# Educators' experiences of their relationships with adolescents involved in drug use

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Substance use amongst learners in South Africa has become a significant problem, with relationships between educators and learners being seriously challenged. Educators are often in a position to notice changes in the behaviour of learners and are able to provide support and assistance. A phenomenological, explorative study was undertaken and in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 educators from a secondary school in a high-risk community in the Western Cape. In addition, a World Café group discussion was used in order to tap the participants' collective wisdom. The data was analysed thematically – using positive psychology as a conceptual framework. This focuses not only on what is wrong or pathological, but rather on what is positive, attempting to nurture resilience and strengths in individuals and communities. Two main themes emerged: challenges to the educator-learner relationships, and the educators' skills and strengths in nurturing positive relationships. It was found that educators' personal well-being is important in order for them to deal with these challenging interactions. Educators used a number of skills and strengths in order to overcome challenges and to foster positive educator-learner relationships. A recommendation for future research is to explore the experiences of learners who have used drugs, and sought support from educators, focusing in particular on what aspects hindered and/or facilitated the relationship between them.

**Keywords:** adolescents; drug use; educator-learner relationships; positive psychology; relational well-being

## Introduction

In South Africa, substance abuse rates are on the increase (Van Niekerk, Suffla & Seedat, 2012), especially amongst the youth (Dada, Plüddemann, Parry, Bhana, Vawda, Perreira, Nel, Mncwabe, Pelser & Weimann, 2012). The social, emotional and financial costs of this are high (National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), 2007; Solowij, Stephens, Roffman, Babor, Kadden, Miller, Christiansen, McRee & Vendetti, 2002). According to Ray Eberlien, the acting chairman of the Central Drug Authority (CDA), the annual cost to the South African economy is estimated to be as much as R130 billion (South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), 2011). In South Africa, learner drug use is becoming a significant problem, with a fifth of school learners having tried a drug by the time they finish primary school (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2004). On average, the initiation of drug use in South Africa occurs at the age of 12 years (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2004). Because of the early age of experimentation and the possible progression of drug use to drug abuse and addiction, behaviour related to continued drug use may come to the attention of educators who then need to deal with these challenges.

In the past, schools have dealt with drug use by expelling learners (Department of Social Development, Republic of South Africa, 1999), resulting in strained relationships between learners and parents. Legislation and school policy has changed over time and relational well-being is now recognised as a protective factor (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). In addition, it is important to mention, that the straining of the educator-learner relationship may not be in the best interest of the learner (Plüddemann, Flischer, McKetin, Parry & Lombard, 2010) and may inhibit solving problems the learner may be experiencing. These problems may be exacerbated by the learner having to leave school, which may further affect the chances of success in life (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006). Educators are in a unique position to intervene when they suspect learners are involved in substance abuse, as they are often seen as sources of support for learners to approach when they experience problems (www.teenshealth.org). South African legislation expressly stipulates that schools need to be a supportive environment for learners with substance use problems (Republic of South Africa, 2002). It is recognised that positive educator-learner relationships affect more than just academic outcomes. They also impact behaviour and a sense of belonging within the school context (Liberante, 2012). However, for educators dealing with learners involved in drug use, these problems may lead to less job satisfaction which in turn could affect relationships with learners negatively.

In this regard, the principle of *in loco parentis* is a legal principle that describes the educator-learner relationship as similar to the parent-child relationship, where another adult does not formally adopt a child, but assumes parental responsibilities for a child (Legal Information Institute - Cornell University, n.d.). This principle gives an educator the right (within limits) to act as parent to a child and to take responsibility for the child's well-being. This principle offers some guidance to the educator-learner relationship, with the educator being a guide to the learner, acting as someone who helps equip the learner for the future, motivating and giving assistance to those experiencing stressors (Mashau, Steyn, Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2008). This indicates that a competent educator nurtures positive relationships with learners and is not merely someone who teaches

"content" mechanically (Liberante, 2012). It has been shown that such relationships can act as a protective factor for children facing numerous risks (Bester & Du Plessis, 2010; Mashau et al., 2008).

