

Drug Abuse and Educational Development among Youths in Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, Nigeria

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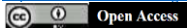
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ABSTRACT

Drug abuse among young people has become an important public-health and educational concern because adolescence represents a critical period for intellectual, social, emotional and behavioural development. Substance use during this period may interfere with school attendance, concentration, academic engagement, educational attainment and the development of skills required for productive adulthood. Recent evidence from Nasarawa State indicates that substance experimentation is present among secondary-school students, with cigarette smoking, marijuana and inhalant use reported among students surveyed across the state. Similarly, research conducted specifically among in-school adolescents in Lafia identified peer pressure as a significant predictor of substance abuse, suggesting that the school and peer environment is important in understanding the problem. This paper examines the relationship between drug abuse and educational development among youths in Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. Drawing on recent empirical literature from Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria and the wider international literature, the paper examines the effects of drug abuse on academic performance, school attendance, concentration, classroom participation, educational attainment and school completion. The review indicates that problematic substance use can be associated with poorer educational outcomes, although the relationship is influenced by peer relationships, family circumstances, socioeconomic conditions and psychological wellbeing. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis involving 63 studies and 438,329 participants found that adolescent and young-adult cannabis use was associated with lower grades, increased absenteeism and dropout, and lower likelihood of completing secondary and postsecondary education. The paper argues that addressing drug abuse in Lafia requires an integrated educational response involving schools, families, health professionals, community organisations and relevant government agencies.

Introduction

Education is one of the most important mechanisms through which young people acquire knowledge, competencies, values and social skills needed for successful participation in society. The quality of educational development during adolescence can influence later employment opportunities, economic independence, health behaviour and social participation. Consequently, factors that interfere with students' ability to attend school, concentrate on learning and complete their education deserve serious scholarly and policy attention (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024).

Drug abuse is one such factor because adolescence is a developmental period characterised by substantial cognitive, emotional and social changes. Young people may be particularly vulnerable to experimentation with psychoactive substances because of curiosity, peer influence, the search for identity and the desire for social acceptance. Evidence from Nasarawa State demonstrates that substance use is already present among secondary-school students: Egga et al. (2024), in a survey of 1,518 students across 26 secondary schools in all 13 local government areas of the state, reported lifetime experimentation with cigarettes, marijuana and inhalants among participating students.

The educational consequences of substance use have received increasing attention in recent research. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Bahorik et al. (2024), which included 63 studies and

438,329 participants, found moderate-certainty evidence that cannabis use during adolescence and young adulthood was associated with lower school grades, increased absenteeism and school dropout, and reduced likelihood of completing secondary school, entering university and obtaining postsecondary degrees. These findings do not establish that every adolescent who uses cannabis will experience poor educational outcomes, but they demonstrate a consistent association across a large body of research.

The problem is particularly relevant to Lafia Local Government Area because local research has already documented substance abuse among adolescents. James, Olapegba and Uye (2023) examined 414 in-school adolescents in Lafia metropolis and found that family functioning, self-esteem and peer pressure jointly predicted substance abuse, with peer pressure showing a statistically significant independent relationship. This finding is important educationally because peer networks are closely connected to the school environment and can influence students' attitudes, behaviours and engagement with learning.

Drug abuse should therefore not be viewed simply as an issue of individual morality or criminal behaviour. It is also an educational-development issue because substance use may affect the cognitive, behavioural and social conditions necessary for effective learning. The education sector consequently has an important role in prevention, early identification, counselling, referral and rehabilitation of students experiencing substance-related difficulties (Egga et al., 2024).

Statement of the Problem

The increasing availability and use of psychoactive substances among young people presents a serious challenge to educational development. Students who misuse substances may experience difficulties with concentration, memory, motivation, classroom participation and school attendance. In a Nigerian tertiary-education study, Adedeji (2024) reported that drug abuse was associated with absenteeism, reduced seriousness toward academic work, declining grades and increased risk of dropping out. Although that study was conducted among tertiary students in Lagos rather than youths in Lafia, its findings provide relevant evidence concerning the educational mechanisms through which problematic substance use may affect students.

Evidence from Nasarawa State further demonstrates that substance use among students is sufficiently prevalent to warrant educational attention. Egga et al. (2024) found that 14.8% of surveyed secondary-school students had ever tried cigarettes, 13.6% had ever tried marijuana and 12.9% had ever used inhalants. The study also identified differences in substance-use patterns according to factors including age, class level, family circumstances, parental substance use and school characteristics. These findings indicate that educational institutions operate within a wider social environment that can influence students' exposure to substances.

