negative behaviour. According to Delia and Krasny (2018) and Seider and Graves (2020), these acts may take place as a result of learner participation in classroom discussions or as a result of learner involvement in advocacy within and outside of the classroom. In light of this, CC is a useful conceptual tool in this study to address the problem of the vulnerable learner who is dealing with drug usage in rural school settings. Learners can later intrude on social structures through the CC lens to transform them, increasing a sense of control, purpose, and change (El-Amin et al., 2017; Freire, 2005). In general, CC has been demonstrated to support learners of all ages' good mental wellness and social-emotional well-being. A strong sense of self, fortitude, leadership abilities, and effective learner development are specifically linked to CC development. As well as aiding developmental processes including identity construction, cultivating social skills, and learning emotion management, this helps learners acquire resilience and competence. Therefore, community members ought to take part in developing solutions to problems that impact them. It is suited for this study since it fosters interaction between the researchers, those being researched, and other interested parties to identify answers to the current issue.

In addition, CC offers enormous promise for enhancing learners' critical consciousness and related abilities through participatory action research (PAR). In reality, according to Delia and Krasny (2018), CC teaches self-reflection since it is a talent to engage in meaningful self-reflection. Analytical self-analysis, evolving knowledge, and ongoing changes in beliefs and aptitudes are all necessary for effective self-reflection. To develop the talent over time, self-reflection opportunities must be provided regularly and with structure. Reflective dialogue and inquiry in focus group discussions (FGD) were used to accomplish these and increase one's capacity to take decisive action. People are more driven to take action to change their communities as they become more aware of drug usage. Learners were therefore encouraged

to generate a list of ideas and consider the advantages and disadvantages of each through activities like providing solutions. These learning exercises showed coping mechanisms in participants, supporting the bright side of the resilience paradigm (Delia & Krasny, 2018; Shuster & Gieseemann, 2021). All learners develop fresh perspectives on the world as they reflect critically on their potential and agency. These led to increased self-efficacy and motivated students to take action. As a result, all study participants were urged to share their thoughts on the subject at hand.

### **METHODOLOGY**

To conduct this study, a qualitative method of inquiry was employed. With the use of this approach, researchers can provide community-based solutions for lowering substance and drug abuse by gaining a deeper understanding of the recent and past experiences of learners in rural secondary schools. Based on the research paradigm of critical emancipatory research (CER), we proposed reducing substance and drug abuse. Crossman (2017), Chidakwa (2020), and Lunga et al. (2021) state that CER researchers are aware that participatory data-gathering techniques foster the dialectical and consensual development of knowledge. As a result, CER promotes transparency, participation, accountability, autonomy, and equality. We do not dispute that, as a result, learners will go through social, physiological, and psychological changes as well as pick up survival skills, form social relationships, and enhance critical thinking.

We used participatory action research (PAR) as our research design to ensure that every participant could participate fully and freely in the study. Lunga et al. (2021) emphasise that action research should be participatory and transformational to include citizens in the process of knowledge creation. As a result, the goal of this study was to engage participants throughout every step of the research process to identify issues that vulnerable learners experience and come up with solutions (Lunga & Chidakwa, 2023; Lunga et al., 2021). Because PAR is participatory, emancipatory, transformative, adaptable, and iterative, as well as being defined by the need for action, its application in this study was pertinent. Since it was simple to establish trusting relationships with the participants using PAR and CER, we appreciated their opinions throughout the entire research process. FGD was used in the study to collect data from sixteen participants who were specifically chosen based on their knowledge, relationships, and experiences about the study's goal. Eight drug-abusing learners, four parents, and four teachers from a secondary school in Masvingo Province made up the group of participants. To provide flexibility and freedom during talks and due to the diversity of the participants, they were divided into three groups (Cohen et al., 2018).

To ascertain the effects of substance and drug usage, we examined complex information that had been gathered to be more understandable using Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis (CDA). A realistic assessment and a speculative investigation were conducted after the information was cooperatively divided into two steps. This kind of research is consistent with that of Lunga et al. (2021) that in real research, all participants should participate in jointly

disassembling information before an academic scientist examines it by hypothetical standards in anticipation of dissemination. Participants and the researchers discussed the research's findings while analysing them on three different levels, including textual analysis, discursive practise, and social practise (Fairclough, 2012).

