

Counselors' Role in Addressing Substance Addiction Issues

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Publication history: Received: May 10, 2026; Revised: June 14, 2026; Accepted: June 17, 2026

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Abstract

This study examined the role of school counselors in addressing substance addiction among students, focusing on commonly used substances, contributing factors, intervention strategies, outcomes, barriers, and a proposed plan of action. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study recognized substance addiction as a concern shaped by individual, family, peer, school, and community influences. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 10 registered guidance counselors from high schools within the Tarlac City Schools Division and the Division of Tarlac Province. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings revealed that alcohol and nicotine, particularly vaping or e-cigarette use, were the most commonly used substances among students. Contributing factors included peer pressure, stress, curiosity, self-image, family exposure, easy availability of substances, social media influence, and inadequate coping mechanisms. School counselors addressed these concerns through individual counseling, behavior contracts, follow-up sessions, referrals, peer mentoring, support groups, family engagement, and community collaboration. These interventions contributed to improved self-awareness, healthier coping mechanisms, increased awareness of substance-related risks, stronger peer accountability, and positive emotional and behavioral changes. However, counselors faced barriers such as parental denial, social stigma, limited resources, heavy workload, weak school support, inconsistent policy enforcement, and easy student access to alcohol and nicotine. The study concluded that counselor-led interventions are essential in promoting safer and substance-free school communities. It recommended professional development, awareness campaigns, peer mentorship, regular evaluation of interventions, stronger family participation, community enforcement, and implementation of Project MELANIE. The study supports SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 16, and SDG 17 by promoting student well-being, quality education, safer institutions, and collaborative prevention efforts. Its sustainability impact lies in strengthening public health, educational, institutional, community, and governance responses to student substance addiction.

Keywords: Alcohol Use, Community Collaboration, Guidance Counselors, Nicotine Use, Peer Mentoring, Project MELANIE, School-Based Intervention, Student Substance Addiction, Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

Substance addiction among students is a growing educational, health, and social concern that affects learners' academic performance, well-being, safety, and long-term development. Students are exposed to risks such as peer pressure, academic stress, social normalization of substance use, family and community influences, and limited support services. This study focuses on the role of school counselors in addressing substance addiction among students by examining commonly used substances, contributing factors, intervention strategies, intervention outcomes, barriers, and a possible plan of action to strengthen school-based prevention and response.

1.1 Substance Addiction Among Students and the Need for School Counselor Intervention

Substance addiction is an escalating concern among students worldwide. Adolescents may engage in substance use because of peer influence, academic stress, and social environments that normalize alcohol, drug, and e-cigarette use. Studies indicate that nearly half of students meet the criteria for at least one Substance Use Disorder (SUD) (American Addiction Center, 2024). In high school settings, more than half of students consume alcohol by graduation, making it the most commonly abused substance (Turnbridge, n.d.). Approximately one-third of high school students experiment with illicit drugs, including marijuana, cocaine, and prescription opioids, with 31% of 12th graders reporting marijuana use in the past year. E-cigarette use is also a concern, with 7.8% of high school students currently using them, a decline from 14.1% in 2022 (Birdsey et al., 2023). Among current youth e-cigarette users, over 26% vape daily, while 38.4% use e-cigarettes at least 20 days in the last 30 days (U.S. Food & Drug Administration, 2023). Flavored e-cigarettes remain popular, with more than 87% of current users choosing flavored varieties, particularly fruit flavors (U.S. Food & Drug Administration, 2023). These patterns show the need for school-based prevention and intervention because substance use negatively affects grades, retention, memory, concentration, and overall learning (Turnbridge, n.d.).

