



## PREVENTIVE COUNSELLING STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING LEARNING CONCENTRATION AMONG STUDENTS WITH SUBSTANCE USE CHALLENGES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BOKKOS LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

This study investigated preventive counselling strategies for enhancing learning concentration among students with substance use challenges in secondary schools in Bokkos Local Government Area, Plateau State, Nigeria. The study aimed to examine the extent to which preventive counselling interventions influence students' focus in learning, identify the socio-cultural factors affecting their effectiveness, and assess the role of educational support in reinforcing these strategies. The study adopted a descriptive survey design, with a population of 96 students identified as experiencing substance use challenges. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire based on a four-point Likert scale and analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation to test the three hypotheses formulated. Findings revealed a significant positive relationship between preventive counselling strategies and students' learning concentration, with socio-cultural factors and educational support further moderating this effect. The study concluded that structured, context-sensitive counselling interventions are effective in improving academic engagement among students with substance use challenges. It recommended the implementation of targeted counselling programs, integration of socio-cultural considerations, regular awareness campaigns, collaboration with parents and community leaders, and the development of policies to institutionalize preventive counselling in secondary schools.

**Keywords:** Preventive Counselling, Learning Concentration, Substance Use, Secondary School Students.



## Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental period during which cognitive capacities, attention control, and learning habits are consolidated. Substance use during this stage, ranging from tobacco and alcohol to cannabis and other psychoactive substances, poses particular risks to concentration, memory, and school engagement, thereby undermining academic progress. Evidence from multiple contexts shows that substance use in adolescence is associated with impaired attention, reduced classroom participation, higher absenteeism, and poorer test performance, making it a priority concern for educators and counsellors.

In Nigeria, growing reports indicate that secondary-school students are exposed to substance use risks in and around school environments, with local studies documenting alcohol and drug use among youths in Plateau State and the Jos metropolis in particular (community surveys and qualitative reports). These local patterns are worrying because they combine the neurocognitive risks of early substance exposure with contextual stressors, poverty, peer pressure, and limited school-based supports, that magnify harmful effects on learning concentration.

Schools are widely recognized as a front-line setting for primary prevention and early intervention. The literature on school-based substance use services highlights that prevention programmes which are integrated into counselling, health education, and whole-school approaches can improve knowledge, change attitudes, and strengthen protective skills among students, even where reductions in use itself are modest in the short term. Programmes blending psychoeducation, life-skills training, and brief counselling show consistent benefits for attention and classroom functioning because they equip

learners with coping, problem-solving, and self-regulation strategies, skills directly linked to concentration.

Counselling plays a central role in these school strategies. Contemporary models position school counsellors as coordinators of prevention, early screeners for at-risk students, and deliverers of brief motivational and cognitive-behavioural interventions that target substance-related harms and their cognitive sequelae (e.g., attention deficits). Evidence from pilot programmes indicates that structured counselling curricula, delivered individually or in small groups, can enhance students' self-regulation, reduce school-time substance use, and boost on-task behaviour, thereby improving concentration and learning outcomes.

Public-health guidance emphasizes a multi-tiered approach: universal prevention for all students (health education, social skills), selective interventions for at-risk groups (peer support, targeted counselling), and indicated interventions for students with established substance use (brief intervention, referral to specialist services). This layered model is effective because it matches intensity of support to need and preserves school resources while ensuring early help for those most vulnerable, an approach recommended by international agencies and recent reviews of delivery models in low- and middle-income settings.

Despite the theoretical and empirical support for school counselling as a prevention strategy, implementation gaps persist in many Nigerian contexts. Challenges include limited numbers of trained counsellors, lack of formal screening protocols, weak linkages with community health services, and the absence of locally adapted counselling curricula—factors that constrain the potential to protect concentration and academic functioning



among students who use substances. In Plateau State, empirical and programmatic reviews point to the need for culturally appropriate, school-based counselling models that are feasible within existing resource constraints and that specifically target attention and study skills alongside substance-use reduction.

This study focuses on Bokkos Local Government Area in Plateau State because local reports and community observations suggest elevated adolescent exposure to alcohol and other substances in some communities, with consequent concerns about school concentration and performance. The research examines preventive counselling strategies that can be implemented at the school level to enhance learning concentration among students with substance use challenges. Specifically, the study will explore which counselling approaches (psychoeducation, cognitive-behavioural techniques, motivational interviewing, peer-led support) are acceptable, feasible, and perceived as effective by students, teachers, and counsellors in Bokkos secondary schools, and how these approaches influence markers of concentration (attendance, on-task behaviour, short-term retention).

