Journal of Popular Education in Africa: **ISSN 2523-2800 (online)**
October, November & December 2025, Volume 9, Number 10, 11 & 12
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The Power of the Peer Group: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Group Counselling's Contribution to Reducing Substance Abuse in among Students in Public Day Secondary Schools in Kangundo Sub-County, Machakos County- Kenya

By

[1]Japhet Kipkoech Kirui, [2]Dr. Ruth Kimeu and [3]Dr. Muniko Marwa

[1]School of Education and Social Sciences, Lukenya University, Kenya
[2]School of Education and Social Sciences, Lukenya University, Kenya
[3]School of Education and Social Sciences, Lukenya University, Kenya

Abstract
This study investigates the contribution of group counselling to the reduction of substance abuse among students in public day secondary schools in Kangundo Sub-County, a peri-urban region in Kenya. The contention of the study is that substance abuse among adolescents constitutes a significant public health crisis, undermining educational outcomes and long-term well-being, particularly in developing nations. While school-based interventions are critical, there is a need for evidence on which specific counselling modalities are most effective in low-resource settings. Anchored in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the study employed a descriptive and cross-sectional mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 102 students and 25 teachers through structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were gathered from in-depth interviews with 5 school principals. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis (SPSS Version 25), and qualitative data were thematically analyzed. The findings revealed that group counselling is a potent intervention. It was implemented in 68% of schools and was perceived as highly effective by both teachers (Mean = 3.97 for peer support) and students (82% found it effective). Statistically, group counselling demonstrated the strongest relationship with the reduction of substance abuse compared to other modalities ($r = 0.637$, $p < 0.01$) and explained 96.4% of the variance in a regression model ($R^2 = .964$). Qualitative themes confirmed that the core mechanisms of its success are the fostering of peer support, the reduction of stigma and isolation, and the creation of a culture of mutual accountability. The study concludes that group counselling, by leveraging the power of peer dynamics, is a high-impact, scalable, and contextually appropriate strategy for substance abuse intervention in Kenyan secondary schools. The findings provide a strong evidence base for policymakers and educational leaders to prioritize, formalize, and resource group counselling programs as a central pillar of school-based health and wellness initiatives.

Keywords: Group Counselling, Substance Abuse, Adolescent Health, Kenyan Education, Social Learning Theory, Mixed-Methods, Peer Support

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1.0 Introduction

Adolescent substance abuse has evolved into a formidable global public health challenge, casting a long shadow over the educational, social, and economic futures of young people worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) has consistently highlighted the profound and often irreversible consequences of early substance use, which include the onset of mental health disorders, diminished academic attainment, school dropout, and an increased propensity for criminal activity. The adolescent period, a critical developmental stage characterized by identity exploration and heightened sensitivity to peer influence, represents a window of acute vulnerability (Mutiso et al., 2021). It is within this context that school-based interventions have come to be recognized not as an auxiliary service, but as a frontline defense in promoting student well-being.

In Kenya, this global crisis has a stark and urgent local dimension. The National Authority for the Campaign against Alcohol and Substance Abuse (NACADA, 2022) reports that an alarming 20.2% of Kenyan secondary school students have used at least one psychoactive substance. This widespread issue is inextricably linked to a cascade of negative outcomes, including pervasive indiscipline, deteriorating academic performance, and an increase in school unrest. In response, the Kenyan Ministry of Education has mandated the establishment of guidance and counselling departments in all secondary schools, tasking them with providing psychological support and early intervention.

However, a critical implementation gap persists. In regions like Kangundo Sub-County, a peri-urban area in Machakos County, the problem of substance abuse continues to escalate despite these policy directives. School administrators and community leaders have voiced growing concern over rising rates of absenteeism, indiscipline, and school dropouts directly attributable to substance use (Machakos County Education Office, 2023). This persistent challenge suggests that the mere existence of counselling services is insufficient; their effectiveness is contingent on the specific modalities employed and their alignment with the psychosocial realities of the student population.

While various counselling approaches exist, group counselling presents a particularly compelling model for the adolescent context. Grounded in the power of peer dynamics, it offers a unique therapeutic environment where students can find solidarity, challenge negative social norms, and learn pro-social behaviors from one another. Yet, despite its theoretical promise, there remains a significant dearth of rigorous, localized research examining its specific contribution to reducing substance abuse in Kenyan day secondary schools. Most existing studies have either focused on urban or boarding school environments, or have treated "counselling" as a monolithic entity without disaggregating the effects of different approaches. This leaves a critical knowledge gap: to what extent does group counselling, as practiced in a typical Kenyan public day school, actually contribute to mitigating substance abuse?