1.2 Patterns, Risk Factors, and Effects of Student Substance Use in Related Literature

The literature shows that student substance addiction is influenced by social, developmental, academic, familial, and environmental factors. Peer pressure, curiosity, stress, family background, social acceptance, and accessibility of substances increase student vulnerability. The normalization of substance use in peer groups and media also increases the need for prevention programs that develop decision-making, refusal skills, and healthy coping mechanisms. Globally, substance use among students remains widespread. The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) indicates that approximately 28% of students across 36 countries smoke cigarettes, while 57% have consumed alcohol within the past 30 days. In Sub-Saharan Africa, overall substance use rates among school-going adolescents were 11.3% for alcohol and 2% for marijuana (Kugbey, 2023). In Erbil City, lifetime prevalence rates were 27.6% for cigarette smoking, 23.6% for waterpipe smoking, and 3.7% for alcohol consumption (Mahmood, 2019). These findings show that substance addiction is a global concern that affects both student health and educational systems. In the Philippines, students commonly use marijuana, methamphetamine or “shabu,” inhalants, and alcohol. Nearly 50% of drug abuse cases begin between ages 15 and 19, making adolescents highly vulnerable to substance use (Ochoa et al., 2019). Ochoa, Valle, Dixie, & Villacorta (2022) found that nearly half of student respondents had engaged in alcohol use or cigarette smoking, with alcohol use being more common than smoking. Substance use increased across grade levels, while friends outside school were identified as the strongest influence. These findings highlight the need for early intervention during adolescence and stronger collaboration among schools, families, and communities.

1.3 Global, National, and School-Based Context of Student Substance Addiction

Substance addiction among students is a continuing global, national, and school-based issue. Across contexts, alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and e-cigarettes are commonly used by adolescents, while peer pressure and social exposure remain major influences. In the Philippines, the vulnerability of students aged 15 to 19 emphasizes the need for adolescent-focused prevention (Ochoa et al., 2019). National initiatives have been implemented to respond to this concern. The Department of Education implemented the Preventive Drug Education Program (PDEP) to integrate drug abuse prevention into the school curriculum and promote healthy choices among learners (Department of Education, 2018). The Sulong Kabataan Program also aims to prevent substance addiction among Filipino youth by strengthening refusal skills and life skills through interactive learning, with preliminary evaluations showing improved confidence in resisting substances (Ochoa et al., 2019). School-based incidents further show the seriousness of the problem. A Grade 7 student at Camarines Sur National High School was apprehended for possessing suspected marijuana leaves. In Negros Occidental, a Grade 10 student was apprehended for bringing a hand grenade and dried marijuana leaves to school, prompting evacuation and safety concerns. These incidents show that substance addiction affects not only individual students but also school safety, discipline, and the learning environment.

1.4 Ecological Systems Theory and Conceptual Basis of School Counselor Intervention

This study is grounded in Ecological Systems Theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theory explains that child development is influenced by interconnected systems, including family, school, peer groups, community, culture, social norms, and economic conditions. The microsystem includes immediate environments such as family, peers, and school; the mesosystem refers to interactions among these environments; the exosystem includes indirect external influences; and the macrosystem includes broader cultural and societal factors. Ecological Systems Theory supports this study because substance addiction among students is shaped by individual, family, peer, school, and community influences. For school counselors, this framework encourages a holistic understanding of student behavior and supports interventions that consider both personal risk factors and broader environmental conditions. Conceptually, the study examines the role of school counselors in addressing substance addiction among students through their profile, the substances they commonly identify, the contributing factors they observe, the intervention strategies they implement, the outcomes of these interventions, the barriers they encounter, and a proposed plan of action. The study uses semi-structured interviews to gather detailed information from school counselors and synthesize their insights into school-based prevention and intervention strategies.