We took into account a variety of textual analysis techniques while analysing actual spoken and written texts, such as syntactical evaluation, the use of metaphor, and rhetorical devices (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Textual analysis was used in this work to examine the FGD recordings. To analyse texts from FGD recordings, we used discursive practise. The researchers looked at the broad sociological currents within the particular setting of this study and were concerned with intertextual and inter-discursive components at the social-context level. The factors of harmful conduct that individuals said were defined and explained throughout this stage, along with social issues (such as gender, power, and culture).

**Table 1.**

*Demographic data of the participants*

<b>Designation</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Level of education</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>
Learner	Male	O' level	16	LP1
Learner	Female	O' level	15	LP2
Learner	Female	O' level	17	LP3
Learner	Male	O' level	18	LP4
Learner	Male	O' level	16	LP5
Learner	Female	O' level	15	LP6
Learner	Female	O' level	17	LP7
Learner	Male	O' level	18	LP8
Parent	Female	O' level	39	AP1
Parent	Male	O' level	38	AP1
Parent	Male	Primary level	44	AP2
Parent	Female	Junior level	45	AP3
Teacher	Female	Degree	43	TP1
Teacher	Male	Masters	34	TP2
Teacher	Female	Degree	29	TP3
Teacher	Male	Diploma	54	TP4

A remote secondary school in the Zimbabwean Chiredzi South District, Masvingo Province, was the site of the review. Given the poor social organisation, lack of experienced teachers, and shoddy educational and learning foundations, it is clear that the school feels disregarded and underdeveloped. Over the five years prior to 2018, the school's rate of completion has consistently been quite low. These facts helped us choose a school to address the learning gaps by determining the causes of drug misuse and how they interfere with Zimbabwean rural learners' ability to think clearly. Their demographic data is included in Table



1 above. They were specifically chosen based on their familiarity with, connections to, and level of expertise with the study's goals.

### **Ethical Clearance**

The study was authorised by the Central University of Technology's Ethics Committee. All participants provided written agreements that led to permission being granted for ethical clearance. Participants were guaranteed secrecy, anonymity, and respect for non-maleficence norms, and participation was completely voluntary (Lunga et al., 2021). There was also a discussion of dependability, confirmability, and transferability issues. As researchers, we were conscious of the possibility of bias on our part, which might have had an impact on the study's conclusion. By doing this, we made sure that we were unbiased, open-minded, and attentive to any challenges we could face while conducting the study (Fairclough, 2012).

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The study covered the subjects of drug abuse's causes and effects on rural learners in the focus group discussion. Availability and accessibility to drugs and substances have effects on rural learners; poverty exposes rural learners to more vulnerability; low socio-economic situations have effects on rural learners; death, separation, or divorces of parents have effects on rural learners; and cultural beliefs have effects on rural learners.

### **Theme 1: Accessibility to Drugs Substances Affect Learner's Cognitive Optimal Functioning**

The responses from the participants indicate that drug abuse creates social inequities and inequalities among troubled learners. Social inequity causes rural learners to have stress and anxiety, which damages their health. Participants argued that in rural communities, those who face drug abuse live unhealthy and short lives. Due to drug and substance abuse, LP9 indicated that *"one becomes a social misfit due to drug abuse."* In addition, their level of happiness is low, making them less likely to engage in social activities. LP3 voiced that *"girls who engage in promiscuous behaviour eventually quit school and get into early marriages and pregnancies, have STDs, get sick and die, or both."* They indicated that inequities and inequalities have adverse effects on a learner's cognitive functioning. This resulted in feelings of marginalisation among learners facing drug abuse within the society they live in.

*...one problem leads to another problem resulting in multiple and complex problems, that is drug abuse. Low self-esteem, self-reproach, helplessness, hopelessness, social withdrawal, moody behaviour, bullying and frustrations are examples of other forms of behaviour that may lead to other behavioural problems affecting the learner's cognitive capabilities. [AP4]*

*...causes psychological distress, premarital sex, sexual abuse and early marriages, attaining low levels of education, low learner achievement by learner him/herself, results in poor health care and growth, low self-esteem by learner, results in lack of learning resources by the learner, ... school location (rurality of the school) results in marginalisation and stereotyping. [AP1]*

Participants alluded to how drug abuse has an adverse effect on a learner's cognitive functioning. The study concluded that drug abuse has an adverse effect on a learner's cognitive functioning. It is critical to remember that these effects might change depending on the substance consumed, the dosage, the frequency of usage, and individual variances. Promoting a drug-free, encouraging atmosphere for learners is essential, as is offering the right instruction and interventions to deal with substance addiction concerns when they manifest themselves.

