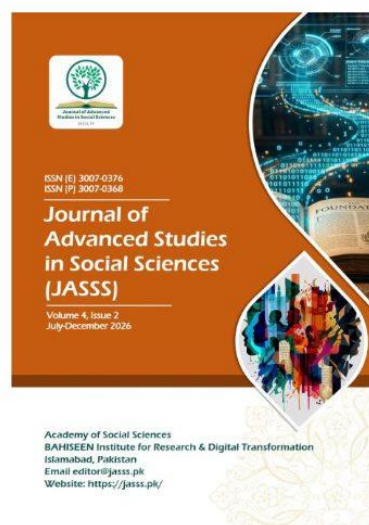


ISSN (E) 3007-0376
ISSN (P) 3007-0368

Journal of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences (JASSS)

Vol.4, Issue 2 (July-December 2026)



Academy of Social Sciences
BAHISEEN Institute for Research & Digital Transformation
Islamabad, Pakistan
Email: editor@jasss.pk
Website: <https://jasss.pk/>



Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International



Academy of Social Sciences
BAHISEEN Institute for Research & Digital Transformation
Street 14-G, Coral Town, Islamabad
Email: editor@jasss.pk, Website: <https://jasss.pk>

Understanding substance abuse among Secondary School learners in Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, South Africa: A Qualitative Exploration of Teachers' Perceptions

Maphuti Chueng (Corresponding Author)

Research Office, Faculty of Health Sciences,
University of Venda, Limpopo province, South Africa

Email : maphuti.chueng@univen.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7685-6660>

Mosima Phadu

Psychology, Faculty of Health Sciences,
University of Venda, Limpopo province, South Africa

Email: mosima.phadu@univen.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9881-216x>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22996694>

Abstract

This qualitative study explores secondary school teachers' perceptions of substance abuse among learners in the Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study aimed to gain insight into teachers' experiences and perceptions of substance abuse, including its causes, impact, and support strategies. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 teachers selected through purposive sampling. The findings primarily reveal teachers' perceptions of the causes and contributing factors of substance abuse, including family and environmental influences, mental health challenges, lack of parental involvement, and accessibility of substances. The study highlights the complexity of substance abuse in schools and underscores the need for further research on its impacts and the development of effective interventions and support strategies. The study's results can inform policy and practice aimed at addressing substance abuse among secondary school learners.

Keywords: Secondary School learners, Substance abuse, Teachers' perceptions

Introduction

Substance abuse among secondary school learners is a significant concern globally, with far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, and communities (WHO, 2020). In this study, "substance abuse" is defined as the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs, that negatively affect learners' health, behaviour, and academic functioning. In South Africa, substance abuse among adolescents is a growing problem, with high rates of alcohol and drug use reported among learners (Morojele et al., 2016). The term "secondary school learners" in this study refers specifically to learners in Grades 8 to 12, which constitute the secondary school phase in the South African education system.

The Capricorn District in Limpopo Province, South Africa, is no exception, with anecdotal evidence suggesting high rates of substance abuse among secondary school learners. However, there is a dearth of research on this topic in the district, highlighting the need for further investigation.

Teachers play a critical role in identifying and addressing substance abuse among learners, as they are often the first point of contact for learners struggling with substance-related issues (Gowing et al., 2015). However, teachers' perceptions of substance abuse and their ability to respond effectively are shaped by their knowledge, attitudes, and experiences.

This study aims to explore secondary school teachers' perceptions of substance abuse among learners in the Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. By gaining insight into teachers' experiences and perceptions, the study seeks to inform the development of effective interventions and support strategies.

Substance abuse among adolescents can have severe consequences, including poor academic performance, mental health problems, and increased risk of addiction (Hawkins et al., 2015). In South Africa, substance abuse among learners is also linked to high rates of HIV/AIDS, violence, and crime (Parry et al., 2017).