The Lafia-specific evidence adds an important dimension to the problem. James et al. (2023) found that adolescents experiencing higher peer pressure reported significantly greater substance abuse than those experiencing lower peer pressure. Since peer groups are an important component of students' daily educational experiences, substance use may spread through social networks within and around schools, potentially affecting not only individual students but also the broader learning environment.

Despite these findings, there remains a shortage of published empirical research specifically examining the relationship between drug abuse and educational development among youths in Lafia Local Government Area. Existing local research has concentrated largely on predictors of substance abuse and its psychological or behavioural consequences, while less attention has been given specifically to academic performance, attendance, school engagement and educational attainment. This gap justifies

a focused examination of the educational dimension of drug abuse among youths in Lafia (James et al., 2023; Kigbu, Ahmad, & Goji, 2024).

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this paper is to examine the effects of drug abuse on educational development among youths in Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

- i. examine the relationship between drug abuse and academic performance;
- ii. determine how drug abuse affects school attendance;
- iii. examine the influence of substance use on students' concentration and classroom participation; assess its implications for school completion and educational attainment;
- iv. identify strategies that schools, families and relevant institutions can employ to reduce drug-related educational difficulties

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What relationship exists between drug abuse and academic performance among youths in Lafia Local Government Area?
- ii. How does drug abuse affect school attendance among youths in Lafia?
- iii. What effect does drug abuse have on students' concentration and classroom participation?
- iv. How does drug abuse relate to school dropout and educational attainment?
- v. What strategies can be adopted to reduce the educational consequences of drug abuse among youths in Lafia?

These questions are consistent with contemporary research showing that substance use can affect several interconnected dimensions of educational participation rather than academic grades alone (Bahorik et al., 2024).

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses may be tested in a future empirical study:

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between drug abuse and academic performance among youths in Lafia Local Government Area.

Ho2: Drug abuse has no significant relationship with school attendance among youths in Lafia Local Government Area.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between drug abuse and students' concentration and classroom participation.

Ho4: There is no significant relationship between drug abuse and school dropout among youths in Lafia Local Government Area.

These hypotheses translate the educational dimensions of substance use into measurable relationships that can subsequently be tested using survey or longitudinal data (Adedeji, 2024; Bahorik et al., 2024).

Conceptual Review

Concept of Drug Abuse

Drug abuse refers broadly to the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including substances used outside accepted medical indications or in ways that create significant physical, psychological or social harm. Among young people, problematic substance use can include the misuse of prescription medicines as well as the consumption of illicit substances. Recent research in Nasarawa

State documented the use of several substances among secondary-school students, including marijuana, cigarettes, inhalants, tramadol and other psychoactive substances (Egga et al., 2024).

It is important to distinguish experimentation, occasional use and substance-use disorder rather than treating all substance use as identical. The educational consequences are likely to vary according to frequency, quantity, age of initiation, type of substance, polydrug use and the student's broader social circumstances. Egga et al. (2024) similarly noted that their cross-sectional study measured patterns of substance use but did not directly examine the motivations or consequences of use, highlighting the importance of studying educational outcomes separately.

Concept of Educational Development

Educational development refers to the progressive acquisition of knowledge, competencies, attitudes, academic skills and qualifications that enable individuals to function effectively in society. For adolescents, educational development encompasses more than examination results; it includes regular school attendance, classroom engagement, concentration, academic motivation, progression between school levels and eventual completion of formal education (WHO, 2024).

Educational development can therefore be understood as a process involving both immediate and long-term outcomes. A student who frequently misses classes because of substance use may initially experience reduced classroom exposure, followed by declining academic performance and eventually disengagement from school. Evidence from Bahorik et al. (2024) supports this developmental interpretation by demonstrating associations between adolescent cannabis use and multiple educational outcomes, including grades, absenteeism, dropout and postsecondary educational attainment.

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory provides a useful framework for explaining substance use among young people because behaviour can be learned through observation, imitation and reinforcement within social environments. Adolescents may observe substance use among peers, older students, family members or other influential individuals and subsequently perceive such behaviour as acceptable or rewarding. The importance of peer influence in Lafia is supported by James et al. (2023), whose study found peer pressure to be a significant predictor of substance abuse among in-school adolescents.