1.5 Research Gaps and Rationale for Examining the Role of School Counselors

Although substance addiction among students has been widely discussed, there remains a need to examine how school counselors directly address the problem in the school setting. Existing literature identifies the prevalence, causes, and effects of student substance use, but the experiences of school counselors in identifying substances, determining risk factors, implementing interventions, evaluating outcomes, and addressing barriers require further study. School counselors play an important role in prevention and intervention. They integrate substance addiction education into school programs, recognize risk factors, provide individual support, conduct small group sessions, involve parents, connect students with community services, and apply evidence-based approaches. Counselors are trained to recognize risk factors such as low socioeconomic status, family history of substance use, and peer influence (Allen, 2019). They also provide one-on-one support by discussing resources, therapy options, and community support services (Allen, 2019). Small group sessions may help students share experiences and develop healthy decision-making and coping strategies (Kelly et al., 2024). Evidence-based programs such as Making Choices and Reducing Risk (MCARR) show the value of educating students about substance use risks and promoting healthy choices. Counselors may assess program impact by monitoring student attitudes

and behaviors over time and refining interventions to improve outcomes (Kelly et al., 2024). However, counselors may face barriers such as limited resources, time constraints, stigma, and lack of parental involvement. Therefore, this study is necessary to examine their role and effectiveness in addressing substance addiction among students.

1.6 Alignment of Counselor-Led Substance Addiction Prevention with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns with SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being because it addresses substance addiction as a student health and well-being concern. Substance use is linked to risky behaviors, health complications, legal issues, impaired cognitive functioning, and long-term consequences (Turnbridge, n.d.). By examining counselor-led prevention and intervention, the study supports healthier student behavior and recovery-oriented school environments. The study also supports SDG 4 – Quality Education because substance addiction affects academic performance, attendance, concentration, memory, and retention. Substance use is associated with lower grades, increased dropout rates, and impaired learning (Turnbridge, n.d.). Strengthening school counseling interventions can help create safer and more supportive learning environments. The study is also related to SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions because it emphasizes school safety, prevention mechanisms, and institutional responses to substance addiction. School incidents involving marijuana and safety risks show the need for stronger protocols and coordinated action among educators, counselors, parents, and policymakers (Philstar Global, 2016). It also supports SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals because prevention requires collaboration among schools, families, communities, government agencies, and support organizations.

1.7 Multidisciplinary Sustainability Significance of School Counselor Intervention

The study contributes to public health sustainability by addressing substance addiction as a student well-being concern. Through prevention, counseling, referral, and recovery support, schools can help reduce the harmful effects of substance use and promote healthier outcomes. It also contributes to educational sustainability by helping protect students' learning, attendance, academic performance, and school completion. The study further supports socio-economic, institutional, community, and governance sustainability. Substance addiction may contribute to long-term social problems, healthcare costs, crime, and reduced productivity. Addressing the issue in schools can help prevent these consequences through improved counseling services, referral systems, parental involvement, and prevention programs. Overall, the study is significant because it highlights the school counselor's role as an advocate, educator, intervention provider, and support system for students affected by or vulnerable to substance addiction.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design to assess the role of school counselors in addressing substance addiction among students. This design was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and practices of school counselors in responding to substance addiction issues in educational settings. Through this approach, the study captured detailed insights into how counselors understood the problem, identified student needs, and implemented counseling strategies, interventions, and support systems.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in selected schools within the Tarlac City Schools Division and the Division of Tarlac Province. Both urban and rural schools were included to capture varied educational contexts and examine how factors such as socioeconomic conditions, community resources, and cultural attitudes toward substance use influenced the work of school counselors. This setting provided a broader understanding of the factors contributing to substance addiction among students and the strategies used by counselors to address these concerns.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were 10 registered guidance counselors from high schools within the Tarlac City Schools Division and the Division of Tarlac Province. They had varied levels of experience, educational backgrounds, and familiarity with the communities they served. Their participation provided relevant insights into the substances commonly used by students, the contexts of substance use, and the counseling practices applied in addressing substance addiction.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study used a targeted selection of registered guidance counselors who could provide meaningful information about substance addiction among students. The selection focused on counselors from high schools in both Tarlac City and Tarlac Province to include diverse perspectives from different school settings. This approach enabled the study to gather relevant experiences from counselors directly involved in student support and intervention.

