

Original Research

Leveraging Education to Tackle Substance Abuse among University Students in North-central Nigeria: Implications for Counselling.

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Abstract

Substance abuse among students poses a serious threat to academic performance, mental health, and national development. This study investigated how education can be leveraged to tackle substance abuse among students and examined the implications for counselling practice in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Employing a mixed-methods design, data were gathered from 300 undergraduate students using structured questionnaires and open-ended items. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation, while qualitative responses were thematically analyzed. Results showed that educational interventions significantly enhance students' awareness and preventive attitudes toward substance use ($\bar{x} = 3.40$). A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < .05$) was found between educational exposure and students' preventive behavior. Counselling was identified as a critical factor in promoting self-control, life skills, and positive behavioral change. However, inadequate curriculum integration and weak institutional support limited the overall effectiveness of these efforts. The study concludes that education, reinforced through proactive counselling and community collaboration, is an effective mechanism for preventing substance abuse among students. It recommends strengthening substance education within school curricula, continuous training of counsellors, and building partnerships between educational institutions, families, and community organizations to sustain behavioural reform and student well-being.

Keywords: Education, Substance Abuse, Counselling, Preventive Behavior, Students, Nigeria

1. Introduction

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Substance abuse remains a pervasive challenge threatening the physical, emotional, and social well-being of students worldwide. It has evolved from an individual health concern to a multifaceted social problem that undermines national productivity, public health, and educational outcomes. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023), approximately 35 million people suffer from substance-use disorders globally, with a significant proportion being adolescents and young adults—an age group that constitutes the majority of students in tertiary institutions and universities. This statistic underscores the alarming trend that substance use is no longer confined to adults but has infiltrated the academic and social spaces of young learners.

In Nigeria, the situation mirrors the global pattern. The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA, 2022) reported a troubling rise in substance consumption among higher institutions and university students, with substances such as cannabis, codeine, tramadol, and other psychoactive drugs being most prevalent. Many students engage in substance use as a coping mechanism for academic pressure, unemployment fears, social anxiety, or peer influence. This trend has led to an increase in cases of academic underperformance, violence, and mental health disorders, which in turn threaten the future of national development. The persistence of this issue points to a systemic gap in prevention and rehabilitation strategies within educational institutions.

Tertiary education is a structured and organized system designed for the holistic development of individuals and the transformation of society through teaching, research, and community service. Its core pillars include teaching, research, and the provision of community services (Ogunode, Edinoh, & Okolie, 2023). Education, as both a formal and informal process, serves as a critical tool in shaping behavior, knowledge, and values. It has the unique capacity to inform, reform, and transform individuals' attitudes toward drug use. When effectively leveraged, education can serve as both a preventive and rehabilitative mechanism against substance abuse (Okonkwo & Ibekwe, 2021). Through curriculum design, co-curricular activities, and targeted awareness campaigns, education can promote substance literacy, helping students understand the health, psychological and social consequences of substance abuse. Schools and universities thus occupy a central position in nurturing students' decision-making abilities and moral consciousness.

Guidance and Counselling Units in tertiary institutions are established to provide a range of support services including individual counselling, group counselling, seminar presentations, workshops, and online-based counselling for both students and staff. Although different institutions may refer to these units by different names, they generally deliver similar core services (Adegoyega, Asemota & Edinoh, 2025). Counselling, as a core educational service, plays a transformative role in assisting students to navigate stressors, build resilience, and make informed life choices (Adegoke, 2020). Counsellors are strategically positioned to identify early signs of substance experimentation and intervene before such behavior escalates into dependency. Within the school setting, counselling provides the psychological and emotional support that complements instructional efforts, ensuring that students not only gain cognitive understanding but also develop coping skills necessary to resist peer pressure and manage academic or personal challenges effectively.