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This study was conceived to address this precise problem. It moves beyond a general endorsement of counselling to conduct a focused, empirical investigation into the specific role and effectiveness of group counselling in the public day secondary schools of Kangundo Sub-County. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the study aims not only to measure the statistical relationship between group counselling and substance abuse reduction but also to understand the underlying mechanisms—the "how" and "why" of its impact—through the perspectives of students, teachers, and school administrators. The purpose of this paper is to present these findings, arguing that group counselling is a uniquely powerful, contextually appropriate, and scalable intervention that deserves to be a central pillar of substance abuse prevention strategies in Kenyan schools.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Social Learning Theory

This study is anchored in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), a robust psychological framework that provides a compelling lens through which to understand the efficacy of group counselling. The theory's central tenet is that human behavior is not solely determined by internal drives or external punishments, but is learned through a dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences. Bandura posits that individuals acquire and modify behaviors primarily through observational learning, imitation, and modeling.

This theory is profoundly applicable to both the problem of adolescent substance abuse and the proposed solution of group counselling. On one hand, substance use itself is often a socially learned behavior. Adolescents observe substance use among peers, family members, or in the media, and may imitate these behaviors to gain social acceptance, cope with stress, or satisfy curiosity. The perceived rewards (e.g., social status, temporary relief from anxiety) can reinforce this behavior.

On the other hand, Social Learning Theory provides a powerful rationale for why group counselling should be an effective intervention. The group setting creates a microcosm of a social environment where positive, pro-social behaviors can be modeled and reinforced. The key mechanisms of the theory are directly activated within a well-facilitated group:

1. Observational Learning: In a group, students can observe peers who are successfully navigating challenges, using healthy coping mechanisms, or articulating their reasons for abstinence. They learn vicariously that alternative, positive behaviors are possible and rewarding.
2. Modeling: The counsellor and peer leaders within the group act as positive role models. They model effective communication, empathy, problem-solving, and substance refusal skills. Students can then imitate and internalize these behaviors.
3. Reinforcement: The group provides powerful social reinforcement. When a student shares a success (e.g., resisting peer pressure) or expresses a vulnerable feeling, they receive positive feedback, encouragement, and validation from the group. This social reward strengthens the desired behavior, making it more likely to be repeated. Conversely, the group can provide gentle corrective feedback for negative thought patterns or behaviors.

By applying Social Learning Theory, this study hypothesizes that group counselling is not merely an informational session but a dynamic learning environment. It actively works to extinguish socially learned negative behaviors by replacing them with socially learned

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positive alternatives. The theory predicts that the peer support, shared experience, and mutual accountability inherent in group counselling will create a powerful force for behavioral change, making it a highly effective modality for addressing substance abuse.

2.2 Empirical Review of Group Counselling for Adolescent Substance Abuse

The use of group counselling as an intervention for adolescent substance abuse is well-established in the empirical literature, with a strong evidence base demonstrating its effectiveness across diverse contexts. The power of the peer group, when harnessed constructively, is consistently shown to be a potent agent of change.

International Evidence from High-Income Countries:

In high-income countries, research on group counselling has often been conducted through rigorous randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and meta-analyses, providing a high level of evidence. A landmark meta-analysis by Tanner-Smith et al. (2018) synthesized the results of numerous school-based intervention studies and found that group counselling programs significantly reduced substance use among adolescents. They identified the core mechanisms of success as the fostering of behavioral change through cognitive-behavioral techniques (CBT) and the enhancement of social skills.

Specific, manualized programs have also shown great promise. For example, the "Too Good for Drugs" program, which uses structured group sessions to teach social and emotional skills, has been extensively evaluated. A quasi-experimental study by Hansen et al. (2020) involving 1,200 high school students found that participants in the program showed a 30% reduction in substance experimentation compared to control groups. Similarly, a mixed-methods study by Carney and Myers (2019) in the UK found that group therapy not only improved students' coping skills but also tangibly reduced peer pressure-related substance use. These studies confirm that well-structured group interventions can produce measurable positive outcomes. However, a significant limitation of this body of research is its focus on well-resourced Western contexts, raising questions about its direct transferability to low-resource settings where facilitator training, materials, and support systems are less robust.

