

0290

Illicit drug use by secondary school learners: reclaiming a life

Gwarega Chibaya^{1,2}, Jeanette Maritz^{1,3}

¹*University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa*, ²*University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe*, ³*University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa*

Background: The use of illicit drugs among secondary school learners is increasing and, therefore, poses a grave threat to public and social health.

Aim: The aim of the study was to explore and describe the experiences of secondary school learners using illicit drugs.

Methods: A qualitative approach was used to explore and describe the experiences of secondary school learners regarding the use of illicit drugs. Data were collected through in-depth individual face-to-face interviews and field notes. Data were analysed using Tesch's method.

Results: Illicit drugs had an influence on both the internal and external environment of the secondary school learner. The initial enjoyment of drug use led to addiction and directed a downward spiral causing behavioural problems, emotional distress, physical and social challenges, and often resulted in conflict with the law. School grades dropped or learners failed grades. Participants wanted to recapture their lives, they needed support from parents, teachers and professionals as well as the internal and external resources to do so.

Conclusion: Secondary school learners are under enormous pressure to cope in a world that often lacks attentive care and nurturing. They frequently revert to unhelpful coping mechanisms to manage. The experiences shared by the participants in trying to recapture their lives show that there is hope if learners, parents, teachers, communities, religious workers and professionals work closely together and develop further strategies to alleviate the access and use of illicit drugs by secondary school learners.