Despite the recognized potential of education and counselling, the persistent rise of substance abuse among students in Nigeria suggests a mismatch between educational policies and practical interventions. While anti-drug campaigns and civic education exist in many institutions, their

implementation often lacks consistency, cultural sensitivity, and adequate resource allocation. Moreover, there is limited empirical research exploring the intersection between education and counselling as joint forces in combating student drug abuse. Thus, the problem is not only the prevalence of substance use but also the underutilization of education as a strategic preventive tool.

Therefore, the critical question arises: *to what extent has education been effectively utilized to curb substance abuse among students in Nigeria, and what are the implications for counselling practice?* Addressing this question requires an empirical inquiry into students' awareness levels, attitudes, and behavioural responses to educational and counselling interventions. Such an investigation will not only contribute to academic discourse but also provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and counsellors striving to reduce the scourge of substance abuse in learning environments.

Consequently, this paper seeks to fill this gap by empirically examining how education-formal, informal, and non-formal-can be strategically deployed to combat substance abuse among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions and universities. It further explores the implications of such educational initiatives for counselling practice, with a view to enhancing preventive, corrective, and developmental counselling strategies within schools and universities.

2. Review of Empirical Literature

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

Substance abuse among students is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has far-reaching implications for individual development, academic performance, and societal stability. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) defines *substance abuse* as the persistent or sporadic excessive use of chemical substances that alter an individual's mood, perception, or cognitive functioning, often leading to psychological and physical dependence. Within educational contexts, substance abuse is not only a health issue but also a behavioral and social problem that undermines learning, discipline, and moral development. Eze and Akinola (2020) observed that many Nigerian students experiment with substances such as cannabis, tramadol, or codeine due to peer influence, stress from academic workloads, or a desire for social belonging. Unfortunately, such experimentation often escalates into dependency, resulting in absenteeism, aggression, and poor academic outcomes.

Educational intervention refers to deliberate learning experiences, programs, or instructional activities designed to prevent or mitigate the use of psychoactive substances (Nwankwo, 2019). These interventions range from classroom instruction on the dangers of drug abuse to extracurricular initiatives such as peer education, school clubs, and community outreach programmes. The essence of such educational interventions lies in their ability to create awareness, reshape attitudes, and promote behavioural alternatives to substance use. Education, therefore, does not only inform but also empowers students to make responsible life choices.

Counselling complements education by providing the emotional and psychological scaffolding necessary for behavioural change. According to Akinade and Adediran (2022), counselling helps students recognize their internal resources, confront external pressures, and develop adaptive coping

mechanisms that reduce the likelihood of engaging in substance abuse. In a school setting, counsellors act as trusted allies who offer guidance, empathy, and confidentiality essential ingredients for behavioural reform. Thus, while education imparts knowledge, counselling transforms that knowledge into action and resilience.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study draws primarily from **Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory** and **Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory**, both of which provide complementary lenses for understanding how education and counselling can influence students' behaviour toward substances.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory posits that behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Students, therefore, acquire habits and attitudes by observing peers, teachers, parents, and community figures. If they are exposed to role models who engage in or condone drug use, they are more likely to imitate such behaviour. Conversely, when students encounter teachers, counsellors, and peers who model self-discipline, emotional control, and healthy coping mechanisms, they are more inclined to replicate those positive behaviours. Within this framework, educational programs that incorporate interactive learning, storytelling, and mentorship can effectively reduce the appeal of drugs among students (Okonkwo & Ibekwe, 2021). Counsellors, through their consistent engagement with students, act as social reinforcers providing feedback, encouragement, and validation that sustain behavioral change.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) complements this understanding by highlighting how an individual's behaviour is shaped by multiple interconnected environments -the family (microsystem), school (mesosystem), community (exosystem), and broader society (macrosystem). The model suggests that effective prevention of substance abuse requires synergy between these systems. For example, schools must collaborate with parents, religious institutions, and health agencies to ensure consistent anti- substance messages and supportive environments. In this regard, counsellors function as mediators across these ecological layers, linking students' personal struggles with the broader social systems that influence their choices.

