



Curbing Drug Abuse Among Special Needs Students: The Critical Roles of Counselling Psychologists

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Abstract

This paper addresses the significant issue of drug abuse among special needs students, a group characterized by various disabilities that pose unique challenges to their learning and social interactions. Special needs students, including those with intellectual, speech, physical, and emotional disabilities, face heightened risks of drug abuse due to factors such as social isolation, emotional stress, and inadequate support systems. Utilizing Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the paper explores how these students may be more susceptible to substance abuse through peer influence and societal pressures. It emphasizes the critical role of counselors in developing tailored intervention strategies and fostering supportive environments. The paper also highlights the challenges counselors face, including communication barriers, lack of resources, and the dual stigma of disability and substance abuse. Effective intervention requires a multifaceted approach, including education, parental involvement, and continuous professional development for counselors. By addressing these factors, the paper aims to empower special needs students to resist drug abuse and achieve better outcomes.

Keywords: Special need students, Drug Abuse, Counselling Psychologists

1. Introduction

Special educators and counselling psychologists continue to show concerns about the observed issue of drug abuse among special need students. Special need students are individuals who have a disability or a combination of disabilities that makes learning or other activities difficult. Special-needs students include those who have intellectual disability which causes them to develop more slowly than other children; speech and language impairment such as a problem expressing themselves or understanding others, physical disability such as vision problem, cerebral palsy, or other conditions; learning disabilities, which distort messages from their senses and emotional disabilities, such as antisocial or other behavioral problems.

This set of students often face unique challenges because of their disability that make them more vulnerable to issues such as drug abuse. These challenges can include social isolation, emotional stress, and a lack of appropriate support systems. For special educators and counselors working with special need students, addressing drug abuse involves not only understanding the individual needs and circumstances of each student but also creating a safe and supportive environment. This includes developing tailored intervention strategies that account for the specific disabilities and personal experiences of these students.

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2. Drug Abuse

Drug abuse is a major problem facing the world in which no nation is not an exemption. The use of non-conventional substances among students is a major problem in our society. Many of the youths ignorantly depend on one form of substance or the other, for various daily activities such as social, educational, political and moral. Lately, non-medical consumption of deference kinds of drugs has become a subject of public concern, largely due to its potential danger to the society. Abuse of substances, licit or illicit, is widespread in the present societal context, and it is becoming common among special need students. Drug abuse and other associated problems constitute a major threat to the survival and effective functioning of human society (Ramatu, 2022). Lives are daily lost through drug dependency and activities of addicts. A significant number of deaths from accidents, violent crimes and cultism can be traced to activities of persons under the influence of drugs.

According to Ramatu (2022), drug abuse refers to the use of drugs for purposes other than medical reasons. It refers to misuse of any psychotropic substances resulting in changes in bodily functions, thus affecting the individual in a negative way socially, cognitively or physically. Social effects may be reflected in an individual's enhanced tendency to engage in conflicts with friends, teachers, and school authorities. Cognitive effects relate to the individual's lack of concentration on academic work and memory loss such as "blackouts. Drug abuse refers to the unauthorized or indiscriminate use of drugs, either without a medical prescription or in a manner that deviates from the

authorized guidelines. Drug misuse refers to the utilisation of medications for purposes other than their intended medical usage.

Okoh, Edward & Ngwu (2023), defined drug abuse as the non-therapeutic use of a drug, particularly when it is taken in violation of legal restrictions or when a socially acceptable substance is consumed excessively. Drug abuse encompasses the unregulated distribution of drugs by unlicensed vendors, drug addiction, drug trafficking or selling, self-medication, consumption of outdated drugs, and improper dosage of drugs. Additionally, it encompasses unsanitary medicine storage practices and the manufacturers' exposure to high temperatures. According to Adaobiagu, & Afamuefuna, (2024), substance abuse is the excessive, maladaptive, or addicted use of drugs for non-medical purposes. Also, Tambari, Aliyu, & Bello, (2024), defined drug abuse as the non-medical self-administration of any substance with the intention of producing psychoactive effects, intoxication, or modifying the body image, regardless of the well-known potential detrimental effects of the drug

Drug abuse is a contemporary issue and a public health concern that affects all ages most especially adolescents with special need students. It is a global health and social problem with different conditions and problems depending on the locality. Drug abuse is not bounded by age, sex, culture, socio-economic, ethnic or religious background; it cuts across boundaries. The use of illicit drugs by special need students is a source of embarrassment to the nation. At this level, this set of students need special assistance in order to become useful regardless of their disability but observed that they make use of drugs in order to remove stress and shame of being special need students from their faces.

3. Social Learning Theory (SLT) and Curbing of Drug Abuse among Special Need Students

Albert Bandura's theory asserts that individuals acquire behaviours by seeing and replicating the actions of others. Within the realm of drug misuse, the hypothesis posits that adolescents with special needs may exhibit a higher susceptibility to substance abuse as a result of their heightened vulnerability to peer pressure and societal factors. For example, a student with a learning handicap may have an increased propensity to partake in substance usage when they observe their peers doing so, perceiving it as a means to assimilate or manage their difficulties. School counsellors can utilise Social Learning Theory (SLT) to guide their interventions by emphasising the instruction of alternative behaviours and provide positive reinforcement for making healthy choices. By engaging in this practice, individuals can assist students with special needs in cultivating more effective coping strategies and strengthening their ability to resist the allure of substance addiction.