Drug use may be one such risk, and learners involved in drug use often exhibit problematic behaviour in the classroom, such as inattention and disruptiveness (Liberante, 2012; Stein, 2009). This is because drug use can have a significant impact on a learner's well-being, with specific reference to their ability to achieve, be healthy and engage in their world as well as their ability to have positive relationships. This was corroborated in a study by Van Schalkwyk and Wissing (2010), who found that drug use by adolescents is associated with lower levels of well-being and that this might imply a greater probability of vulnerability, and further problems in relating to peers, parents and, especially, to educators. Quite understandably, it has also been found that educators struggle more to deal with the emotional and social challenges presented by learners than with their academic needs, and they report less confidence in dealing with social and emotional problems (Garner, Moses & Waajid, 2013; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Furthermore, they also tend to show more anger and frustration towards disruptive learners, reacting negatively towards learners who display problematic behaviour in the classroom (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Yoon, 2002). It is therefore clear that behavioural issues such as truancy, poor performance, lack of concentration, aggression and disrespectful behaviour that result from drug use can hamper the educator-learner relationship. Garner et al. (2013) indicate that these experiences may lead to learners feeling unable to access support from the school community.

According to the South African School Act 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996), all schools in South Africa are obligated to adopt a code of conduct for learners that spells out the methods for dealing with problems such as learner drug use within the school community. Specifically, the Government Gazette No. 23490 (Republic of South Africa, 2002) clearly stipulates that schools may not institute primarily punitive measures but that they have a duty to assist learners with substance use problems. However, these documents focus more on the administrative aspects of dealing with these learners and do not lay out explicit and specific guidelines as to how educators might support them. This is potentially problematic, as it may limit the efficacy of educators in dealing with challenges and may lead to educators feeling helpless about these relational problems (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003).

Positive educator-learner relationships are characterised by warmth, active involvement and open communication, which promote academic, social and emotional competence (Kitching, Roos & Ferreira, 2012). This means that when a learner has a positive relationship with an educator, it is possible that this support could assist the learner in becoming able to stop using drugs and to avoid further vulnerabilities to addiction. A study by Meyers, Miller, Hill and Tonigan (1998) bears out that positive educator-learner relationships contribute towards positive outcomes, which may result in drug users entering treatment. Another effect of positive, supportive relationships is that learners engage in less disruptive behaviour and perform better academically (Liberante, 2012). Continuous supportive relations can also lead to learners experiencing a sense of belonging within their school community, which may enhance their overall well-being (Keyes, 2007). It is therefore clear that through positive relationships, educators can be a source of support to learners, and facilitate positive experiences.

Wissing (2014) states that relational functioning is a core component of overall well-being. This is supported by Ryff (2014) who claims that relational health is embedded in those social connections and daily interactions that offer opportunities for well-being. In addition, Kitching et al. (2012) argue that healthy relational functioning is key to positive human development, and Evans and Prilleltensky (2007) state that personal well-being, for example learners' and educators' personal wellness, as well as collective well-being, for example, the school community, is mediated by relational well-being. In a study by Knesting (2008), it was reported by learner participants that the presence of committed and caring educators was even more important than the administrative systems designed to support them. Similarly, it was found that when educators focus on positive interactions and communications with learners, they are better able to deal with learners' problematic behaviour (Mashau et al., 2008). In other words, good quality interconnectedness as ordinary daily interacting is crucial for positive learning environments.

Worldwide, the broader discourse indicates that schools are facing many challenges which threaten relational functioning (Goleman, 2013). Educators face many challenges at school, such as overcrowding of classrooms, difficulties with discipline and learners' alcohol and substance abuse problems. Rothmann and Pieterse (2007) mention the immense impact of educators experiencing burn-out. Clearly, there are a great number of demands on educators in general, and even more on those working at schools in high-risk communities. The impact of these added difficulties on educators' mental well-being and overall health must be considered, since lower levels of positive human health are associated with higher costs at all levels, not merely financial (Keyes, 2007).