Despite the growing concern about substance abuse among learners, there is a lack of research on teachers' perceptions and experiences of substance abuse in South African schools. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring teachers' perceptions of substance abuse and their role in addressing this issue.

The study's findings can inform the development of policies and programs aimed at preventing and addressing substance abuse among learners. By engaging with teachers' perceptions and experiences, the study can also contribute to the development of more effective support strategies for learners struggling with substance-related issues.

This qualitative study will contribute to the growing body of research on substance abuse among adolescents in South Africa, highlighting the importance of teacher perspectives in addressing this issue.

Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

This study is grounded in the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. The theory explains that learners' behaviour is influenced by different environmental systems that interact with one another. At the microsystem level, learners are directly influenced by their immediate environments such as family, school, and peers. In this study, teachers identified factors such as lack of parental supervision, peer pressure, and family substance use as key contributors to substance abuse.

The mesosystem refers to the relationships between these environments. Poor communication between parents and schools, or lack of collaboration in monitoring learners, may increase the risk of substance abuse. At the ecosystem level, external factors such as community conditions affect learners indirectly. Issues such as poverty, crime, and the presence of taverns or drug dealers near schools contribute to easy access to substances.

The macrosystem includes broader societal influences such as cultural norms and socio-economic conditions. In this context, the normalisation of alcohol use and socio-economic challenges in communities may further increase substance abuse among learners.

This theory shows that substance abuse is not caused by a single factor, but by multiple interacting influences. Therefore, interventions should focus on: Strengthening family involvement and supervision, enhancing school support systems and teacher capacity, promoting collaboration between parents and schools and Addressing community-level issues such as substance availability.

In a nutshell, the theory helps explain teachers' perceptions by showing how different environmental factors combine to influence learners' substance use behaviour.

Research Methodology and Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore secondary school teachers' perceptions of substance abuse among learners in the Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was used to gain in-depth insights into teachers lived experiences and perceptions of substance abuse among learners. Phenomenology is appropriate for exploring how individuals make meaning of their experiences regarding a particular phenomenon. The use of thematic analysis alongside a phenomenological design is justified, as thematic analysis provides a flexible and systematic approach for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data while remaining consistent with participants lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This combination allowed for a detailed exploration of the phenomenon, highlighting the complexities and meanings teachers attach to substance abuse in school contexts.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select 23 secondary school teachers from two public high schools (Mamolemane High School and Moshubaba High School) located in the Bahlaloga Circuit of the Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

This clarification aligns the sampling description with the study setting as approved in the ethics section. The sample size was determined by data saturation, ensuring that the data collected was rich and comprehensive. The participating teachers varied in teaching experience, subjects taught, and roles within the school (class teachers and senior educators), providing diverse perspectives on substance abuse among learners.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 23 teachers to allow for an in-depth exploration of their perceptions and experiences of substance abuse among learners. The interviews were conducted in English, which was the common language of instruction in the participating schools. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the depth of responses provided by participants. The interviews were conducted in private settings within the school premises (empty classrooms and offices) to ensure confidentiality and minimise disruptions. The primary researcher served as the interviewer and facilitated all interviews, ensuring consistency in the data collection process. The interviewer adopted a neutral and non-judgmental stance to encourage open and honest responses from participants.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, following a systematic process to identify patterns and themes in teachers' perceptions of substance abuse.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarisation with the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively from the data, focusing on meaningful units related to teachers' perceptions of substance abuse.

These codes were subsequently reviewed, compared, and grouped into broader categories based on similarities and patterns.

From these categories, overarching themes and sub-themes were developed, reflecting the key ideas emerging from the data (causes and contributing factors).

The researcher continuously refined the themes by checking them against the original transcripts to ensure they accurately represented participants' views.

To enhance credibility, coding and theme development were reviewed and verified through peer debriefing and discussions with a co-researcher.

This rigorous process ensured that the findings were grounded in the data and accurately reflected teachers' perspectives.