Together, these theories emphasize that substance abuse prevention is not a single intervention but a **holistic educational and counselling process** that integrates knowledge, behaviour modeling, emotional support, and community participation.

2.3 Empirical Evidence

Empirical research consistently demonstrates the critical role of education and counselling in preventing substance abuse among students. In a study conducted across Nigerian universities, Okolie and Eze (2020) found that exposure to structured substance education programmes significantly reduced experimentation rates among adolescents. The study revealed that students who received consistent anti- substance education were 30% less likely to engage in substance use compared to those without such exposure. Similarly, Yusuf and Bello (2021) examined counselling strategies in three Nigerian universities and discovered that individualized and group counselling

sessions contributed to a 40% reduction in self-reported substance -use tendencies. Their study emphasized that effective counselling interventions promote self-control, moral reasoning, and problem-solving abilities.

In another empirical study, Alabi, Omotayo, and Yusuf (2022) investigated the influence of school-based substance prevention curricula on students' coping mechanisms in South-West Nigeria. The results indicated that students exposed to participatory learning such as role plays, debates, and peer mentoring exhibited significantly higher levels of awareness, refusal skills, and confidence in resisting peer pressure. This supports the argument that learning environments that emphasize participation and emotional engagement foster long-term behavioural change. Internationally, Williams and Patel (2020) found similar outcomes among Indian high school students, where participatory substance education was associated with a measurable decline in substance experimentation and improved academic engagement.

Despite the positive outcomes of these interventions, challenges persist. Nwachukwu (2022) observed that many Nigerian schools face acute shortages of trained counsellors and insufficient funding for drug education initiatives. Asemota, Edinoh & Attah (2025) also affirmed that University counselling centers in Nigeria play a critical role in safeguarding student wellbeing, academic success, and institutional climate. Yet, many centers struggle with chronic underfunding, inadequate staffing, limited facilities, low awareness and stigma, weak policy implementation, and insufficient data systems. Counselling units, where they exist, are often under-resourced and undervalued, limiting their ability to provide sustained interventions. Moreover, cultural stigma surrounding substance-related counselling sometimes discourages students from seeking help. These findings highlight a significant implementation gap between educational policy and practical delivery.

Nwankwo (2019) argued that while the Nigerian education system acknowledges the importance of moral and civic education, there is inadequate integration of substance education into mainstream curricula. Teachers often lack the training and materials necessary to facilitate meaningful discussions on substance abuse. Okonkwo and Ibekwe (2021) further noted that anti- substance education is frequently treated as an occasional campaign rather than a continuous process embedded in the school ethos. This lack of consistency weakens students' ability to internalize the desired behavioural outcomes.

Cumulatively, these studies point to a clear conclusion: **education and counselling are powerful yet underutilized tools in addressing student substance abuse.** To maximize their impact, there must be a deliberate effort to integrate substance education into the curriculum, train teachers and counsellors adequately, and establish a supportive school culture that reinforces healthy behaviour.

2.4 Summary of Literature Gaps

While prior research (e.g., Okolie & Eze, 2020; Yusuf & Bello, 2021; Alabi et al., 2022 ;Asemota, Edinoh &Attah) underscores the effectiveness of educational and counselling interventions, few studies have explored how these two elements can be **jointly leveraged** to create sustainable behavioural change among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Furthermore, existing studies

have paid limited attention to the contextual realities of North-central Nigeria, where cultural, economic, and peer factors interact in complex ways to influence substance use. Therefore, this study contributes to filling this gap by empirically examining how education, complemented by counselling, can serve as a multidimensional approach to tackling substance abuse among university students, thereby promoting academic success, emotional well-being, and social responsibility.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **descriptive survey research design**, which is appropriate for examining existing conditions, opinions, and relationships among variables without manipulating them. The design enabled the researcher to collect quantitative data from a large number of respondents to assess how educational interventions and counselling practices contribute to the prevention of substance abuse among university students. The descriptive approach was chosen because it allows for the exploration of participants' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences in their natural settings (Adegoke, 2020). It also aligns with the study's objective of understanding how education and counselling can jointly shape behavioural outcomes related to substance use in academic environments.