The challenges faced by educators may lower their levels of well-being, which then impacts on their effectiveness, leading them to be less able to assist learners in need of assistance. Educators working in high risk communities where there are high levels of substance use may face these challenges on a daily basis. The experience of these challenges can give educators insight into the nature of the relationships of educators and learners who use substances. In order to uncover those skills and competencies that are useful for building relationships with such learners, as well as to identify general guidelines to assist other educators to deal with similar challenges, it is clear that we need to explore the educators' experiences of their relationships with adolescent learners involved in drug use.

### Research Question

In the light of the aforementioned, it is noted that although relational well-being is the key to personal and collective well-being, the educator-learner relationship is seriously challenged when educators face the particular difficulties associated with learners who are involved in drug use. Therefore, the research question of this study has been formulated as follows: What are educators' experiences of their relationships with adolescent learners involved in drug use?

## Method

### Empirical Study

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was used as the study was explorative, describing and focusing on understanding the lived experiences of individuals in their social context (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011; Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). A search of many databases yielded articles that focused on educator-learner relationships in general, but none were found that specifically focused on educators and their relationships with learners involved in drug use. In-depth and rich data was therefore required in order to gain insight and understanding into the phenomenon.

### Participants

A non-probability purposive sample of 16 participants was used. All participants were secondary school educators who worked in a school community in Cape Town. This community has been identified as one of 20 high-risk communities in South Africa (Captain Williams, pers. comm.) where there is a high incidence of drug abuse and addiction. Participants were specifically chosen because they had experience in dealing with learners involved in drug use. The school's headmaster acted as gatekeeper. Participants were approached by a mediator, who was one of the educators appointed by the school's headmaster. Of the 16 participants, seven were male and nine were female. The average age of the participants was 41 years. Their average number of years' teaching experience was 15 years, with a maximum of 25 years and a minimum of three years. There was a great deal of variability in the number of years the educators had worked in the particular high risk community, ranging from 1 year to 19 years, with an average of seven years. The interviews and World Café discussion were both conducted on the school premises. Interviews were performed during free periods and the World Café session was implemented immediately after school one day. Participants were not paid to participate. However, they were given tea, coffee and light snacks during the World Café session.

Initially, in-depth individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants, where open-ended questions regarding their experiences with learners involved in drug use were posed. An interview schedule was used in order to ensure consistency in the questions asked. These interviews were audio-recorded, with participants' permission, and then transcribed verbatim. Questions for the second data capturing method, namely the World Café group discussion, evolved from the individual interviews. The participants of the World Café discussion were the same 16 participants that had participated in the individual interviews. In the World Café, four instructions were given to participants who gathered in small groups of four. These were as follows:

1. Write or draw something that explains how you see educators as a source of support for adolescent learners involved in substance use (within the school community).
2. Write or draw something that explains how educators and/or the school go about creating an environment where learners feel they can get support.
3. Write or draw something that explains what you feel is the best way for an educator to address the issue of learners using substances while still building the relationship with the learner.
4. Write or draw something about how the level of well-being of the educator impacts on building relationships with learners (focusing on both constructive aspects as well as obstacles).

Responses of participants were audio-recorded with the permission of all participants and then transcribed.

The trustworthiness of data was ensured through the use of crystallisation where multiple perspectives explain the data (Tracy, 2010). In order to attain crystallisation, more than one method was used to collect data, with in-depth interviews followed by a group activity using the World Café discussion method. Emerging themes were checked with participants (Tracy, 2010) in the World Café discussion, adding to the trustworthiness of the study.