## **Theme 2: The Public Need to Be Assisted and Decolonised from Their Self-Constructed Poverty Mentality**

According to the study, drug usage is primarily caused by poverty, which has a negative impact on rural learners' ability to learn effectively. Therefore, it is important to help parents prioritise their tasks and free them from socially imposed mental poverty.

*...if they are poor, we are also poor... we end up in promiscuous behaviour as a way to get what they cannot provide. [LP5]*

*...poverty causes one to become mentally unstable. [LP4]*

*...poverty we are facing is causing learner drug abuse... [LP3]*

*...but I am surprised why these parents are saying they are poor yet they have a lot of cattle, why can't they use them? I just feel poverty is being personalised here! [AP7]*

*...some parents are still too young to work for their families, but they want their learners to be paid by BEAM and CAMFED. It surprises me as the headmaster of this school. More so, they have a lot of cattle but they do not want to use them to pay for their learners. Every Thursday (At the marketplace where goods are sold at low prices) you find those same parents drunk. Where do they get the money if they are poor? [AP8]*

*...I think there is a need to understand this community and educate them on how to utilise the resources and power they have. [AP6]*

*...parents that they are poor but they are not poor. They are in mind not in possessions. This community is very rich, with one person owning about 30 cattle. They need help on how to utilise these resources they have. They have personalised this poverty) [AP2]*

Participants' reactions indicated that poverty is the *root cause* of being *vulnerable*, resulting in them facing *more vulnerability*. The effects of poverty identified by participants were *low learner development*, *poor academic performance*, and *poor decision-making by learners*. These affect the mind to the point that an individual cannot function well socially and beyond. This also has a negative impact on learners' educational attainment, as they are frequently forced to make high-risk decisions in order to survive, resulting in high rates of dropping out and early marriage. Learner participants also noted that they have inherited the effects of poverty from their parents. Parents themselves blamed the *economic situation*; however, other parents admitted that they *neglect their learners (the statement implies that parents and learners are a pair instead of teacher and learner)* even if they have the resources, as they believe there is a donor or government to assist them. Parents also indicated that they need tutoring on how to use the resources they have. It was also clear that parents prioritised useless things (drinking

beer) at the expense of their lives. It was clear that rural people have a self-constructed poverty mentality and donor syndrome. The idea of decolonisation is frequently linked to correcting past and present systemic injustices and power disparities brought on by colonisation. While it is critical to acknowledge how colonialism has affected cultures, particularly its influence on socioeconomic disparities and mentalities, it is equally necessary to approach the problem of poverty mentality with sensitivity and context.

### **Theme 3: The Absence of Guidance and Counselling Exposes Learners to Vulnerabilities**

According to the participants, the socioeconomic situation in Zimbabwe has led to many parents moving to South Africa and Mozambique in search of better living conditions, leaving their learners unprotected. They abandon learners and expose them to all types of maltreatment, leaving learners feeling doubtful, uncertain, worried, and confused. The empirical findings supported the theory that, because of their low socioeconomic status, learners are more vulnerable when a caregiver is not present since they are left alone and unsupervised. These were the participants' comments:

*...due to our economic status, our parents migrate to South Africa/Mozambique and usually leave us with no caretakers [LP4]*

*...if they don't send money/food, we usually end up engaging in promiscuous behaviour. [LP2]*

*...the end result is promiscuous behaviour, early pregnancy, early marriages, getting STIs and drug abuse due to lack of guidance and counselling [AP6]*

*Their behaviour is mischievous indeed. As an elder, you cannot counsel them because they hear their parent's voice only. Due to migration, the abandoned siblings do as they wish because there is no guidance leaving them vulnerable. Secondly, learners themselves do not care about education, do not pay attention at school, and all they think of is going to South Africa. What they know and want is smoking dagga, the government should look into it. [AP7]*

*...siblings do as they wish because there is no guidance leaving them vulnerable [AP10]*

*...as an elder, you cannot counsel them because they hear their parent's voice only [AP8]*

According to researchers, learners who lack the wisdom of elders may make bad decisions that cause them pain. In addition, it was discovered that certain learners tend to develop unfavourable attitudes toward advice and counselling from any adult if their parents are not present. This implies that the students have the propensity to act inappropriately and frequently engage in promiscuous behaviour. As a result, learners are vulnerable when guidance and counselling are lacking. Participants asserted that if learners received appropriate life guidance and counselling, this might be avoided. It is true that learners may be exposed to a number of risks in the absence of guidance and counselling services. The entire growth and well-being of learners are greatly supported by guidance and counselling.