The theory also has direct educational implications because schools are social environments in which students continually observe and interact with one another. Where substance use is normalised within a peer group, students may face pressure to participate in behaviours that interfere with academic responsibilities. A meta-analysis by Watts et al. (2024) similarly found substantial evidence that peer influence is associated with adolescent substance use, supporting the relevance of social-learning mechanisms in understanding youth drug behaviour.

Social Control Perspective

Social control theory provides a complementary explanation by suggesting that strong attachments to conventional institutions can discourage behaviours that undermine socially valued goals. For students, attachment to parents, teachers and school communities may function as protective factors, whereas weak institutional attachment may increase vulnerability to risky behaviour. Recent evidence from Nasarawa State demonstrates that family structure, parental behaviour and school characteristics are associated with patterns of adolescent substance use, although these relationships differ across substances and demographic groups (Egga et al., 2024).

Drug Abuse and Academic Performance

Academic performance is one of the most visible indicators of educational development, and substance use may undermine it through several pathways. Intoxication, withdrawal symptoms, reduced motivation, impaired concentration, disrupted sleep and inconsistent school attendance can interfere with students' ability to participate effectively in academic activities. A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis found that adolescent and young-adult cannabis use was probably associated with lower school grades and reduced educational attainment (Bahorik et al., 2024).

Evidence from Nigeria also supports the connection between substance use and academic difficulties. Adedeji (2024) reported that students who abuse drugs may experience declining grades, reduced seriousness towards academic work and absenteeism. Similarly, research conducted among secondary-school students in Kwara State found a significant relationship between drug abuse and academic performance, with excessive use associated with poorer retention of taught material and lower academic performance (Ajanaku, Olanrewaju, & Akinware, 2024).

For Lafia, the concern is particularly relevant because substance use has already been documented among students in the local educational environment. James et al. (2023) demonstrated that substance abuse is present among in-school adolescents in Lafia and that peer pressure significantly predicts such use. This suggests that academic-performance research in Lafia should examine not only the direct relationship between substance use and grades but also the role of peer networks and school engagement in mediating that relationship.

Drug Abuse and School Attendance

Regular attendance is fundamental to educational development because students cannot benefit fully from classroom instruction when they are frequently absent. Substance use can contribute to absenteeism through intoxication, withdrawal, health problems, disciplinary sanctions, involvement in drug-seeking activities and declining motivation towards school. Bahorik et al. (2024) found that adolescent and young-adult cannabis use was associated with increased school absenteeism, with the meta-analysis reporting an odds ratio of 2.31 for absenteeism.

The relationship between drug use and attendance may also become circular. A student who begins missing school may become academically disconnected, which can increase association with peers who engage in risky behaviours; conversely, substance use may itself make regular attendance more difficult. The 2024 Nigerian systematic review by Ekpenyong et al. emphasised that adolescent substance use is influenced by multiple factors and cautioned against understanding the behaviour solely at the individual level.

In Lafia, this relationship deserves specific empirical investigation because existing studies have established the presence of substance use among in-school adolescents but have not sufficiently quantified its effect on attendance. Future research should therefore compare attendance records or carefully measured self-reported absenteeism among students with different patterns of substance use while controlling for socioeconomic and family factors (James et al., 2023; Egga et al., 2024).

Drug Abuse, Concentration and Classroom Participation

Effective learning requires sustained attention, memory, motivation and active participation. Psychoactive substances may interfere with these functions either directly through their effects on the nervous system or indirectly through sleep disruption, withdrawal, emotional difficulties and changes in daily routines. Evidence synthesised by Bahorik et al. (2024) indicates that adolescent cannabis use is associated with poorer academic outcomes, although the underlying mechanisms may involve several interacting cognitive, behavioural and social factors.

Classroom participation may also decline when students become disengaged from school or prioritise activities associated with substance use. Adedeji (2024) identified lack of seriousness towards academic work and absenteeism among reported educational consequences of drug abuse among Nigerian tertiary students. Such evidence supports the need to conceptualise educational development as including students' participation and engagement, not simply examination scores.

For students in Lafia, these mechanisms are particularly important because adolescent substance use occurs within a social environment characterised by peer influence. James et al. (2023) found that students reporting high peer pressure also reported significantly higher substance abuse, suggesting that classroom participation and academic engagement may need to be examined alongside the quality of students' peer relationships.

Drug Abuse and School Dropout

School dropout represents one of the most serious educational consequences because leaving school prematurely can restrict future educational and employment opportunities. Substance use may contribute to dropout through accumulated absenteeism, declining academic achievement, disciplinary problems, social disengagement and deteriorating relationships with teachers and parents. Bahorik et al. (2024) found moderate-certainty evidence that adolescent and young-adult cannabis use was associated with increased school dropout, with an estimated odds ratio of 2.19 across the included studies.