By situating the investigation in Bokkos LGA, the research seeks to generate actionable evidence for school managers and policymakers in Plateau State on scalable counselling interventions tailored to local needs. The ultimate aim is to inform integrated school-based programmes that protect cognitive functioning and promote academic achievement among adolescents facing substance-related risks.

### **Prevalence and patterns of adolescent substance use: global to local perspective**

Adolescent substance use remains a major public-health and education concern

worldwide. Global surveillance and systematic reviews indicate that experimentation with tobacco, alcohol and psychoactive drugs typically begins in adolescence and that prevalence varies by region, socioeconomic status and local norms (World Health Organization [WHO], 2014; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2019). In sub-Saharan Africa, growing urbanization, peer influences, and informal supply chains have contributed to increasing access to alcohol, cannabis and inhalants among young people (UNODC, 2019).

In Nigeria, national and sub-national surveys and agency reports suggest that alcohol and tobacco are the most commonly used substances among adolescents, followed by cannabis and inhalants in some communities. The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and academic studies have documented youth substance use hotspots in urban and peri-urban areas where commercial activities and weak enforcement coincide (NDLEA reports; Adewuya & Makanjuola, 2010). Plateau State, with its mix of urban centres and mining and trading communities, has been reported in local studies and health-sector assessments to exhibit rising adolescent substance use in some LGAs — often linked to peer influence, poverty, family disruption and school absenteeism (local health reports; community studies). These contextual risk factors make school-based preventive responses particularly important in Bokkos LGA.

### **Cognitive and educational effects of adolescent substance use**

Substance use during adolescence has well-documented neurocognitive consequences. Alcohol and psychoactive drugs, particularly when used regularly or at early ages, adversely affect attention, working memory, processing speed and executive functions capacities integral to classroom



concentration and learning (Squeglia, Jacobus & Tapert, 2009; Jacobus & Tapert, 2013). Experimental and longitudinal research indicates that even moderate alcohol use can impair divided attention and learning efficiency, and chronic use is associated with poorer academic outcomes including lower test scores and higher dropout rates (Brown et al., 2008; Meier et al., 2012).

From an educational perspective, impaired concentration manifests as off-task behaviour, reduced classroom participation, incomplete assignments and decreased ability to sustain study over time. These functional impairments explain part of the well-documented association between school substance use and lower academic achievement (Fergusson, Boden & Horwood, 2007). In resource-constrained school systems, the compounded effects of substance use, poverty and weak learning support can accelerate learning deficits, making early preventive interventions crucial.

### **School-based prevention and counselling: models and evidence of effectiveness**

Schools provide a natural platform for preventive interventions because they reach most adolescents and can deliver universal, selective and indicated strategies in a structured manner (WHO, 2014). A large body of research has evaluated school-based prevention programs with various emphases: social competence/life-skills training, normative education, resistance skills training, and multi-component approaches that include family and community components.

**Life-Skills and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs:** Life-skills training (LST) programs, which teach decision-making, problem-solving, coping, and refusal skills, have consistently shown

positive effects on substance use initiation and related behaviours (Botvin & Griffin, 2004). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that well-implemented LST reduces cigarette, alcohol and cannabis use and improves classroom behaviours related to concentration (Tobler et al., 2000). SEL programs, which overlap with LST, enhance students' self-regulation, a key cognitive faculty underlying attention, and have been linked to better academic and social outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011).

**Cognitive-Behavioural Interventions and Brief Counselling:** Cognitive-behavioural approaches (CBT) adapted for adolescents target maladaptive thought patterns and teach coping, self-monitoring, and study-skill strategies that support concentration. Brief CBT interventions delivered in schools (individual or small group) have been effective in reducing substance use and improving attention-related functioning among at-risk youth (Riggs, Sakuma & Pentz, 2006). These interventions are practical in school settings because they are structured, time-limited and can be delivered by trained counsellors or counsellor-teachers.

**Motivational Interviewing (MI) and Brief Interventions:** Motivational Interviewing is a client-centred counselling style that helps adolescents resolve ambivalence about substance use and increase readiness to change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). School-based brief interventions using MI techniques have demonstrated reductions in substance use and increases in engagement with school supports, thereby indirectly supporting concentration and learning (Jensen et al., 2011).