Trustworthiness and Validity

The study ensured trustworthiness and validity through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail of the research process. These strategies enhanced the credibility and dependability of the findings. Triangulation was not applied in this study, as data were collected using a single method (semi-structured interviews with teachers). Instead, credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data and independent review of coding and themes by a co-researcher.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Venda Ethics Committee (Ethics no: SHS/14/PH/01/1605), the Limpopo Department of Education, and the selected schools in Capricorn District, Bahlaloga Circuit, namely: Mamolemane High School and Moshubaba High School. Both schools are public secondary schools located in a rural circuit within the Capricorn District, serving communities characterised by socio-economic challenges. A total of 23 teachers participated in the study, all drawn from these two schools.

Results and Discussion

Teachers most frequently referred to substances such as alcohol, tobacco (including cigarettes), and illicit drugs (e.g., cannabis) when discussing substance abuse among learners. These substances were described as easily accessible within the community and, in some cases, within the school environment.

The findings of this study focus specifically on teachers' perceptions of the causes and contributing factors of substance abuse among high school learners. One main theme emerged from the data analysis, namely Teachers' Perceptions of Causes and Contributing Factors, with four sub-themes: family and environmental influences, mental health and emotional challenges, lack of parental involvement and supervision, and accessibility and availability of substances (see Table 1).

Table 1: Theme and sub-themes portraying the Teachers' Perceptions of Causes and Contributing Factors' substance abuse among high school learners in the Capricorn district, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	
Teachers' Perceptions of Causes and Contributing Factors	1.	Family and Environmental Influences
	2.	Mental Health and Emotional Challenges
	3.	Lack of Parental Involvement and Supervision
	4.	Accessibility and Availability of Substances

Theme: Teachers' perceptions of causes and contributing factors

Teachers postulated the teachers' perceptions of Causes and Contributing Factors' substance abuse among high school learners. This theme emerged from data analysis. Sub-themes that emerged from the teachers' perceptions of causes and contributing factors from that include family and environmental influences, mental health and environmental challenges, lack of parental involvement and supervision and accessibility and availability of substances.

Sub-theme 1: Family and Environmental Influences

During the interview, Teachers believed that family dynamics, peer pressure, and environmental factors, such as poverty and crime, contributed to substance abuse among learners. **The participants remarked:**

"Many of our learners come from broken homes, and substance abuse is a way for them to cope with their family problems." (Teacher 5)

"The environment we live in is not conducive to healthy living. Poverty, crime, and substance abuse are rampant, and our learners are exposed to it daily." (Teacher 12)

"Peer pressure is a significant factor. Learners are influenced by their friends, and if they're hanging out with the wrong crowd, it's only a matter of time before they get into trouble." (Teacher 7)

"Some learners are exposed to substance abuse at home. Their parents or caregivers are substance users, and it's normalized in their households." (Teacher 18)

Family dynamics play a significant role in shaping learners' behaviors, including substance abuse. Research suggests that learners from dysfunctional families are more likely to engage in substance abuse (Belsky, 2001). According to a study by Hawkins et al. (1992), family factors such as parental substance abuse, family conflict, and lack of parental involvement increase the risk of substance abuse among learners.

Environmental factors, such as poverty and crime, also contribute to substance abuse among learners. Learners living in disadvantaged communities are more likely to be exposed to substance abuse and violence, increasing their risk of substance abuse (Sampson et al., 2002). Additionally, peer pressure is a significant factor, with learners who associate with peers who engage in substance abuse being more likely to initiate substance use themselves (Simons-Morton et al., 1999).

Family structure and parental influence also play a crucial role in shaping learners' risk of substance abuse. Learners from single-parent households may receive less supervision and support, increasing their vulnerability to substance abuse (Barrett & Turner, 2006). Parental substance abuse is also a significant risk factor, with learners who grow up in households where substances are abused being more likely to normalize substance use and engage in substance abuse themselves (Johnson & Leighton, 2017).