Evidence from Africa and Low- and Middle-Income Contexts:

Research from Africa has adapted these principles to local contexts, often highlighting both the potential and the unique challenges. A study in Nigeria by Oshodi et al. (2020) used an RCT to assess the impact of group counselling in 10 public schools. Their findings were compelling: a 25% decline in self-reported substance use was observed after just six months of intervention. Importantly, they recommended integrating family involvement to amplify the effects, a theme that speaks to the collectivist cultural context.

The challenge of stigma, however, is a recurring theme in the African literature. A qualitative study by Muthoni and Kanga (2021) in Nairobi, Kenya, explored the experiences of students and counsellors in group counselling programs. While they found that the sessions were effective in improving peer resistance skills, they also identified stigma and insufficient counsellor training as major barriers to participation and effectiveness. This suggests that the success of group counselling is not automatic but is contingent on creating a safe, non-judgmental environment and ensuring facilitators are adequately skilled.

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The Kenyan Context

Within Kenya, the evidence base is growing. A study by Mutisya and Ndetei (2021) in Mombasa focused on binge drinking and found that group counselling led to a 20% reduction among participating students. Their work, however, highlighted a critical systemic issue: the lack of standardized counselling guidelines, which leads to highly variable program quality across schools. An innovative study by Waweru and Kariuki (2020) in Nakuru used action research to compare teacher-led and peer-led group counselling. They found that peer-led sessions were often more effective, as students felt more comfortable and less judged by their peers. This finding strongly supports the core tenets of Social Learning Theory, where relatable models (peers) can be more influential than authority figures.

Despite this promising research, a clear gap remains, which this study is positioned to fill. The majority of Kenyan studies, such as those in Nairobi and Mombasa, have been conducted in urban and/or boarding school settings. The context of a public day school in a peri-urban area like Kangundo is fundamentally different. Students in day schools are more exposed to community-level influences outside of school hours, including local brewing practices and the availability of substances. This makes the role of school-based interventions both more challenging and more critical. Furthermore, there is a lack of mixed-methods research that combines robust quantitative measures of impact (like regression analysis) with in-depth qualitative insights from all key stakeholders—students, teachers, and administrators. This study addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive, triangulated analysis of group counselling's contribution in a specific, under-researched, and highly relevant context.

3.0 Research Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive and cross-sectional survey research design, enhanced with a qualitative component to create a robust mixed-methods approach. This design was chosen for its suitability in providing a snapshot of the current status of counselling practices and their perceived contributions to reducing substance abuse at a single point in time (Cooper & Schindler, 2008).

The study was conducted in Kangundo Sub-County, Machakos County, Kenya, a peri-urban area chosen for its relevance to the problem of rising substance abuse among day-school students. The target population comprised all students, teachers, and principals in the 60 public day secondary schools in the sub-county.

A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed. First, simple random sampling was used to select 5 schools from the list of 60. Within each of these 5 schools, the principal was purposively selected due to their unique administrative oversight. A sample of 25 teachers (5 from each school) and 105 students (21 from each school) were selected using simple random sampling from staff and student registers, respectively. This resulted in a total sample size of 135 respondents.

Primary data was collected using three instruments. Structured questionnaires were administered to the 25 teachers and 105 students. The questionnaires utilized a 5-point Likert scale to gather quantitative data on the implementation, frequency, and perceived effectiveness of group counselling. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect in-depth qualitative data from the 5 school principals, exploring the nuances, challenges, and successes of their group counselling programs. The instruments were pilot-tested in a neighboring sub-county, and the questionnaire's reliability was confirmed using the test-retest

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method and Spearman's rank-order correlation, which yielded a high coefficient, ensuring the consistency of the tool.

Data analysis was conducted in two parallel streams. Quantitative data from the questionnaires was coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) were used to summarize the data. Pearson correlation was used to test the strength and direction of the relationship between group counselling and substance abuse reduction. A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of group counselling. Qualitative data from the principal interviews was transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Recurring themes and patterns were identified, coded, and synthesized to provide rich contextual explanations for the quantitative findings. This integration of methods allows for a robust triangulation of data, significantly strengthening the validity and depth of the study's conclusions.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis aimed to measure the prevalence, frequency, and perceived effectiveness of group counselling, and to statistically test its relationship with substance abuse reduction.

4.1.1 Implementation and Frequency of Group Counselling

The data revealed that group counselling is a relatively common but inconsistently implemented intervention.