The relationship between substance use and dropout should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously because dropout may also be caused by poverty, family instability, academic difficulties, mental-health problems and other forms of social disadvantage. The Nigerian literature similarly demonstrates that adolescent substance use is embedded within multiple social and demographic conditions rather than being attributable to a single cause (Ekpenyong et al., 2024).

For Lafia, this distinction is important because a student who uses drugs and leaves school may have experienced several underlying difficulties before substance use became evident. Research in Nasarawa State has identified family structure, parental substance use, school type and class level among factors associated with substance use, indicating that future research should control for such variables when investigating school dropout (Egga et al., 2024).

Peer Pressure and Educational Development

Peer pressure is an important factor linking drug abuse to educational development. Adolescents often spend substantial amounts of time with classmates and friends, and peer groups can influence attitudes towards schooling, academic achievement and risk-taking behaviours. A meta-analysis by Watts et al. (2024) found evidence that peer influence plays a significant role in adolescent substance use, while the Lafia-specific study by James et al. (2023) similarly identified peer pressure as a significant predictor of substance abuse among in-school adolescents.

The educational significance of peer pressure is that substance use may alter the social group to which a student is attached. A student who becomes increasingly involved with substance-using peers may experience reduced commitment to school and greater exposure to activities that compete with academic responsibilities. However, peer groups can also function positively when they encourage school attendance, academic achievement and healthy behaviour, which suggests that prevention programmes should not treat peers only as a source of risk (Watts et al., 2024).

Family Factors and Educational Development

Family circumstances can influence both substance use and educational outcomes. Parents provide supervision, emotional support, educational encouragement and behavioural models, while family

instability may create additional vulnerabilities for some adolescents. In the Nasarawa State survey, Egga et al. (2024) found that several aspects of family background, including family type, parental marital status and parental smoking, were associated with substance-use patterns among secondary-school students.

However, family influence should not be understood as deterministic. James et al. (2023) found that family functioning did not independently significantly predict substance abuse in their Lafia sample after the variables in their model were considered, whereas peer pressure remained significant. This finding suggests that interventions should avoid blaming families and instead consider how family, peer, school and community influences interact in shaping adolescent behaviour (James et al., 2023).

Educational Institutions as a Platform for Prevention

Schools provide an important platform for preventing drug abuse because they provide sustained contact with adolescents and can combine education, counselling, early identification and referral. Evidence from Nasarawa State has led researchers to recommend comprehensive school-based interventions involving educators, parents, peers, health professionals, community members and religious leaders (Egga et al., 2024).

School-based prevention should, however, extend beyond simply telling students that drugs are harmful. Effective programmes should develop decision-making skills, resistance to harmful peer influence, emotional regulation, problem-solving abilities and healthy coping strategies. A recent Nigerian systematic review of cognitive behavioural interventions reported reductions in substance use alongside improvements in coping skills, self-esteem and depressive symptoms, although the authors noted variation in study quality and limited long-term evidence (2025).

Guidance and counselling services are particularly important because students may be reluctant to disclose substance-use problems where they fear punishment or stigma. Counsellors can provide confidential assessment, early intervention and referral to appropriate health services while maintaining the student's connection with education. Such an approach is consistent with recommendations from research in Nasarawa State for schools to provide education, counselling, screening, referral and follow-up services (Egga et al., 2024).

Role of Parents and the Community

Parents and caregivers can contribute to prevention by maintaining open communication with young people, monitoring behavioural changes, establishing appropriate boundaries and supporting educational goals. Evidence from Nasarawa State indicates that parental substance use is associated with increased odds of several forms of adolescent substance experimentation, demonstrating that young people's behaviour can be influenced by the examples and environments provided within the family (Egga et al., 2024).

Community concerns the difference between substance-use prevalence and educational consequences. Knowing that students use substances does not automatically establish that their academic performance is poor because of that use. A rigorous Laf, standard deviations, regression coefficients or “findings.” The 2024 Nasarawa State study is especially useful for designing institutions also have an important role because young people do not spend all their time within school. Religious organisations, youth associations, traditional institutions, health workers and civil-society organisations can support prevention, referral and reintegration. The multifactorial nature of adolescent substance use identified in Nigerian research means that educational interventions are more likely to be sustainable when they are embedded within broader community-based approaches (Ekpenyong et al., 2024).