The community environment and socioeconomic factors also contribute to substance abuse among learners. Learners living in communities with high levels of substance abuse and crime are more likely to engage in substance abuse (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and unemployment, can also increase learners' risk of substance abuse (Galea et al., 2004).

Understanding the role of family and environmental influences in substance abuse can inform prevention and intervention strategies. Family support, including parental involvement and supervision, can protect learners from substance abuse (Dishion & McMahon, 1998). Environmental interventions, such as community-based programs, can also help prevent substance abuse among learners (Hawkins et al., 2002).

Sub-Theme 2: Mental Health and Emotional Challenges.

During the interview, teachers identified underlying mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, as contributing factors to substance abuse among learners.

Participants remarked:

"Some learners are self-medicating to cope with their emotional pain. They're struggling with depression, anxiety, or trauma, and substance abuse seems like an easy escape." (Teacher 3)

"I have seen learners who are anxious or depressed, and they turn to substances to feel better. It's a temporary fix, but it creates more problems in the long run." (Teacher 10)

"Learners are under a lot of pressure to perform academically, and some turn to substances to deal with the stress. It's a coping mechanism, but it's not a healthy one." (Teacher 14)

"Substance abuse can be a symptom of deeper issues. Learners may be struggling with their mental health, and the substance abuse is just a manifestation of that." (Teacher 20)

Mental health and emotional challenges are significant concerns for learners, particularly in the context of substance abuse. Research suggests that learners struggling with mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, are more likely to engage in substance abuse as a coping mechanism (Hawkins et al., 1992). According to a study by Brook et al. (2013), mental health problems can increase the risk of substance abuse among learners.

Mental health issues are prevalent among learners, with studies suggesting that a significant proportion of learners experience mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety (Kessler et al., 2005). These issues can have a profound impact on learners' academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being.

There is a well-established link between mental health and substance abuse, with learners who experience mental health problems being more likely to engage in substance abuse (Swendsen & Merikangas, 2000). Substance abuse can exacerbate mental health problems, creating a cycle of addiction and mental health issues.

Early intervention is critical in addressing mental health issues and preventing substance abuse among learners. Schools can play a crucial role in providing support and resources for learners struggling with mental health issues (Weist & Murray, 2007). By providing early intervention and support, schools can help learners develop healthy coping mechanisms and reduce the risk of substance abuse.

Sub-Theme 3: Lack of Parental Involvement and Supervision

During the interviews, teachers perceived that inadequate parental involvement and supervision contributed to learners' vulnerability to substance abuse. The participants commented as follows:

"Some parents are not involved in their children's lives, and that lack of supervision can lead to substance abuse. Learners are left to make their own decisions, and sometimes those decisions aren't good ones." (Teacher 2)

"Parents need to take more responsibility for their children's actions. If they're not monitoring their kids' activities, it's easy for them to get into trouble." (Teacher 6)

"I have seen learners whose parents are always working, and they're left alone without adult supervision. That's when they might get into substance abuse or other problems." (Teacher 11)

"Some parents don't know what's going on in their children's lives. They're not communicating with them, and they're not aware of the risks of substance abuse." (Teacher 15)

"If parents were more involved in their children's lives, I think we would see less substance abuse. Learners need guidance and support, and parents can provide that." (Teacher 22)

Lack of parental involvement and supervision is a significant risk factor for substance abuse among learners. Research suggests that learners who receive inadequate parental supervision are more likely to engage in substance abuse (Dishion & McMahon, 1998). According to a study by Barrett and Turner (2006), learners from households with low parental involvement are more likely to experience substance abuse problems.

Parental involvement plays a crucial role in shaping learners' behaviors, including substance abuse. Learners who receive adequate parental supervision and support are less likely to engage in substance abuse (Hawkins et al., 1992). Conversely, learners who lack parental involvement and supervision may be more vulnerable to substance abuse.