### **Theme 4: Rural Learners Can Actively Construct Their Sense of Significance in Complex Circumstances**

According to empirical evidence, learners lose hope when their parents or guardians pass away or separate from them. It psychologically and emotionally affects the optimal functioning of the

rural learners' cognitive capabilities. This resulted in social and behavioural problems, which affected their access to quality education. Participants reiterated the following:

*... the death of a parent/guardian pains us a lot and kills hope in us, it's so painful to be in that situation). [LP1]*

*...it's the same economic situation and death of a parent because you suffer the same consequences due to separation). [LP5]*

*...due to death, for example, orphans at school show low self-esteem, self-reproach, helplessness, hopelessness, social withdrawal, moody behaviour, bullying, and frustrations.... [AP4]*

It was also evident that low intellectual development due to social and behavioural problems deprives learners of positive opportunities and time to grow and develop successfully. Learner participants acknowledged that social behavioural difficulties influence their way of thinking and behaving, which leads to social behavioural problems within the society within which they live, harming their academic achievement. In addition, learners felt that they needed to be actively included in exploring and constructing ways to deal with drug abuse, as it affects them too. One can become a social misfit if he or she experiences social behavioural problems. Even in challenging situations, rural learners may actively create their sense of meaning. Rural areas frequently present particular difficulties, such as scarce resources, isolation from other areas, and social differences. Rural learners do, however, have advantages and characteristics that might enhance their sense of accomplishment.

### **Theme 5: Cultural Practises Have a Two-Pronged Contribution to Optimal Functioning of Rural Learners**

An empirical study demonstrates how cultural values or customs have affected the lives of rural learners in Xangani (Tsonga in South Africa) communities. Most participants said that cultural attitudes or Practises have influenced learners' lives in a variety of capacities. They argued that the behaviour learners exhibit following initiation rituals may lead to learners becoming more vulnerable. This depends on the individual's choice to interpret their thoughts or habits as either good or bad. Thus, findings revealed that cultural Practises have a two-pronged contribution to the optimal functioning of rural learners. In their arguments, the participants had this to say:

*"In my view, cultural initiations are not bad but it needs to be done by the grown-ups. [AP9]*

*...most girls almost 90% get married soon after initiated. Maybe it's because of peer pressure I think mainly from the boys. [LP3]*

*...in my view, cultural initiations are not bad but they need to be done by grown-ups [AP7]*

*"...through the culture, they are taught how to manage life problems in a meaningful way, that's what exactly they are taught" [AP10]*

The parents of the participants mostly indicated that while they had no issue with the cultural customs of the Xangani community, they were concerned about the age at which the students attended the initiation rites. They believed that young boys and girls, after going through initiation processes, were unable to make decisions on their own and, if they did, those

decisions were immature. Participants agreed that Xangani rural learners' behaviour is threatened by cultural beliefs, but they also claimed that cultural beliefs or Practises teach rural learners how to effectively manage their current and future life difficulties. The parents of the participants mostly indicated that, while they had no issue with the cultural customs of the Xangani community, they were concerned about the age at which the learners attended the initiation rites. They believed that young boys and girls, after going through initiation processes, were unable to make decisions on their own and, if they did, those decisions were immature. Participants agreed that Xangani rural learners' behaviour is threatened by cultural beliefs, but they also claimed that cultural customs or values teach rural learners how to effectively manage their current and future life difficulties.

In fact, cultural traditions can help rural learners function at their best in two different ways. The traditions, values, beliefs, and customs of a community are all included in its cultural Practises. While cultural customs can be advantageous, it is vital to keep in mind that they may also offer issues or restrictions that need to be resolved. Some Practises could be out-of-date or support unfavourable prejudices and ideas. It is crucial to engage in critical thinking and make sure that cultural customs uphold human rights principles and encourage inclusivity and equality.