Implications for Lafia Local Government Area

The evidence reviewed suggests that Lafia requires an educational response that is locally informed rather than relying exclusively on national statistics. The 2023 Lafia study provides evidence concerning peer pressure and substance abuse among in-school adolescents, while the 2024 Nasarawa State survey provides a broader picture of substance-use patterns across the state's 13 LGAs. Together, these studies establish a strong basis for more detailed research into the educational consequences of substance use specifically within Lafia (James et al., 2023; Egga et al., 2024).

A particularly important research gap concerns the difference between substance-use prevalence and educational consequences. Knowing that students use substances does not automatically establish that their academic performance is poor because of that use. A rigorous Lafia study should therefore measure substance-use frequency alongside objective or carefully validated indicators of academic performance, attendance, school engagement and educational progression. Such an approach would address the limitations of cross-sectional evidence and improve the usefulness of findings for policy (Egga et al., 2024; Bahorik et al., 2024).

Recommendations

Strengthening School-Based Prevention

Secondary schools in Lafia should incorporate evidence-informed substance-use prevention into existing health education, guidance and counselling activities. Programmes should address peer pressure, decision-making, emotional regulation, coping strategies and the academic consequences of substance use rather than relying exclusively on fear-based messages (Egga et al., 2024; Watts et al., 2024).

Improving Guidance and Counselling

Schools should strengthen counselling units and establish clear referral pathways for students experiencing substance-related difficulties. Early identification is particularly important because interventions during adolescence may prevent more serious educational and health consequences later in life (2025; Egga et al., 2024).

Strengthening Parent–School Collaboration

Parents and schools should work together to identify behavioural changes, absenteeism, declining academic performance and peer-related risks at an early stage. Because family circumstances and parental substance use have been associated with adolescent substance-use patterns in Nasarawa State, parent-focused prevention should form part of the wider educational response (Egga et al., 2024).

Developing Positive Peer Programmes

Schools should establish structured peer-support and peer-education initiatives that promote academic achievement and healthy behaviour. This recommendation follows directly from the Lafia evidence identifying peer pressure as a significant predictor of substance abuse and from wider evidence demonstrating the importance of peer influence during adolescence (James et al., 2023; Watts et al., 2024).

Improving Local Research and Monitoring

The Lafia Local Government Council, educational authorities and relevant health institutions should support systematic monitoring of substance use and its educational consequences. Future studies should include both in-school and out-of-school youths because school-based surveys alone may underestimate the problem among young people who have already disengaged from education (Ekpenyong et al., 2024).

Integrating Treatment with Educational Reintegration

Young people who develop problematic substance use should have access to appropriate treatment and psychosocial support without unnecessary exclusion from education. Evidence concerning cognitive behavioural interventions among Nigerian adolescents suggests potential benefits for substance-use reduction and psychological functioning, although further high-quality longitudinal research is needed (2025).

Conclusion

Drug abuse constitutes an important challenge to educational development among youths because it can affect academic performance, school attendance, concentration, classroom participation, educational attainment and school completion. Evidence from international research demonstrates consistent associations between adolescent substance use and poorer educational outcomes, while Nigerian studies provide evidence that substance use among young people is influenced by peer, family and school-related factors (Bahorik et al., 2024; Ekpenyong et al., 2024).

The situation is particularly relevant to Lafia Local Government Area because substance use has been documented among in-school adolescents in the area, with peer pressure identified as a significant predictor. At the wider Nasarawa State level, a large 2024 survey involving 1,518 students found substantial experimentation with several psychoactive substances, confirming that adolescent substance use is a relevant educational and public-health concern in the state (James et al., 2023; Egga et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the existing evidence should not be interpreted as demonstrating a simple one-directional causal relationship in which drug use alone produces poor educational outcomes. Family circumstances, socioeconomic conditions, peer relationships, psychological wellbeing, school environment and other factors can operate simultaneously. Stronger longitudinal and locally representative research is therefore needed to establish the pathways through which substance use affects educational development among youths in Lafia (Egga et al., 2024; Ekpenyong et al., 2024).

Ultimately, reducing the educational consequences of drug abuse in Lafia requires collaboration among schools, parents, students, health professionals, community organisations and government agencies. Prevention should be combined with counselling, early identification, treatment and educational reintegration so that young people experiencing substance-related problems are supported rather than simply excluded from the educational system. Such an integrated approach is consistent with current evidence emphasising school-based prevention, psychosocial support and multi-level responses to adolescent substance use (Egga et al., 2024; 2025).

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