The lack of parental involvement and supervision can have a profound impact on learners' behavior, increasing the risk of substance abuse and other problem behaviors. According to a study by Sampson and Laub (1994), learners who lack parental supervision are more likely to associate with deviant peers, increasing the risk of substance abuse.

Parental involvement is essential in preventing substance abuse among learners. By providing adequate supervision and support, parents can help learners develop healthy coping mechanisms and reduce the risk of substance abuse (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003). Schools can also play a role in promoting parental involvement and providing resources for parents to support their children.

Sub-Theme 4: Accessibility and Availability of Substances

During the interviews, teachers noted that easy access to substances, including alcohol and drugs, in the community and schools, contributed to substance abuse among learners. The participants remarked as follows:

"Substances are readily available in our community. It's easy for learners to get their hands on them, and that's a major concern." (Teacher 1)

"I have seen learners buying substances from dealers who operate near the school. It's alarming how accessible they are." (Teacher 4)

"Some learners have family members or friends who are substance users, and they get substances from them. It's a network that's hard to break." (Teacher 8)

"Alcohol is easily accessible, especially during holidays or celebrations. Learners see it as a way to have fun, but it can lead to problems." (Teacher 12)

"The proximity of our school to local shebeens or taverns makes it easy for learners to access substances. It's a challenge we face daily." (Teacher 16)

"Substances are often brought into the school or sold near the school premises. We need to do more to prevent this." (Teacher 19)

The accessibility and availability of substances are significant risk factors for substance abuse among learners. Research suggests that learners who have easy access to substances are more likely to engage in substance abuse (Galea et al., 2004). According to a study by Hawkins et al. (1992), the availability of substances in a community can increase the risk of substance abuse among learners.

Community factors, such as the presence of substance-abusing peers and the availability of substances, can contribute to substance abuse among learners. Learners who live in communities with high levels of substance abuse and crime are more likely to engage in substance abuse (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Additionally, the proximity of schools to areas where substances are readily available can increase the risk of substance abuse among learners.

The accessibility and availability of substances can have a profound impact on learners' behavior, increasing the risk of substance abuse and other problem behaviors. According to a study by Swadi (1999), learners who have easy access to substances are more likely to experiment with substances, increasing the risk of substance abuse.

Prevention strategies that focus on reducing the accessibility and availability of substances can be effective in preventing substance abuse among learners. According to a study by Pentz (2003), community-based prevention programs that aim to reduce the availability of substances can be effective in reducing substance abuse among learners.

The Implications of the Study

The study's implications highlight the need for comprehensive strategies to address substance abuse among secondary school learners in Capricorn District, Limpopo Province. Key implications include:

- 1. School-based interventions:** Implementing awareness campaigns, debates, and support programs can help prevent substance abuse.
- 2. Teacher support and training:** Educators need training to address substance abuse effectively and create a safe learning environment.
- 3. Parental involvement:** Parents should be engaged in prevention efforts to strengthen family bonds and monitor learners' behaviour.
- 4. Community-based initiatives:** Collaboration with local leaders, healthcare providers, and law enforcement can help reduce substance abuse.
- 5. Policy enforcement:** Schools should enforce policies on substance abuse strictly to prevent and address the issue.

Limitations of the study

A key limitation of this study is that it relied solely on teachers' perspectives. While teachers provide valuable insights based on their daily interactions with learners, the absence of learner, parent, or community voices may limit the comprehensiveness of the findings. Future research should incorporate multiple stakeholder perspectives to provide a more holistic understanding of substance abuse among secondary school learners.

Conclusion

The study on substance abuse among secondary school learners in Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, South Africa, highlights the complexity of the issue from the perspective of teachers. The key findings of this study are limited to teachers' perceptions of the causes and contributing factors of substance abuse, particularly family and environmental influences, mental health challenges, lack of parental involvement, and accessibility of substances. Although the study initially intended to explore impacts and support strategies, these were not directly evidenced in the findings, indicating a need for further research in these areas.