2.5 Research Instrument

The study used a semi-structured interview guide designed to facilitate in-depth discussions with the participating counselors. The guide contained open-ended questions that encouraged respondents to share their experiences, perceptions, and practices related to substance addiction among students. It focused on the substances commonly used by students, the factors contributing to substance addiction, and the barriers counselors encountered in providing support. The instrument also explored substances such as alcohol, marijuana, synthetic drugs, e-cigarettes, and prescription medications. It examined contributing factors such as peer pressure, mental health concerns, socioeconomic challenges, family dynamics, and cultural attitudes toward substance use. In addition, it gathered information on barriers such as insufficient training, lack of resources, stigma, and difficulties in engaging parents and the community.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering procedure began with the submission of a formal permission letter to the Schools Division Superintendent of Tarlac Province and Tarlac City Schools Division. After permission was sought, interviews were conducted with the participating guidance counselors. The interviews began with questions on the respondents' demographic profile, including age, gender, and years of experience, to provide context for their perspectives. The interviews then focused on the substances counselors commonly encountered among students, including alcohol, marijuana, synthetic drugs, e-cigarettes, and prescription medications. Participants were also asked about the factors contributing to substance addiction, such as peer pressure, mental health challenges, family dynamics, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural attitudes. They further described the intervention strategies they used, including individual counseling, school programs, collaboration with support staff, and community partnerships. The interviews also examined the outcomes of counseling interventions in reducing substance use and improving student well-being. Counselors shared observations, success stories, and examples of changes in student behavior and attitudes. They also discussed barriers such as limited resources, inadequate training, stigma, and difficulties in engaging parents and the school community. The collected data served as the basis for developing a proposed plan of action to strengthen the role of school counselors in preventing and addressing substance addiction among students.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study used thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns from the interview data. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to accurately capture the participants' responses. The researcher read and reread the transcripts to become familiar with the data, noted recurring ideas, and generated initial codes from meaningful segments of text. Similar codes were then grouped to form broader themes related to the counselors' experiences, perceptions, intervention strategies, outcomes, and barriers in addressing substance addiction among students. The researcher remained reflexive throughout the process by acknowledging possible biases and considering the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts influencing substance use and counseling practices. The final themes were organized into a structured report that explained how the findings addressed the research objectives.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Profile of the Respondents

The profile of the respondents provides context for understanding the qualifications, experience, and perspectives of the guidance counselors involved in the study. The findings focused on age, gender, and years of service, which may influence how counselors respond to substance addiction concerns among students.

3.1.1 Age of Guidance Counselors

The findings showed that most guidance counselors belonged to the 31–40 age bracket, comprising 50% of the respondents. This was followed by those aged 41–50 at 30%, while the 20–30 and 51–60 age brackets each represented 10% of the respondents. This result suggests that most respondents were in their early to middle professional years, which may provide a balance between experience, adaptability, and active engagement in student concerns. As reported by Zippia (n.d.), school guidance counselors have an average age of 41 years, with roughly 55% being over 40, indicating that middle age is common in the profession and is often associated with professional stability and experience.

3.1.2 Gender of Guidance Counselors

The findings showed that the majority of the guidance counselors were female, accounting for 80% of the respondents, while male counselors represented 20%. This indicates that the respondents were predominantly women. This gender distribution reflects broader trends in the counseling profession. According to Zippia (n.d.) 75.3% of school guidance counselors are women, while 24.7% are men, indicating a significant gender imbalance in the profession. This suggests that the gender composition of the respondents is consistent with the wider profile of school guidance counselors.

3.1.3 Years of Service of Guidance Counselors

The findings revealed that 70% of the respondents had served for 1 to 10 years, while 30% had 11 to 20 years of service. This shows that most counselors had relatively shorter service experience, although some had longer professional exposure in the field. This distribution indicates that the respondents included both newer and more experienced counselors, which may provide varied perspectives on handling student substance addiction. According to Zippia (n.d.), tenure statistics show that many guidance counselors are relatively new to the profession, with 18% having less than one year of experience and 26% having one to two years, while 19% have more than 11 years of experience. This reflects a balance between emerging and seasoned professionals in the counseling field.