3.2 Population of the Study

The population for this study comprised all undergraduate students in selected tertiary institutions within **North-central Nigeria**, including universities, colleges of education, and polytechnics. The region was chosen because of its cultural diversity, mix of urban and semi-urban student populations, and increasing reports of substance-related issues among youths (NDLEA, 2022). According to institutional records and NDLEA reports, the region has witnessed rising incidences of substance misuse, particularly among students aged 17 to 27. This made it an ideal setting for the empirical examination of how educational and counselling efforts can be leveraged for prevention and intervention.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of **320 students** were selected using a **multi-stage sampling technique** to ensure representation across gender, institution type, and academic level.

- In the **first stage**, four tertiary institutions were randomly selected from the region: two universities, one college of education, and one polytechnic.
- In the **second stage**, departments were stratified into education and non-education disciplines to capture diverse perspectives.
- In the **final stage**, respondents were randomly selected from departmental lists using a simple random sampling technique.

The final sample included **180 male and 140 female** students across different levels of study. This composition provided a balanced gender representation and allowed for comparative insights into male and female students' awareness, attitudes, and behaviours toward substance abuse.

3.4 Instrumentation

Data was collected using a self-developed questionnaire titled **Educational Strategies for Tackling Substance Abuse Questionnaire (ESTSAQ)**. The instrument was designed to capture students' perceptions of how education and counselling contribute to substance abuse prevention. It consisted of **two main sections**:

- **Section A:** Demographic information such as gender, age, institution type, and level of study.
- **Section B:** Twenty-five (25) items related to students' awareness, exposure to substance education, counselling access, and behavioural tendencies regarding substance use.

Each item was rated on a **four-point Likert scale** ranging from *Strongly Agree (4)* to *Strongly Disagree (1)*. Example items included:

1. "My institution provides adequate education on the dangers of substance abuse."
2. "Counselling services in my school have helped me cope with peer pressure."
3. "Teachers and counsellors serve as role models against substance use."

This structure allowed for quantitative analysis while still reflecting the nuanced experiences of students in educational and counselling settings.

3.5 Validity of the Instrument

To ensure the instrument measured what it was intended to measure, **content and face validity** were established through expert review. The questionnaire was submitted to three specialists in Educational Psychology and Guidance and Counselling from two Nigerian universities. These experts examined the items for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to improve the wording of ambiguous statements and eliminate redundant items. This validation process enhanced the credibility and academic rigor of the instrument.

3.6 Reliability of the Instrument

Reliability testing was conducted using a pilot study involving 30 students from a tertiary institution not included in the main sample. The responses were analyzed using **Cronbach's Alpha**, which yielded a coefficient of **0.84**, indicating a high level of internal consistency. According to Nunnally's (1978) benchmark ($\alpha \geq 0.70$), this value demonstrates that the questionnaire items were reliable for the main study.

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place over a three-week period. The researcher personally visited the selected institutions with the assistance of trained research assistants. Prior to administration, permission was sought from institutional authorities, and respondents were briefed on the purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. The questionnaire was administered and retrieved on the spot to minimize non-response rates. Out of 320 distributed copies, **312 were returned**, and **300** were found usable after screening for completeness, yielding a 93.75% response rate.

3.8 Method of Data Analysis

Data were coded and analyzed using the **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 25)**. Descriptive statistics such as **frequency counts, means, and standard deviations** were used to answer the research questions, while **Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation (r)** was employed to test the relationship between educational interventions and students' substance - preventive behavior.

The choice of correlation analysis was guided by the study's objective to determine the strength and direction of association between the two variables—education (independent variable) and preventive behavior (dependent variable). The significance level was set at **0.05**.