Additionally, the idea emphasises the significance of role models and social support in influencing behaviour. Within the realm of drug misuse

prevention, school counsellors can enhance their efforts by collaborating with teachers and other school personnel to establish a nurturing and encouraging atmosphere. School counsellors can cultivate a culture that inhibits substance misuse by exemplifying healthy behaviours and offering positive feedback to students who make commendable choices. Furthermore, SLT places significant importance on the function of observation and imitation in the acquisition of behaviours. School counsellors can leverage this by offering students strong role models and promoting the observation and emulation of healthy behaviours. School counsellors can effectively utilise the Social Learning Theory to mitigate drug usage among special needs kids by integrating these tactics with other evidence-based practices.

4. Causes of Drug Abuse among Special Need Students

Drug abuse among special needs students is a multifaceted issue influenced by various factors based on the observation and findings of the writers and the factors includes: psychological, social, and environmental dynamics.

Psychological factors play important roles in drug abuse of special needs students. Many of these students experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression due to their disabilities. These psychological burdens can lead to self-medication as a coping mechanism. For instance, students with ADHD or autism might use drugs to manage their symptoms or to feel a sense of normalcy and control. The lack of proper mental health support and counseling exacerbates this issue, making these students more vulnerable to substance abuse (Adaobiagu, & Afamuefuna, 2024). Also, Pamela, Stephen & Geoffrey (2001), affirmed that social isolation and peer pressure significantly contribute to drug abuse among special needs students. These students often face social stigmatization and exclusion, leading to feelings of loneliness and alienation. To gain acceptance or fit in with their peers, they might turn to drug use. Additionally, in an effort to be seen as "normal" or to avoid bullying, they may succumb to peer pressure and start using substances. This social dynamic is particularly pronounced in inclusive educational settings where the desire to belong can override the fear of the negative consequences of drug use.

In addition, *Heidi & Jennifer (2022) stated that* family environment and dynamics are crucial in understanding drug abuse among special needs students. Families dealing with special needs children often experience high levels of stress and may lack the resources or knowledge to provide adequate support. In some cases, parental neglect or substance abuse within the family can model and normalize drug use for these children. Furthermore, inconsistent discipline and lack of supervision can create an environment where drug use is more likely to occur. Moreover, accessibility and exposure to drugs are significant factors. Special needs

students might have more unstructured time and less supervision than their peers, increasing their exposure to drugs. For instance, students with learning disabilities or emotional disturbances might have more free time if they are not fully engaged in academic or extracurricular activities. This unsupervised time can be spent in environments where drugs are available, increasing the likelihood of experimentation and eventual abuse.

Furthermore, educational and institutional factors also may contribute to the problem. Schools may not be adequately equipped to handle the unique challenges faced by special needs students, leading to gaps in support and intervention. Lack of specialized programs, trained staff, and individualized attention can result in these students feeling unsupported and turning to drugs as an escape. Additionally, the educational system's focus on academic performance can overlook the social and emotional needs of special needs students, failing to provide a holistic approach to their development and well-being.

5. Potential Challenges face by Counsellors'

Counselors working with special needs students to curb drug abuse encounter several unique challenges. One significant hurdle is the communication barrier that often exists due to various disabilities. Students with cognitive impairments, autism spectrum disorders, or speech and language difficulties may struggle to express their thoughts, feelings, or experiences effectively. This can make it challenging for counselors to accurately assess the extent of drug abuse and understand the underlying causes. Additionally, these students might have a limited understanding of the consequences of drug use or the ability to make informed decisions, complicating efforts to educate them about the dangers of substance abuse. Furthermore, creating a trusting relationship, which is crucial for effective counseling, can be particularly challenging when students have social or emotional difficulties that hinder open communication, (Pamela, Stephen and Geoffrey, 2001).

Heidi & Jennifer (2022) affirmed that another significant challenge is the lack of specialized resources and training. Counselors may not always have access to resources tailored to the unique needs of special education students struggling with drug abuse. Standard intervention programs are often not designed with these students in mind and may need significant adaptation. Counselors must be skilled in both substance abuse counseling and special education, a combination that requires extensive and ongoing professional development. Additionally, the stigma surrounding both drug abuse and disabilities can make it difficult to garner support from parents, school staff, and the broader community. This dual stigma can lead to a lack of collaboration and resources, making it harder for counselors to implement effective prevention and intervention strategies. Overall, these challenges necessitate a highly individualized

approach, considerable patience, and a robust support network to address the complex needs of special needs students dealing with drug abuse.