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The availability of drugs and other substances can, in fact, significantly affect a learner's capacity for optimal cognitive functioning, as highlighted in theme 1. Abuse of drugs or alcohol can damage cognitive functions, obstruct learning, and lower academic achievement. According to the research, drug usage leads to socioeconomic inequities that make powerless rural learners more vulnerable (Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2021). This argument is supported by the submission. This is further corroborated by research from UNESCO (2018) and ZIMVAC (2019), which found that certain learners, aged 13 to 17, dropped out of school for a variety of reasons, including lack of funding (63%), illness (2%), handicap (2%), pregnancy (8%), or marriage (8%). In complicated rural learning environments, where life is prevalent, things frequently do not go as planned. The findings of a study by Mangeli et al. (2017) support the aforementioned arguments that the human condition is greatly impacted by vulnerability, leading to numerous accounts of vulnerability. In this instance, the evidence was sufficient to show that students were more exposed to and impacted by drug addiction and were more willing to take action to free themselves from such trying circumstances.

To combat the poverty mentality under Theme 2, it is crucial to address the underlying socioeconomic problems and advance inclusive, equitable, and empowering environments rather than merely concentrating on decolonisation. The study found that helping parents prioritise their children first and liberating them from the "mental poverty" they are in, which is a social construct, is necessary. UNESCO (2018) and ZIMVAC (2019) surveys reveal that poverty has a real impact on rural residents, making them more vulnerable. The studies showed a strong

link between poverty and poor cognitive and academic preparation in rural schools. The research also showed that learning impairments and low growth were more likely to be recognised in disadvantaged learners. However, according to this study, the community's poverty was an issue that it created on its own. This idea was supported by the literature because the community possessed resources (cattle, goats, and pigs) that they could have used but didn't want to or didn't know how to use (Myende, 2017). According to Motsa and Morojele (2019), self-constructed poverty is a direct outcome of poor resource management and a complete failure to make use of the wealth that people possess. Self-constructed poverty is based on the social constructivist theory that truth is rooted in cultures, ideas, and societal interactions that are surrounded by cultural traditions rather than solely being a result of natural creation. This assisted in giving analytical insights to comprehend the intricate processes the social environment can impose on society to lead people to believe they are poor while having a variety of resources. According to Chidakwa (2020) and Motsa and Morojele (2019), these resources come in the form of a variety of capital, including social, political, natural, financial, cultural, built, and human capital. Through the use of existing resources, the PAR and CER philosophy seeks to rid the community of this socially created attitude. This study showed that rural communities could deal with their issues if they were aware of the resources they had available. The study concludes that mental proficiency in the rural context is severely hampered by self-constructed poverty. By educating them about their resources, parents can help them prioritise decolonising their mental poverty and ensuring that they are self-personalised.

In the absence of guidance and counselling services, learners felt exposed to a variety of vulnerabilities under Theme 3. Guidance and counselling play a significant role in supporting learners' overall growth and well-being. Participants argued that this could be prevented if learners received appropriate life guidance and counselling. Findings supporting the Swaziland study by Motsa and Morojele (2019) show that lacking parental direction frequently leaves students feeling helpless and insecure, as well as facing additional social life issues. The majority of rural Zimbabweans have relocated to Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa, and Zambia in search of better pastures, according to a ZIMVAC poll conducted in 2019. According to studies by Mukwenha et al. (2022) and Zvira (2016) in Zimbabwe, these learners engage in high-risk behaviours that can lead to pregnancy, STD infection, and increased social vulnerability if they are left alone and unsupervised. In addition, these learners perform poorly academically and are more likely to leave school, according to Pillay (2018). The researchers contend that placing separated and alone learners in households with children increases their susceptibility by increasing their risk of exploitation and behavioural problems. Finding strategies for guiding and advising learners so they can survive in challenging circumstances is necessary if one is not encouraged to make the best choice. Therefore, counselling and guidance are important for learners' future success. The study acknowledges that counselling is a transforming process that aids individuals in learning everything that is intended to be learned both inside and outside of

the community; as a result, it should be specifically targeted toward aiding students in realising their full potential as they prepare for adulthood.