## Data Analysis

The data from the interviews and the World Café session were subjected to thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The following six-phased process was used. First, familiarisation of the data was achieved by reading and re-reading the data with a view to identifying important ideas. Second, provisional codes were created from the ideas identified in the previous phase. The transcripts were printed out in full and notes were made to assist identification of provisional themes. Third, codes were combined and reorganised to create broader themes. Fourth, combined codes were then refined to identify the links between them. Fifth, the themes were named, and finally, the themes were presented as the research findings.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted for the study by the North West University, under the approval number NWU-00060-12-A1. In addition, the Western Cape Department of Education gave approval for the study to be conducted in a specific school in the Province. Thereafter, permission was gained from the principal of the school concerned and a mediator was appointed to facilitate the practical aspects of the data-collection. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were told that all identifying information would be kept safe and confidential, and that no personal information about the participants would be revealed. Informed consent was given by all the educators involved in the study. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the study, the Department of Education's counselling helpline, as well as Lifeline, were informed about the study, and when it was scheduled to take place. Next, all participants were informed about the availability of counselling services, should they feel the need to make use of them. Cards advertising the contact details of Lifeline, as well as the Department's helpline, were placed on all tables during the group activity.

## Results and Discussion

From the thematic analysis, the following two themes emerged with a number of sub-themes attached to each:

- challenges to the educator-learner relationship
- skills and strengths for nurturing positive relationships

| Main Themes | Challenges to the educator-learner relationship | Skills and strengths for nurturing positive relationships |
|---|---|---|
| Sub Themes | Emotional challenges | Educator motivation |
| | Behaviour that constrains relationships | Being approachable |
| | Pressure to play multiple roles | Being flexible |
| | | Investing time in learners; knowing the learner and the learner's context |
| | | Listening skills |
| | | Encouraging and empowering |
| | | Setting boundaries |
| | | Being a positive role model |
| | | Following up and trust-building |

The themes and sub-themes are discussed below. The discussion of the findings is presented using the positive psychology approach, because the science of positive functioning encompasses psychological, emotional and social dimensions of well-being.

## Challenges to the Educator-Learner Relationships

Educators experience a number of challenges with regard to building and maintaining relationships with learners involved in drug use. Three sub-themes emerged from the data: emotional challenges; behaviour that constrains relationships; pressure to play multiple roles. The participants reported serious challenges to the learner-educator relationship in the form of mixed and difficult emotions such as fear, disappointment and despondency. In literature focusing on the general experience of educators when dealing with "misbehaviour", emotions of anger and frustration have been those most commonly reported (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003), along with feelings of being overwhelmed by difficulties in connecting with learners, in particular, those at risk of emotional problems (Johnson, Eva, Johnson & Walker, 2011). Each sub-theme will now be discussed.

### Emotional challenges

Well-being theory states that the deliberate use of positive emotions, for example gratitude, inspiration and humour, can lead to more flexible and creative thinking (Fredrickson, 2013). On the other hand, negative emotions limit the ability to pay attention and solve problems (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Participants reported various negative emotions, such as disappointment, fear and a lack of trust, expressed as "*...you can't trust them, because they will disappoint you*" (P5).

Although there are contextual differences between the educators dealing with learners who have 'normal' emotional problems, for example, the effective managing of intense emotions associated with adolescence, and those educators dealing with learners involved in substance abuse, the

effects of the negative emotions can influence educators in a similar way. These effects include feelings of ineffectiveness (Diener, 2006). This is important because positive relations are about positivity resonance, while negativity resonance constrains relationships, and could hold serious threats to interpersonal connections (Diener, 2006; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

The following verbatim response supports this:

> P15: *You getting to a point where you feel despondent towards the learner because learners absolutely not listening, um, to a point where, you know you really just don't, you feel that there's just so much distance between yourself and the learner that nothing can be done.* [sic]

### Behaviour that constrains relationships

There were also many reports of the way in which a learner's behaviour, such as disrespect to educators, aggression, rudeness, not coming to class, avoidance and even dropping out of school, clearly affected the emotions of the participants and made it very difficult for them to have positive relationships with the learners. Participants highlighted their own behaviour, which hampered relationship building, such as avoiding the learner. Both educator and learner therefore make use of avoidance strategies in order to sidestep more personal relationships with one another. And yet, this behaviour (Garner et al., 2013; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003) can have a reciprocal effect, creating a negative feedback cycle (Zineldin & Hytter, 2012).