To effectively address substance abuse, future research should explore the impacts of substance abuse on learners and evaluate intervention and support strategies involving teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. Practically, schools should develop comprehensive prevention programs, provide teachers with training and support, and foster collaboration with parents and communities.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to all participants for participating in the study. Appreciation is also extended to the University of Venda Research Publication Committee (RPC) for funding the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding Clearance: There was no Funding

References

- Barrett, A. E., & Turner, R. J. (2006). Family structure and substance use problems in adolescence and early adulthood: Examining explanations for the relationship. *Addiction*, 101(1), 109-120.
- Belsky, J. (2001). Developmental risks (still) associated with early childcare. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 42(7), 845-859.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Brook, J. S., Lee, J. Y., & Brook, D. W. (2013). Trajectories of marijuana use from adolescence to adulthood: Predictors and outcomes. *Journal of Addictive Diseases*, 32(2), 127-136.
- Dishion, T. J., & McMahon, R. J. (1998). Parental monitoring and the prevention of problem behavior: A conceptual and empirical reformulation. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 1(1), 61-75.
- Galea, S., Nandi, A., & Vlahov, D. (2004). The social epidemiology of substance use. *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 26(1), 36-52.
- Gowing, L. R., Cooke, R., & Ali, R. L. (2015). What is the role of teachers in identifying and responding to substance use disorders in schools? *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 51, 45-53.
- Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., & Arthur, M. W. (2002). Promoting science-based prevention in communities. *Addictive Behaviors*, 27(6), 951-976.
- Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., & Miller, J. Y. (1992). Risk and protective factors for substance use and abuse: Implications for prevention. In J. G. Bachman, P. M. O'Malley, & L. D. Johnston (Eds.), *Explaining the etiology of substance abuse* (pp. 85-115). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., & Miller, J. Y. (2015). Risk and protective factors for substance use and abuse. In J. D. Hawkins, R. F. Catalano, & J. Y. Miller (Eds.), *The etiology of substance abuse* (pp. 85-115). New York: Springer.
- Johnson, J. L., & Leighton, J. P. (2017). Substance abuse in families: A review of the literature. *Journal of Family Violence*, 32(1), 37-48.
- Kessler, R. C., Berglund, P., Demler, O., Jin, R., Merikangas, K. R., & Walters, E. E. (2005). Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62(6), 593-602.
- Kumpfer, K. L., & Alvarado, R. (2003). Family-strengthening approaches for the prevention of youth problem behaviors. *American Psychologist*, 58(6-7), 457-465.
- Morojele, N. K., Nkosi, S., & Londt, M. (2016). Substance use and abuse among adolescents in South Africa. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse*, 25(2), 141-155.
- Parry, C. D. H., Morojele, N. K., & Saban, A. (2017). Substance use and HIV/AIDS in South Africa. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 75, 34-41.
- Pentz, M. A. (2003). Evidence-based prevention programs for children and adolescents. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 25(3), 271-282.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1994). Urban poverty and the family context of crime: A new look at structure and process in a classic study. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 10(2), 137-156.
- Sampson, R. J., Morenoff, J. D., & Gannon-Rowley, T. (2002). Assessing neighborhood effects: Social processes and new directions in research.
- Simons-Morton, B., Haynie, D. L., Crump, A. D., Eitel, P., & Saylor, K. E. (1999). Peer and parent influences on smoking and drinking among early adolescents.

- Swadi, H. (1999). Individual risk factors for adolescent substance use. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 55(1-2), 109-117.
- Swendsen, J. D., & Merikangas, K. R. (2000). The comorbidity of depression and substance use disorders. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 20(2), 173-189.
- Weist, M. D., & Murray, M. (2007). Advancing school mental health promotion globally. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, 1(1), 5-14.
- WHO (2020). Substance use disorders. World Health Organization.