In addition, the conclusions are supported by pertinent evidence under theme 4 made by Chidakwa and Hlalele (2021), Gunda and Mbwirire (2020), and Jakaza and Nyoni (2018) that learners feel stigmatized, mistreated, bullied, anxious, depressed, and stressed as a result of their parents' passing, separation, or divorce. However, through this complex situation, learner participants revealed that they were prepared to actively find a solution to their problem if guided to do so. This supports the argument made in the literature that people interpret things differently depending on their prior knowledge, current Practises, and other information that is readily available to them in their surroundings (Pillay, 2018). This results in long-term projects that empower communities and give learners sustainable livelihoods (Myende, 2017). According to Seider and Graves (2020), citizens can be empowered to solve their problems and lead sustainable lives through active involvement. Thus, according to Myende's (2017) hypothesis, every community has resources that may be actively used to address any vulnerabilities that might exist. To accept the use of community resources, people must actively participate in the process. Thus, it is proposed that to manage abuse, educators and members of the community collaborate. The distinctive skills and goals of rural learners must be acknowledged and supported by educational institutions, politicians, and communities. We can enable rural learners to actively construct their sense of significance and thrive in challenging circumstances by offering pertinent educational materials, mentorship programs, and chances for community engagement.

Based on the justification for Theme 5, it can be concluded that cultural ideas have an equal impact on learners' behaviour, both positively and negatively. The positive side was consistent with research showing that children raised in homes where their parents teach them about their cultural views are more likely to comply with their parents' wishes, even when they don't want to (Chen, 2018). This confirms the encouraging discovery that parents from different cultures have an impact on the behavioural and intellectual patterns of their learners. Girls in the Xangani culture undergo a month of severe segregation from their regular lives with trainers to teach them social norms. According to the study's findings, students who understand cultural ideas are more likely to adhere to positive behaviours. Culture has a close relationship with good structural influence, but it also has a relationship with social inequality (Chidarikire et al., 2019). Literature suggests that culture may be used to establish and reproduce power relationships (Motsa & Morojele, 2019), potentially leading to social inequities through exclusion and discrimination. This is supported by Alexander (2016), who claims that certain African students have experienced injustice, marginalisation, and helplessness and have gotten enmeshed in the dispossessed culture of silence. Power issues, as well as any resulting inequality, inequity, and social injustice, should be at the centre of any understanding of culture in education. In addition, damaging cultural Practises like child labour and child marriage are carried out so frequently over a long period that Xangani societies start to tolerate them. To achieve this goal and support

the beneficial community-level transformation of social norms and behaviours, the study advises that information should be increased and attitudes should be changed. The report also makes policy recommendations that will enable women and girls to speak up, exercise their rights, and guarantee that their voices are heard during significant decision-making processes. The study concludes that rural learners can build a strong sense of identity, gain useful skills, and succeed academically and personally by using the positive aspects of cultural practises and fostering an inclusive educational environment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Results cannot be extrapolated to a larger population because this was a qualitative study with a small sample size. We acknowledge that the developed tactics need to be reviewed by a larger and possibly more varied population, even if the data were gathered from a community where participants were actively participating. Although the study's conclusions may appear to be highly helpful in controlling substance and drug abuse, it is necessary to use the tactics to evaluate their efficacy.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The results of this study made it abundantly evident that drug misuse and rurality have a significant impact on the cognitively optimal functioning of rural learners. However, the research shows that rural people have donation syndrome and a self-created poverty mentality, which therefore interferes with their learners' ability to learn. The study makes the case for helping the parents choose priorities and free themselves from the mental slavery they have been socially colonised into. According to the study, students who lack the wisdom of more experienced people tend to make poor decisions and suffer as a result. Participants proposed that this might be avoided if learners received appropriate assistance and counselling in life from individuals within their local community. It was also clear that if they don't receive guidance and counselling, their intellectual development suffers because their social and behavioural issues prevent them from having the pleasant experiences and time they need to mature and develop successfully. The study concludes that learners need to actively participate in investigating and developing solutions to the drug misuse problem that is pervasive in the society they live in.

The study's findings suggest that helping parents prioritise their children's needs first will help them escape the mental poverty they have socially constructed through community involvement. In addition, by actively involving the numerous vulnerable rural students in the exploration and development of drug misuse prevention strategies, schools and communities can build relationships with them. More so, cooperative working partnerships between schools and rural communities are important for ensuring that students receive the right advice and counselling from specified individuals or groups. The study's findings suggest that helping parents prioritise their children's needs first will help them escape the mental poverty they have socially constructed through community involvement. In addition, by proactively engaging the numerous vulnerable rural students in the exploration and development of drug misuse



prevention strategies, schools and communities can build relationships with them. More so, cooperative working partnerships between schools and rural communities are important for ensuring that students receive the right advice and counselling from specified individuals or groups.

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