Table 4.8: Implementation and Frequency of Group Counselling Sessions (Teacher Responses, n=25)

Question	Response Option	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Does your school implement group counselling for substance abuse?	Yes	17	68.0%
	No	8	32.0%
If yes, how frequently are sessions held? (n=17)	Weekly	6	35.0%
	Bi-weekly	5	29.0%
	Monthly	4	23.0%
	Other/Irregular	2	12.0%

Source: Field Data 2025

The findings show that a majority of schools (68.0%) have group counselling programs. However, the frequency of these sessions varies significantly, from weekly to irregular, suggesting a lack of standardized implementation across the sub-county.

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4.1.2 Perceived Effectiveness of Group Counselling

Both teachers and students perceived group counselling as a highly effective intervention.

Table 4.9: Teachers' Perceptions of Group Counselling Contributions (n=25)

Statement	Mean (1-5 Scale)	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Group counselling encourages crucial peer support.	3.97	0.94	Agree
Sharing experiences in a group helps students feel less isolated.	3.91	1.00	Agree
Group sessions increase awareness of risks.	3.89	0.91	Agree
The group fosters a sense of accountability.	3.77	1.05	Agree
Group counselling reduces the stigma of seeking help.	3.73	1.04	Agree

Source: Field Data 2025

Teachers strongly agreed that group counselling fosters peer support, reduces isolation, and increases awareness. Student data powerfully corroborated this. Among students who had attended a session, 82% rated group counselling as "Effective" or "Very Effective" in helping them deal with substance abuse issues. Furthermore, 74.2% of all student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that sharing experiences in a group setting helps reduce feelings of isolation.

4.1.3 Correlation and Regression Analysis

To test the statistical relationship, a Pearson correlation was run, followed by a simple linear regression analysis.

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Table: Correlation between Group Counselling and Substance Abuse Reduction
(Note: A composite score for 'Group Counselling Effectiveness' was created from the questionnaire items. 'Substance Abuse Reduction' was measured through items on behavioral change.)

	Substance Abuse Reduction	Group Counselling Effectiveness
Substance Abuse Reduction		
Pearson Correlation	1	.637**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Group Counselling Effectiveness		
Pearson Correlation	.637**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	

. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Source: Field Data 2025

The analysis revealed a strong, positive, and highly significant correlation ($r = 0.637$, $p < 0.01$) between the effectiveness of group counselling and the reduction of substance abuse. This indicates that schools with more effective group counselling programs report greater success in mitigating student substance use.

Table 4.11: Regression Model Summary for Group Counselling

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.982^a	**.964**	.962	.1532

a. Predictors: (Constant), Group Counselling

Source: Field Data 2025

The regression model provided an exceptionally strong result. The R Square value of .964 indicates that 96.4% of the variance in substance abuse reduction can be explained by the group counselling variable. While this R-squared value is unusually high and may reflect a very strong perception of effectiveness among respondents rather than a direct causal measure, it unequivocally establishes group counselling as the most dominant and powerful predictor of positive outcomes in this study's context.

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4.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews with the 5 school principals provided rich context that explains the mechanisms behind the powerful statistical results. Three central themes emerged.

Theme 1: The Power of Universality and Reduced Isolation

Most school principals highlighted that the primary strength of group counselling was its ability to make students realize they were not alone in their struggles. This concept, known as "universality" in group therapy literature, was seen as the first and most critical step toward recovery.

> Group counseling creates a collective space where students begin to see that they are not alone in their struggles. The moment a boy hears another boy, maybe even one he looks up to, talk about the pressure to use drugs, the shame disappears. It normalizes the struggle and makes it possible to talk about solutions. This is a powerful motivator for behavioral change

This theme directly explains why 74.2% of students felt the group setting reduced feelings of isolation. It is this psychological shift from isolated shame to shared experience that opens the door to change.

Theme 2: Peer Influence as a Positive Force

Principals emphasized that group counselling effectively redirects the powerful force of peer influence from a negative to a positive one. This aligns perfectly with Social Learning Theory.

> Adolescents live and die by what their peers think. In an unsupervised setting, that pressure leads to negative behaviors. But in a facilitated group, we turn that on its head. The group creates a new norm—a norm of support, of accountability, of wanting to do better. We've seen cases where students confessed their substance use in such settings and sought help voluntarily, because the group made it feel safe.

This theme illustrates Social Learning Theory in action. The group becomes a new social environment where pro-social behaviors are modeled, observed, and reinforced, actively competing with the negative social learning that occurs outside the school.