**Peer-led and Whole-School Approaches:** Peer education and peer support programs leverage adolescents' social networks for



positive influence. When integrated into a whole-school approach, combining policy, education, counselling and family engagement, peer initiatives can shift norms and reduce substance use prevalence (Faggiano et al., 2014). Whole-school models that combine universal prevention (e.g., health education), targeted counselling, and environmental policies (e.g., enforcement, safe spaces) yield stronger and more sustained effects than single-component programs (WHO, 2014).

**Evidence syntheses and meta-analyses:** Meta-analyses of school-based prevention have generally concluded that programs emphasizing social competence and resistance skills are most effective, particularly when delivered with fidelity and across multiple sessions (Tobler et al., 2000; Faggiano et al., 2014). Durlak et al. (2011) reported that SEL programs produce a range of benefits including improved attention and classroom behaviour, which are proximal to learning concentration. These findings suggest that counselling strategies that incorporate life-skills, CBT elements and motivational techniques are likely to improve concentration among students with substance use challenges.

### **Counselling strategies specifically aimed at concentration and learning**

While substance-use prevention targets the behaviour itself, interventions that explicitly couple substance counselling with strategies to enhance attention and study skills appear particularly promising for educational outcomes.

**Self-regulation and metacognitive training:** Programs that teach self-monitoring, goal-setting, time management and organizational strategies strengthen students' metacognition and concentration (Zimmerman, 2002). When combined with counselling that addresses substance triggers and coping strategies,

metacognitive training helps students re-engage with learning tasks and sustain attention during lessons.

**Classroom-based behavioural interventions:** Teacher-managed behavioural interventions (e.g., token economies, structured routines, reduced distractions) can support concentration for students identified by counsellors as at-risk due to substance use. Integration of counsellor recommendations into classroom plans ensures consistency and helps transfer skills learned in counselling to the learning environment (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers & Sugai, 2008).

**Family-involved counselling and community linkages:** Family-based strategies (parent education, parent-teacher-counsellor meetings) enhance adherence to prevention goals and support changes in home environments that affect sleep, nutrition and daily routines — all of which influence concentration. Referral linkages with community health or addiction services are necessary for students with heavier substance use who require specialist care (Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 1992).

### **Implementation challenges and contextual constraints in Nigerian schools**

Applying effective counselling strategies in Plateau State's secondary schools, including Bokkos LGA — requires attention to context. Common barriers in low-resource settings include a shortage of trained counsellors, competing curricular demands, stigma around substance use, weak referral systems, and limited parental engagement (Adejumo & Adeyemi, 2016; Oluwole et al., 2018). Cultural beliefs that normalise certain substances (e.g., local brews) and the absence of school policies on substance use complicate prevention efforts. Moreover, variability in school



infrastructure and the absence of private spaces for counselling hinder delivery fidelity. Despite these barriers, adapted, low-cost models such as teacher-facilitated life-skills sessions, group MI delivered by paraprofessionals, and use of peer mentors have shown feasibility in similar Nigerian and sub-Saharan contexts (Oketch, 2017; Onifade & Akinboye, 2020). Successful implementation hinges on capacity building, policy support, community partnerships and monitoring systems. Integrating the evidence suggests that the most promising approach for Bokkos secondary schools is a multi-tiered counselling model that combines universal life-skills and SEL lessons, selective group CBT/MI for at-risk users, teacher-mediated classroom supports, and family-engagement components. Programmes should be culturally adapted, brief and scalable, use existing human resources (trained teachers, counsellors, peer leaders) and include monitoring of concentration metrics (attendance, teacher ratings of on-task behaviour, short retention tests) alongside substance use indicators.

### Statement of the Problem

Learning concentration is a fundamental requirement for effective academic engagement and achievement among secondary school students. However, in recent years, many students in Nigerian secondary schools have exhibited declining levels of attention, focus, and sustained engagement in classroom activities. One major contributor to this challenge is the increasing involvement of adolescents in substance use, including alcohol, tobacco, and other psychoactive substances. Substance use during adolescence has been shown to impair cognitive functioning, reduce attention span, weaken memory, and negatively affect motivation for learning, thereby undermining students' academic performance. In Bokkos Local Government Area of Plateau State, anecdotal evidence

from teachers, school administrators, and community stakeholders suggests that substance use among secondary school students is becoming a growing concern. Peer influence, socio-economic pressures, inadequate parental supervision, and exposure to substance-using environments have contributed to this trend. As a result, many affected students struggle with poor classroom concentration, absenteeism, declining academic outcomes, and behavioural problems. Despite these challenges, structured and preventive counselling interventions aimed at addressing substance-related learning difficulties remain inadequate or poorly implemented in many secondary schools within the area.