Interpretations of results were supported by visual representations, including tables and charts, to provide a clear and humanized depiction of patterns and trends among respondents.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was upheld throughout the study. Prior approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of one of the participating institutions. Participants were informed of their right to decline or withdraw at any point without penalty. To maintain anonymity, no identifying information such as names or registration numbers was collected. Data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes. Moreover, sensitivity to the subject matter of substance abuse was maintained by framing questions in a nonjudgmental manner, ensuring respondents felt psychologically safe to provide honest answers.

3.10 Justification for the Methodological Approach

The choice of a quantitative descriptive design and survey method was justified by the study's focus on capturing broad patterns of perception and behavior among a large group of students. While qualitative approaches may provide in-depth personal narratives, the quantitative survey offered generalizable insights that can inform institutional policy and large-scale counselling interventions. Furthermore, the integration of both educational and counselling variables required an approach that could statistically establish relationships hence the inclusion of correlational analysis.

Overall, this methodological structure was designed to ensure validity, reliability, and ethical soundness while producing results that are both empirically grounded and practically relevant to educational and counselling practice in Nigeria.

4. Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate how education can be leveraged to tackle substance abuse among students and to identify the implications for counselling practice. The analysis of data collected from 300 valid responses is presented in this section, guided by the research questions and hypotheses formulated for the study.

4.1 Research Question 1:

To what extent does educational intervention influence students' awareness and attitudes toward substance abuse prevention?

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize students' responses regarding the role of education in influencing their awareness and attitudes.

Table 1

Students' Responses on the Role of Education in Tackling Substance Abuse (n = 300)

Statement	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Decision
Educational campaigns increase awareness of substance risks.	3.62	0.51	Agree
Counselling sessions promote self-control among students.	3.58	0.56	Agree
Substance education is adequately integrated into the school curriculum.	2.78	0.84	Fairly Agree
Teachers serve as positive role models against substance use.	3.44	0.60	Agree
Peer education reduces experimentation with substance.	3.51	0.54	Agree
School-based programs help students understand consequences of substance abuse.	3.47	0.57	Agree

Grand Mean = 3.40

Interpretation: The grand mean of 3.40 indicates a *high level of agreement* among respondents that education positively influences students' awareness and attitudes toward substance abuse

prevention. However, the relatively lower mean (2.78) on curriculum integration suggests that educational efforts are not yet systematically embedded into formal learning structures.

Figure 1 : Students’ Perception of the Effectiveness of Education in Preventing Substance Abuse

Educational Dimension	Percentage Agreement
Education Awareness	90%
Counselling Effectiveness	85%
Peer Support Impact	78%
Curriculum Integration	65%
Community Collaboration	60%

Interpretation: As illustrated in Figure 1, students perceived educational awareness (90%) and counselling effectiveness (85%) as the strongest factors in preventing substance abuse, followed by peer support (78%). However, only 65% acknowledged the effective integration of drug education into the curriculum, reflecting a policy-practice gap in educational planning.

4.2 Research Question 2:

What is the relationship between educational interventions and students’ preventive behaviors toward substance abuse?

Pearson’s Product-Moment Correlation was computed to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between educational intervention and students’ substance -preventive behaviour.

Table 2

Correlation between Educational Intervention and Substance-Preventive Behaviour

Variables	r	p-value	Decision
Educational Intervention vs. Preventive Behaviour	0.68	0.000	Significant

Interpretation:

The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.68, p < 0.05$) indicates a **strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship** between educational intervention and students’ preventive behaviour toward substance abuse. This means that as educational exposure and counselling activities increase, students’ capacity to resist substance use and adopt preventive behaviours also improves.

This finding empirically validates the central assumption of the study: that education and counselling jointly serve as powerful tools for behavioural transformation among students.

4.3 Research Question 3:

What are the key counselling implications derived from leveraging education to prevent substance abuse?