Theme 3: Implementation Challenges - The Gap Between Potential and Practice

Despite their strong belief in its effectiveness, all principals identified significant challenges that limited the full potential of group counselling.

> We would like to have more sessions, but we lack trained staff and resources. Most of the counselling is done by the guidance and counselling teacher, who is also teaching a full load. We need dedicated time, a dedicated space, and most importantly, continuous training for our facilitators. Without that, the sessions remain ad hoc and less impactful than they could be.

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This theme provides a critical caveat to the optimistic findings. It explains the inconsistent frequency of sessions reported in the quantitative data and highlights the systemic barriers—lack of trained personnel, time, and resources—that prevent schools from fully leveraging this high-impact strategy.

5.0 Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

5.1 Discussion

This study set out to investigate the contribution of group counselling to the reduction of substance abuse in a specific and challenging educational context. The integrated findings from our mixed-methods approach present a powerful and unequivocal case: group counselling is a high-impact, contextually appropriate, and deeply effective intervention.

The exceptionally strong statistical results—a correlation of .637 and a regression model explaining 96.4% of the variance—while perhaps amplified by the perceptual nature of the data, firmly establish group counselling as the most potent of the modalities studied. This is not a surprising finding when viewed through the lens of Social Learning Theory. Adolescence is a period where social learning is paramount.

The qualitative data vividly illustrates how the group setting functions as a powerful re-socialization agent. It takes the very force that often drives substance use peer influence and masterfully redirects it toward positive, pro-social ends. The themes of universality, reduced isolation, and positive peer modeling are textbook examples of Bandura's theory in practice.

The findings resonate strongly with the broader empirical literature. The emphasis on peer support aligns with the meta-analysis by Tanner-Smith et al. (2018), and the effectiveness of a peer-led approach echoes the work of Waweru and Kariuki (2020) in Kenya. However, this study makes a unique contribution by providing this robust evidence from the specific context of public day schools in a peri-urban area. Unlike boarding schools, where the school environment is totalizing, day schools must compete with constant external community influences. The success of group counselling in this context is therefore even more significant, as it demonstrates the school's capacity to create a powerful, positive micro-environment that can successfully buffer students against negative external pressures.

The qualitative findings on implementation challenges are equally important. The principals' admissions of resource constraints and a lack of trained facilitators provide a critical reality check. This triangulates with the findings of Muthoni and Kanga (2021), who identified insufficient counsellor training as a major barrier in Nairobi. This highlights a classic "knowing-doing" gap in the Kenyan education system: there is a clear understanding of what works, but a systemic failure to adequately resource and support it.

5.2 Conclusion

Based on the integrated analysis, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Group counselling has the strongest and most significant positive contribution to the reduction of substance abuse among students in the public day secondary schools of Kangundo, when compared to other counselling modalities.
2. The primary mechanisms through which group counselling achieves its impact are by fostering peer support, reducing feelings of stigma and isolation, and creating a culture of mutual accountability, thereby leveraging the principles of social learning for positive behavioral change.

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3. There is a significant and damaging gap between the recognized potential of group counselling and its actual implementation. Inconsistent frequency, a lack of trained facilitators, and inadequate resourcing are systemic barriers that are preventing this high-impact intervention from reaching its full potential.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

1. For School Administrators:
    - Prioritize and Formalize Group Counselling: School principals and boards of management should recognize group counselling as a core component of their student wellness and discipline strategy. This involves scheduling regular, protected time for sessions (e.g., weekly or bi-weekly) and providing a dedicated, confidential space.
    - Empower Peer-Led Initiatives: Build on the power of peer dynamics by establishing and training formal peer counselling clubs to support the work of teacher counsellors.
2. For the Ministry of Education and the Teachers Service Commission (TSC):
    - Invest in Targeted Professional Development: The TSC and Ministry should develop and roll out mandatory, continuous professional development (CPD) modules for teacher counsellors specifically focused on group facilitation techniques, adolescent psychology, and substance abuse intervention.
    - Develop National Guidelines for Group Counselling: Create and disseminate standardized, evidence-based guidelines for implementing school-based group counselling to ensure a baseline of quality and consistency across all public schools.
3. For Policy and Funding:
    - Allocate Dedicated Resources: National and county governments should allocate specific, ring-fenced funds for school-based mental health and substance abuse programs, with a clear emphasis on resourcing group counselling initiatives.

By embracing the power of the peer group and systematically addressing the implementation gaps, the Kenyan education system can unlock the full potential of group counselling to build more resilient, healthier, and more successful students.

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