Although preventive counselling strategies, such as psychoeducation, life-skills training, cognitive-behavioural techniques, and peer support programmes, have been identified as effective in mitigating substance use and improving students' learning concentration, their application in public secondary schools in Bokkos LGA has not been sufficiently examined. There is limited empirical evidence on the availability, effectiveness, and utilization of such counselling strategies in enhancing learning concentration among students with substance use challenges in the area. Consequently, the persistent problem of reduced learning concentration among substance-using students continues to affect academic outcomes and overall school effectiveness. This gap underscores the need for a systematic investigation into preventive counselling strategies that can enhance learning concentration among secondary school students with substance use challenges in Bokkos Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria.

### Theoretical Frameworks

The study is anchored by Social Cognitive Theory developed by Bandura in 1986. The



theory emphasises observational learning, self-efficacy and reciprocal determinism; life-skills and peer models increase self-efficacy for refusal and self-regulation. These frameworks support multi-component counselling that enhances motivation to change, builds skills, and alters environmental contingencies that undermine concentration.

### Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of preventive counselling strategies in enhancing learning concentration among students with substance use challenges in secondary schools in Bokkos Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. determine the effect of preventive counselling strategies on the learning concentration of secondary school students with substance use challenges in Bokkos Local Government Area.
- ii. examine the relationship between substance use behaviour and learning concentration among secondary school students in Bokkos Local Government Area.
- iii. assess the influence of school-based counselling services on reducing substance use and improving learning concentration among secondary school students in Bokkos Local Government Area.

### Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:

- i. What effect do preventive counselling strategies have on the learning concentration of secondary school students with substance use challenges in Bokkos Local Government Area?
- ii. What relationship exists between substance use behaviour and

learning concentration among secondary school students in Bokkos Local Government Area?

- iii. How do school-based counselling services influence substance use reduction and learning concentration among secondary school students in Bokkos Local Government Area?

### Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses are formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant effect of preventive counselling strategies on the learning concentration of secondary school students with substance use challenges in Bokkos Local Government Area.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There is no significant relationship between substance use behaviour and learning concentration among secondary school students in Bokkos Local Government Area.

**H<sub>03</sub>:** School-based counselling services do not significantly influence substance use reduction and learning concentration among secondary school students in Bokkos Local Government Area.

### Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which was considered appropriate for examining preventive counselling strategies and their influence on learning concentration among secondary school students with substance use challenges in Bokkos Local Government Area of Plateau State. The design enabled the researcher to collect data from a representative sample of students and school counsellors to describe existing counselling practices and students' concentration-related learning behaviours without manipulating any variables. The population of the study comprised all public secondary school students in Bokkos LGA, with particular focus on students identified by school authorities as having substance



use challenges. Using a multistage sampling technique, selected secondary schools were first chosen through simple random sampling, after which purposive sampling was used to identify students with substance use challenges, while proportionate random sampling was applied to select the final respondents. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled Preventive Counselling Strategies and Learning Concentration Questionnaire (PCSLCQ), designed by the researcher based on related literature. The instrument consisted of sections measuring exposure to counselling strategies, substance use challenges, and level of learning concentration. The questionnaire was validated by experts in guidance and

counselling and educational measurement, while reliability was established using the test–retest method. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions, while inferential statistics (Pearson Product Moment Correlation or t-test, as applicable) were used to test the formulated hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

**Results**

**Testing of Hypotheses Using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC)**

Hypothesis 1 (H<sub>01</sub>): There is no significant relationship between preventive counselling strategies and students’ learning concentration.

**Table 1: Pearson Product Moment Correlation on Preventive Counselling Strategies and Students’ Learning Concentration**

Variables	N	r-calculated	r-critical (0.05)	Decision
Preventive Counselling Strategies & Learning Concentration	96	0.672	0.201	Reject H <sub>01</sub>

Since r-calculated (0.672) > r-critical (0.201), there is a significant positive relationship between preventive counselling strategies and students’ learning concentration. This implies that effective counselling strategies are associated with improved learning concentration among students.

Hypothesis 2 (H<sub>02</sub>): Socio-cultural factors do not significantly influence the effectiveness of preventive counselling strategies on students’ learning concentration

**Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation on Socio-cultural factors do not significantly influence the effectiveness of preventive counselling strategies on students’ learning concentration**

Variables	N	r-calculated	r-critical (0.05)	Decision
Socio-Cultural Factors & Learning Concentration	96	0.485	0.201	Reject H <sub>02</sub>

Since r-calculated (0.485) > r-critical (0.201), socio-cultural factors significantly influence the effectiveness of preventive counselling strategies on students’ learning concentration. This suggests that cultural

norms, peer influence, and parental attitudes impact students’ responsiveness to counselling.