3.2 Substances Commonly Used by Students

The findings showed that alcohol and nicotine, particularly through vaping or e-cigarettes, were the most commonly used substances among students. Counselors reported that vaping was perceived by students as less harmful than traditional smoking because it has no strong cigarette odor, comes in appealing flavors, and is viewed as modern or socially acceptable. Alcohol use was also common because of its accessibility and normalization in family gatherings, social events, and community settings. Students were reportedly influenced by peer pressure, academic stress, family exposure, and easy access through online shops and convenience stores. These findings indicate that student substance use is influenced by both availability and social normalization. Johnston et al. (2020) identified alcohol and tobacco as the most commonly used substances among adolescents and young adults, especially in academic settings where peer pressure and social interactions play a significant role. Degenhardt et al. (2016) observed a rising trend in marijuana use due to changing social norms and perceptions of reduced harm, while Lee et al. (2017) emphasized that stress, academic pressure, and mental health concerns often contribute to substance use as a coping mechanism. Republic Act No. 9211 restricts the sale and distribution of tobacco products near schools (Philstar Global, 2016), yet continued sales and advertising near schools show the need for stronger enforcement and awareness (Institute for Global Tobacco Control, 2023). The findings also relate to RSSO-CAR (2018), which reported higher alcohol and nicotine use among male students, and to Sussman et al. (2021), who found that males were more likely than females to engage in risky substance-related behaviors due to peer influence and social reinforcement.

3.3 Factors Contributing to Substance Addiction Among Students

The findings revealed that substance addiction among students was mainly influenced by social pressure, stress, curiosity, self-image, family exposure, easy availability of substances, social media influence, and inadequate coping mechanisms. Counselors identified peer pressure as a major factor, as students used substances to fit in with peers or follow trends. Social media and influencers also contributed by presenting substance use as harmless or desirable. Family behavior further normalized substance use when students observed parents or relatives drinking, smoking, or vaping. Academic stress and limited coping skills also pushed students to use alcohol or nicotine as a form of escape. These findings suggest that substance addiction among students is driven by interconnected social, emotional, and environmental factors. Students who lack healthy coping mechanisms may be more vulnerable to alcohol and nicotine use when facing stress, social pressure, or family expectations. According to Stallman et al. (2020), students often resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms when faced with stress, which can lead to anxiety, depression, and substance use as a temporary form of relief. This supports the current finding that stress, inadequate coping strategies, and social influences contribute to substance use and possible dependency among students.

3.4 Strategies Implemented by School Counselors to Address Substance Addiction

The findings showed that school counselors used individualized interventions, peer-based support, family engagement, and community collaboration to address substance addiction among students. Individual strategies included one-on-one counseling, behavior contracts, follow-up sessions, and referrals to psychologists or other professionals for severe cases. Preventive and supportive measures included peer mentoring, support groups, extracurricular activities such as sports, and awareness seminars. Counselors also collaborated with parents, barangay officials, and community stakeholders to better understand student behavior and regulate access to vape and alcohol near schools. These strategies show that counselors respond to substance addiction through a combination of direct counseling, prevention, monitoring, referral, and collaboration. According to Worthen (2019), effective counseling begins with strong and trusting counselor-student relationships, which help counselors identify risk factors, academic needs, and personal challenges. Allen (2019) also emphasizes the role of peer influence and the value of peer mentoring initiatives where older or more experienced students guide younger peers in making healthy choices. The findings therefore support the importance of trust-based counseling, parental involvement, peer mentoring, and community cooperation in addressing the root causes of substance use among students.