Lack of training related to drug addiction and handling students with substance abuse is one of the main challenges counsellors can face. Earlier studies conducted by Burrow-Sanchez and Lopez (2009) in the United States indicated that school counsellors felt ill-prepared to work with students abusing substance and needed training in areas of screening and assessment, individual interventions, consultations, curriculum development, group interventions and family interventions (Burrow-Sanchez & Lopez, 2009). This study is evident today even in certain local contexts and settings like Seychelles as the need for refresher courses and continuous on-the-job training is crucial to gain skills and to enhance the capacity of counsellors to deal with students involved in drug abuse.

Besides lack of training, Young, Boles and Otero (2007) mentioned that counsellors also face challenges with parents and guardians who are resistant to treatment, who are not supportive, and who are drug users themselves (Young, Boles & Otero, 2007). Some of such parents may be in denial that they or their children are abusing drugs. This can pose as a challenge for counsellors who may feel their efforts are a waste.

6. The Role of Counsellors in Curbing of Drug Abuse among Special Need Student

The extensive function of counsellors in mitigating drug misuse among special needs kids goes beyond conventional therapeutic contacts. These specialists are required to cooperate with schools, parents, and medical staff in order to create thorough intervention strategies. The collective endeavour is crucial in guaranteeing that interventions are uniform and comprehensive, targeting not only the addiction but also the fundamental reasons that contribute to the student's substance usage, (Kolawole, A2020). Counsellors frequently engage in campaigning for enhanced resources and adjustments within educational systems to successfully support these children. Their narratives demonstrate a dedication to ongoing education and adjustment, as they remain well-informed on the most recent advancements in both special education and addiction treatment in order to deliver the most efficient care. Counsellors strive to empower special needs kids via their unwavering dedication, enabling them to surmount obstacles and cultivate resilient, drug-free lifestyles.

According to National Institute on Drug Abuse (2023), counsellors can arrange enlightenment sessions to teach special needs students about the perils of drug addiction and its detrimental effects on health, academic performance, and relationships. These programmes may consist of seminars, workshops, and guest speakers who impart their experiences.

Counsellors can disseminate instructive materials and resources to enhance the knowledge of students with special needs regarding the potential hazards linked to substance addiction. Additionally, assertiveness training sessions are conducted to empower students, enabling them to effectively resist peer pressure and make well-informed judgements on drug use. Special needs kids acquire the skills to establish and communicate their personal boundaries, articulate their viewpoints, and decline the use of substances through engaging in role-playing activities and participating in discussions. These activities enable them to assert themselves confidently while maintaining a courteous demeanour. This instruction boosts their self-assurance and self-worth, enabling them with the abilities to handle social settings without yielding to peer pressure, (Adaobiagu & Afamuefuna, 2024).

In addition, Bolu-steve & Adeboye, (2020) stated that counsellors have the ability to create customised relapse prevention programmes for special needs kids who have a history of drug addiction or are vulnerable to a recurrence of drug use. These programmes usually consist of detecting stimuli, formulating effective coping mechanisms, and devising individualised plans to prevent relapse. Counsellors offer continuous assistance and direction to aid students in properly applying these tactics and sustaining their sobriety. Furthermore, when counsellors have suspicions or knowledge of a student's participation in drug addiction, they may be required to initiate a constructive confrontation. This entails directly confronting the issue with the learner in a supportive and nonjudgmental manner. Counsellors convey apprehension over the student's welfare, present objective information about the observed behaviour, and offer aid in obtaining suitable resources and support services. Constructive confrontation seeks to incentivize the student to recognise the issue and actively seek assistance in order to overcome it.

Furthermore, counsellors have the ability to create peer support systems that match students with mentors or peer counsellors who have received training in the prevention and intervention of drug usage. These programmes provide a cohesive network within the educational institution, enabling students to actively seek guidance, motivation, and pragmatic counsel from their fellow classmates. Peer mentors can act as exemplary figures, providing compassion, comprehension, and responsibility to fellow students who may be facing challenges related to substance misuse, (Muhammad, 2022). In addition, Ayuk, (2020) agreed that counsellors might cooperate with special education teachers to incorporate a drug misuse prevention curriculum into current health education classes or wellness initiatives. These curricula generally include subjects such as the impact of drugs on the body and brain, techniques for refusing drugs, strategies for making decisions, techniques for managing stress, and healthy ways of coping. Counsellors empower special needs students by

equipping them with precise information and practical skills, enabling them to make educated decisions and withstand peer temptation to engage in drug experimentation.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing drug abuse among special needs students requires a multifaceted approach that combines tailored intervention strategies, comprehensive education, and robust support systems. The unique vulnerabilities of these students necessitate specialized attention from educators, counselors, and the wider community. By leveraging theories such as Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, counselors can implement evidence-based practices that promote healthy behaviors and foster a supportive environment. Challenges such as communication barriers, lack of resources, and dual stigmas must be overcome through continuous professional development and collaboration with families and schools. Ultimately, the role of counselors is pivotal in empowering special needs students to resist drug abuse, providing them with the tools and support necessary to thrive despite their challenges.

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