The following verbatim response supports this:

> P16: *They tend to be more aggressive, also, ja, that's it; and just that 'nevermind attitude' and also very being, being very nonchalant about things, and eh, they will even back-chat you or they will insult you as the educator, that's what happens, yes.* [sic]

In particular, if the educator raised concerns about behaviour to the learner, they would come to class less frequently, and eventually not at all.

> P5: *When you start asking them, you will find that they come less to your class and they will start bunking and then eventually when it's by the time we must bring his parents in, he's out of the school.* [sic]

### Pressure to play multiple roles

The selected high-risk community has a high rate of single parent families and poverty, as well as alcohol and drug abuse, and domestic violence (Strategic Development Information & Geographic Information System (GIS) Department, 2013). Apart from the many difficulties linked to extreme poverty, there is also a lack of access to mental health facilities and rehabilitation centres. Confronted with these realities, educators experience extra pressure to fulfil the roles of social worker or care-giver, in addition to being an educator. Sutton and Wheatley (2003) found that when major role responsibilities are not fulfilled by appropriate roleplayers, such as parents, it can influence children negatively. In addition, Billingsley (2004) and Singh and Billingsley (1996) found that educators who experience role conflicts and ambiguity may deal with negativity. Negative stress of role expectations is associated with decreased levels of job satisfaction with detrimental effects on overall well-being (Billingsley, 2004; Zineldin & Hytter, 2012). So, although the participants were often willing to go this extra mile for their learners, these efforts often implied negative stress and decreased levels of well-being.

The following verbatim response supports this:

> P9: *Most of the parents will come to school to talk about their own child, but they think, like, if we do have the solution to the problem whereby we are only the educators, we are not; sometimes it feels to me like: 'I'm the mother, I'm an educator, I'm a social worker', but it's deeper than that, it's deeper than that, yes.* [sic]

## Skills and Strengths for Nurturing Positive Relationships

The second theme entails the requisite skill set that educators use to nurture positive relationships with learners involved in drug use. Freiberg and Lamb (2009) emphasised that we cannot think about education without relationships. Kitching et al. (2012) found that respectful interacting had the effect of creating nurturing relationships. Patton, Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Butler, Glover, Catalano and Bowes (2006) established that such relationships and a healthy sense of belonging decreased particular types of problem behaviours, in particular drug abuse.

Participants reported a number of competencies which enabled them to encourage healthy relationships. Several sub-themes emerged from the data, namely: educator motivation; being approachable; being flexible; investing time in learners; knowing the learner and the learner's context; listening skills; encouraging and empowering; setting boundaries; being a positive role model; following up, and building trust. Each subtheme will now be discussed below.

### Educator motivation

Most participants spoke about experiences that kept them motivated when they struggled to cope. For this reason, educator motivation appears to be the way in which participants deal with the challenging and mixed emotions mentioned in the sub-theme, emotional challenges. Many spoke of how their job involved "a calling", where they experienced a sense of lifelong purpose to make a difference in the lives of learners. This viewpoint, that being an educator presupposes a vocation, motivated par-

ticipants to cope effectively with stressors associated with their profession (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis & Gruen, 1986). It was important to participants to appraise negative situations, such as learners' rude or insulting behaviour. This is consistent with studies by Blank, Adams, Kittelson, Connors and Padden (2012) and Folkman et al. (1986), where positive meaning was found to have been created from a situation, in order to facilitate healthy coping and perseverance.

The following verbatim response supports this:

> P6: *There are few people that in XXX that they are good, so at the end of the day one shouldn't judge the book by its cover, just because in one of the houses in XXX there's a possibility, in one of the houses in XXX of the learners, who are studying here in school, there's a possibility that one day they will be a lawyer, they will be a judge, they will be a magistrate. So at the end of the day I need to be part and parcel of that.* [sic]

### Being approachable

Being approachable has also been mentioned in various studies as one of the key traits of an effective educator (Gurung & Vespia, 2007; Mokhele, 2006; Peel, 2000). Participants understood that learners might be reluctant to disclose their problems if they thought they would be criticised, blamed or judged by the educator. Knesting (2008) found that learners would only approach educators when they felt safe and respected.