Hypothesis 3 (H<sub>03</sub>): Educational support and awareness programs do not



significantly relate to enhanced learning concentration among students with substance use challenges.

**Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation on Educational support and awareness programs do not significantly relate to enhanced learning concentration among students with substance use challenges**

Variables	N	r-calculated	r-critical (0.05)	Decision
Educational Support & Learning Concentration	96	0.589	0.201	Reject $H_{03}$

Since  $r$ -calculated (0.589) >  $r$ -critical (0.201), there is a significant positive relationship between educational support/awareness programs and students' learning concentration. This indicates that awareness initiatives and structured educational support improve concentration levels among students facing substance use challenges.

### Discussion of Findings

The study revealed significant relationships between preventive counselling strategies, socio-cultural factors, educational support programs, and students' learning concentration in secondary schools in Bokkos LGA, Plateau State.

The analysis showed a significant positive relationship between preventive counselling strategies and students' learning concentration ( $r = 0.672, p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that when students are provided with structured counselling programs, their ability to focus on learning improves despite substance use challenges. This finding aligns with Etejere and Ogundele (2018), who reported that targeted counselling interventions enhance students' attention and academic engagement. Similarly, Ndaku (2023) emphasized that counselling strategies tailored to students' specific behavioral challenges significantly improve their academic performance. The finding underscores the importance of implementing comprehensive preventive counselling programs that address substance use to enhance students'

cognitive engagement and learning outcomes.

The study also found that socio-cultural factors significantly influenced the effectiveness of preventive counselling strategies on learning concentration ( $r = 0.485, p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that cultural norms, peer pressure, and parental attitudes can either facilitate or hinder the success of counselling programs. Omoluabi (2016) highlighted that students' responsiveness to counselling is often shaped by their family and community environment. Munir and Amma (2017) further reported that peer influence and cultural acceptance of substance use could reduce the effectiveness of school-based interventions unless these factors are addressed in preventive programs. This finding suggests that any counselling strategy must consider the socio-cultural context of the students to maximize its effectiveness.

Finally, educational support and awareness programs were found to have a significant positive relationship with students' learning concentration ( $r = 0.589, p < 0.05$ ). This implies that initiatives such as workshops, seminars, and classroom-based awareness programs effectively improve students' focus and reduce the adverse effects of substance use on learning. Wilfred (2018) emphasized that continuous educational support helps students internalize healthy behaviors and prioritize academic engagement. Abba and Bello (2024) and Sabanci and Urhan (2024) corroborated that awareness campaigns



complement counselling strategies by equipping students with knowledge and practical skills to resist negative influences like smoking and drug abuse.

### Conclusion

The study established that preventive counselling strategies have a significant positive effect on enhancing learning concentration among secondary school students facing substance use challenges in Bokokos Local Government Area, Plateau State. The findings revealed that well-structured counselling programs, when combined with socio-cultural considerations and educational support initiatives, can significantly improve students' academic focus and engagement. Socio-cultural factors such as peer influence, parental attitudes, and community norms were found to influence the effectiveness of counselling interventions. Similarly, educational support programs, including workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns, were shown to reinforce the impact of counselling strategies. Overall, the study confirms that addressing substance use challenges through a holistic and context-sensitive approach can meaningfully enhance students' learning outcomes in secondary schools.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- 1 Secondary schools in Bokokos LGA should establish structured preventive counselling programs specifically targeting students with substance use challenges to improve their learning concentration.
- 2 School authorities and counsellors should incorporate socio-cultural dynamics into counselling programs, taken into account peer influence, parental guidance, and community norms, to ensure higher acceptance and effectiveness of interventions.
- 3 Schools should regularly organize workshops, seminars, and classroom-based awareness sessions on the dangers of substance use and strategies for maintaining focus in learning.
- 4 Active involvement of parents and community leaders in counselling initiatives should be encouraged to create a supportive environment that reinforces students' adherence to preventive measures.
- 5 Schools should develop monitoring mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of counselling programs and educational interventions, ensuring that strategies are adapted to meet students' evolving needs.
- 6 Educational authorities in Plateau State should formulate policies that mandate the integration of preventive counselling and awareness programs into the school curriculum to systematically address substance use challenges and enhance learning concentration.

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