Qualitative feedback from open-ended questionnaire items revealed five dominant themes from students' perceptions of counselling roles in substance prevention:

Counselling Theme	Frequency (%)	Description
Emotional support and guidance	82%	Counsellors help students manage emotional stress and anxiety.
Peer mediation	74%	Counsellors facilitate healthy peer influence and conflict resolution.
Life-skills education	70%	Counselling enhances self-esteem, assertiveness, and decision-making.
Referral and intervention services	62%	Counsellors link students to professional rehabilitation when needed.
Advocacy and awareness creation	58%	Counsellors participate in school campaigns and public sensitization.

These findings show that counselling extends beyond one-on-one therapy to include preventive education, advocacy, and empowerment confirming its indispensable role in sustaining anti-substance education initiatives.

5. Discussion of Findings

The results of this study offer significant insights into the power of education and counselling in combating substance abuse among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The high mean scores (Table 1) affirm that education substantially contributes to shaping students' awareness and attitudes toward substance prevention. These findings resonate with those of Okonkwo and Ibekwe (2021), who emphasized that education fosters behavioural transformation by instilling moral reasoning, civic responsibility, and informed decision-making.

The correlation result ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$) further confirms a **strong and positive association** between educational intervention and preventive behaviour. This supports the assertions of Alabi et al. (2022) and Yusuf and Bello (2021), whose studies revealed that consistent exposure to substance education and counselling significantly reduces experimentation and relapse rates among students. The implication is that educational institutions, when strategically empowered, can serve as effective agents of social reform and public health promotion.

These findings are also consistent with **Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory**, which explains that students learn behaviours through observation and imitation of role models such as teachers and

counsellors. The data from this study demonstrate that when educators and counsellors exhibit responsible conduct and actively communicate anti-substance values, students internalize these positive behaviors. Similarly, **Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory** provides a lens for understanding how the school, family, and community systems collectively influence student behaviour. The relatively low ratings for community collaboration (60%) indicate that while school-based education is effective, broader community engagement remains weak-suggesting the need for multi-sectoral partnerships involving parents, faith organizations, and local agencies.

Furthermore, the study corroborates Adegoke's (2020) position that counselling serves as an emotional and psychological anchor for students, providing coping strategies for managing stressors that often trigger substance use. The thematic analysis (Table 3) highlights counselling functions such as emotional support, peer mediation, and advocacy, which extend beyond academic counselling to holistic life guidance. Counselling, therefore, should not be viewed as a remedial service but as a preventive and developmental process integrated into everyday educational practice.

Despite these positive outcomes, the findings also expose structural limitations. The relatively moderate score (2.78) for curriculum integration suggests that substance education has not been sufficiently institutionalized within Nigeria's tertiary curricula. This observation aligns with Nwachukwu (2022) and Nwankwo (2019), who identified inadequate policy implementation, insufficient counsellors, and weak institutional support as barriers to effective prevention efforts. Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate policy shift toward embedding comprehensive substance education and counselling services in all levels of education.

5.1 Practical Implications for Counselling

The findings have several important implications for counselling practice in Nigeria:

1. **Preventive Counselling Orientation:** Counsellors should shift focus from crisis management to proactive prevention through continuous sensitization, workshops, and peer mentoring programmes.
2. **Curriculum Integration:** Counsellors, in collaboration with educators, should advocate for the inclusion of substance education within general studies and civic education courses.
3. **Capacity Building:** Regular professional development and training for counsellors are essential to keep pace with emerging substance trends and psychological approaches.
4. **Collaborative Counselling Networks:** Counsellors should partner with parents, healthcare workers, and community leaders to create a supportive network for at-risk students.
5. **Policy Advocacy:** Counselling professionals should engage policymakers to ensure adequate staffing, resources, and recognition of counselling units in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

5.2 Synthesis with Global Perspectives

Globally, the use of education as a deterrent to substance abuse has proven effective when combined with counselling and community engagement. Studies by Williams and Patel (2020) in India and Okolie and Eze (2020) in Nigeria show that participatory learning and peer education yield better outcomes than punitive or moralistic approaches. These international parallels reinforce the universality of educational and counselling interventions as sustainable models for youth empowerment and behavioural reform.