3.5 Outcomes of the Interventions

The findings showed that the interventions implemented by school counselors contributed to emotional and behavioral change among students. Counselors observed improved self-awareness, healthier coping mechanisms, increased awareness of substance-related risks, stronger peer accountability, improved self-confidence, better adherence to intervention plans,

and reduced access to substances through community collaboration. Support groups also provided students with a safe space to express their struggles and develop a sense of belonging. However, the effectiveness of some interventions was limited by parents' inability to attend seminars, lack of follow-through at home, and limited access to psychologists, especially in public schools. These outcomes indicate that counseling interventions can improve student well-being when supported by consistent monitoring, awareness-building, peer support, family involvement, and access to professional services. According to Betters-Bubon and Donohue, education and awareness programs help reduce substance experimentation by equipping students with knowledge and skills for informed decision-making. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) have also been linked to reductions in disciplinary incidents, while counseling and peer support programs improve students' emotional well-being, safety, belongingness, and academic success. These findings reinforce the value of holistic interventions that combine education, behavioral support, counseling, and supportive school environments.

3.6 Barriers Encountered by School Counselors

The findings revealed that school counselors faced several barriers in providing comprehensive support to students with substance addiction concerns. These barriers included lack of parental acknowledgment, uncooperative families, social stigma, strong peer and social media influence, lack of school resources, heavy counselor workload, limited support from school staff, inconsistent policy enforcement, and easy access to vape and alcohol. Counselors also noted that community environments sometimes normalized substance use, making interventions more difficult to sustain. These barriers show that substance addiction among students cannot be addressed by counselors alone. Family denial, stigma, limited institutional support, and weak enforcement of substance-related policies reduce the effectiveness of school-based interventions. According to Lander et al. (2013), many families lack a comprehensive understanding of Substance Use Disorders (SUD) and available resources, resulting in inadequate responses and delayed intervention. This supports the need for stronger parental education, improved school resources, coordinated staff support, and stricter community enforcement to address student substance addiction more effectively.

3.7 Proposed Action Plan for Substance-Free School Communities

The findings led to the development of Project MELANIE: A Model for a Substance-Free Future, a school-based initiative focused on preventing nicotine and alcohol use among students. The project aims to educate, inspire, and empower students to resist substance use through awareness, advocacy, and supportive school initiatives. Its vision is to develop students who make informed and healthy decisions free from the influence of nicotine and alcohol. The proposed action plan addresses family and social barriers by strengthening family involvement, reducing stigma, integrating substance prevention information into school materials, and creating safe spaces for student discussions. It also addresses institutional barriers by enhancing school resources, fostering collaboration among school staff, including substance prevention policies in school governance materials, and proposing support from the Department of Education for training and funding. Policy and enforcement challenges are addressed through collaboration with barangay officials, partnerships with local vendors, and substance-free school zone campaigns using posters, banners, and student-led advocacy. Overall, the action plan emphasizes prevention, family participation, school capacity-building, community regulation, and student empowerment as essential components of a safer and substance-free learning environment.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concluded that most guidance counselors were female, aged 31–40, and had 1 to 10 years of service. Alcohol and nicotine were identified as the substances most commonly used by students, while social influence, stress, and inadequate coping mechanisms contributed to substance addiction. School counselors addressed these concerns through individual interventions, peer support, and community-based strategies, which contributed to emotional and behavioral changes among students. However, effective counseling was hindered by barriers related to family dynamics, social stigma, and institutional limitations, leading to the development of a proposed action plan to strengthen intervention efforts.

The study recommended continuous professional development for guidance counselors through workshops and training on advanced counseling techniques, particularly in substance addiction intervention. Schools should conduct awareness campaigns on the dangers of alcohol and nicotine use, integrate spiritual practices, stress management, mindfulness, and healthy coping mechanisms into school programs, and expand peer mentorship initiatives by training student leaders as role models. Regular evaluation of intervention strategies should also be conducted, while schools should work closely with parents, local authorities, and community officials to enforce laws limiting students' access to alcohol and nicotine near schools and implement the proposed action plan.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study involved semi-structured interviews with registered guidance counselors from selected high schools within the Tarlac City Schools Division and the Division of Tarlac Province. The data gathering procedure began with the submission

of a formal permission letter to the Schools Division Superintendent of Tarlac Province and Tarlac City Schools Division before the conduct of interviews.

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