5.3 Summary of Discussion

In summary, this study provides strong empirical support for the argument that education complemented by effective counselling plays a decisive role in reducing substance abuse among students. However, achieving sustainable outcomes will require institutional commitment, multi-sectoral collaboration, and the professional empowerment of counsellors. Education and counselling are not merely academic tools; they are transformative processes capable of reshaping the moral and behavioral fabric of the next generation.

6. Implications for Counselling

The findings of this study carry profound implications for counselling practice, policy formulation, and educational leadership within Nigerian tertiary institutions and beyond.

First, the strong positive correlation between educational exposure and preventive behaviour underscores the **preventive and developmental role of counselling**. Counsellors should intensify proactive interventions such as seminars, peer-mentorship programmes, and awareness campaigns that help students build resilience and self-regulatory skills before they become exposed to substance use. This aligns with Adegoke's (2020) argument that counselling in schools must move from a reactive stance to a proactive developmental model.

Secondly, the finding that curriculum integration remains weak calls for a **systematic infusion of substance education into formal curricula**. Counsellors, educators, and curriculum planners must collaborate to embed substance -prevention concepts into civic education, general studies, and life-skill modules. This would institutionalize prevention and create a sustained knowledge framework that reinforces positive student behavior.

Thirdly, the prominence of peer mediation and emotional guidance among counselling functions implies that counsellors must be equipped with **emotional intelligence and group facilitation skills**. Counselling programmes should prioritize empathy-driven communication, stress management, and conflict-resolution training to address the psychosocial triggers of substance abuse.

Fourthly, counselling units must evolve into **multi-sectoral support systems**. Given that substance abuse is a multidimensional problem, counsellors should partner with parents, community leaders, religious institutions, and health professionals to establish holistic support networks for at-risk students. This echoes Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of environmental influences on human development.

Lastly, there is a policy imperative for government agencies such as the **National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA)** and the **Federal Ministry of Education** to recognize school counsellors as critical stakeholders in the national substance prevention strategy. Institutional support, continuous professional training, and the provision of counselling infrastructure are essential for sustaining impact.

7. Conclusion

This study empirically demonstrated that education serves as a powerful tool for tackling substance abuse among university students when strategically aligned with counselling interventions. The data revealed that educational campaigns, counselling sessions, and peer education significantly enhance students' awareness, attitudes, and preventive behaviors toward substance use. However, the limited integration of substance education into school curricula remains a major barrier to sustained behavioural change.

The findings affirm that **education without counselling is incomplete**, as the cognitive understanding of substance risks must be complemented by emotional and behavioral guidance. Counselling provides the psychological bridge between awareness and action empowering students to internalize healthy habits and resist peer pressure.

The study, therefore, concludes that leveraging education to combat substance abuse demands a **holistic, multi-level strategy** - one that combines cognitive learning, emotional support, and community participation. Such an approach will not only reduce the prevalence of substance abuse among students but also promote mental well-being, academic success, and societal stability.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings and implications, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Curriculum Development:** The Federal Ministry of Education should integrate substance education and counselling modules into the national curriculum at all educational levels.
2. **Capacity Building for Counsellors:** Universities and teacher training colleges should provide specialized training on addiction counselling and preventive education.
3. **Peer-Led Interventions:** Schools should establish peer counselling and mentorship clubs to foster student-led advocacy and support.
4. **Community Partnership:** Counsellors should collaborate with parents, religious leaders, and health professionals to extend preventive education beyond the school environment.
5. **Policy Reform:** Educational policymakers should ensure that every tertiary institution has a functional counselling center, adequately staffed and resourced.

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