The following verbatim response supports this:

> P4: *If you want to talk, my room is open, you can come, break time, you need help after school, because they are leaving at two, half-two then you'd be leaving at three, I said after half past two you can come to my class, I always open the door for them and it works.* [sic]

### Being flexible

Flexibility towards the learners involved in drug use was explained as the needed wisdom not to apply school rules as "one size fits all". It was pointed out that if educators were too strict, learners would be reluctant to approach them and this would hinder the formation of positive relationships. Gurung and Vespia (2007) found that flexibility contributes towards an educator's likeability. However, the participants were also aware there were times when they needed to be consistent in their treatment and dealings with all learners, in particular when dealing with behavioural problems in a classroom context.

The following verbatim response supports this:

> P7: *A child must have a letter if a child stays absent, but sometimes you need, it's important if you know the history, let it slide if a child come back, welcome that child, we did this, you need to complete this and let the child assimilate back into class and then continue.*

### Investing time in learners

Participants reported that spending time with learners was important in the process of forming positive relationships with them. Research by Hamre and Pianta (2006) also support the fact that making time for learners is a way to help the process of building relationships.

The following verbatim response supports this:

> P5: *The relationship with them, because they in your car, you give them the key and then they will say, look Mr X I came in the running, I came third or second and now that relationship is way better than in class, and afterwards, you will see that that learner's much better in class as well, because he's with me after school as well.* [sic]

### Knowing the learner and the learner's context

Participants expressed the importance of having some information about the learners, as this would alert them to possible problems in the learners' personal lives. Participants all agreed that it was important to know and understand where learners came from, treating every learner and situation as individual, as (P7) stated "not taking a hammer and beating everything down". Without an understanding of the personal circumstances of the learner, it was difficult to understand the motives and behaviours that the learner displayed. Freiberg and Lamb (2009) emphasise the importance of knowing learners in order to connect with them.

> P3: *Don't just judge that child and say: 'you are bad and what and this'. Like I told you, go a little deeper. You don't know what is wrong at home. Some of their parents even sell this stuff, some of their parents they every ... I know of a learner, one of my previous schools, you know that even the grandmother tik'ed* [used the drug Tik]. [sic]

### Listening skills

Participants reported the primary function of the educator, in situations where a learner had a problem, to be listening. Participants spoke about allowing the learner to talk and just listening to what they were saying. It was highlighted that, at times, learners might need guidance in talking about their lived experiences. Existing research supports this idea, namely that intentional listening and knowing what is going on could enable educators to provide support, as well as to take appropriate action (Knesting, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

The following verbatim response supports this:

> World Cafe: *Now your help, your help is listening.* [sic]

### Encouraging and empowering

Many participants emphasised the importance of

empowering learners by providing emotional support and enabling the learners to take responsibility for their own problems. When learners were struggling, most of the participants mentioned the significance of encouraging the learner by acknowledging his/her strengths and capabilities. In support of this, Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich and Linkins (2009) speak about the importance of recognising our positive strengths, which lead to feelings of greater satisfaction with their achievements and their lives.

The following verbatim response supports this:

> P14: *That's when I start encouraging him, telling him, showing him the better picture of if you leave that this is what can happen and I always praise him for, because I know he is a very good student, he's a very good dancer and I always refer to those two things.* [sic]

### Setting boundaries

The participants agreed that it was important to have boundaries with the learners, so that the learners could take responsibility for themselves and thus become empowered. This involved being able to outline specifically what the learner needed to do, and what the educator undertook to do. According to Knesting (2008), effective educators communicate their expectations in an effective way to their learners.

The following verbatim response supports this:

> World Café: *Um, learner was sent to the clinic and I used to check up, that's why, like the follow up is important, like whether he has his card on him, did you go for your, the tests this week um, so I used to check up on those things right, but I mean at the end of the day, it's becomes their choice on whether they, whether they want to come out with it, because I mean I think I gave, I've given so much support to that learner, um and I think that's where you need to also maybe draw a boundary um to what you are going to do, um how far you going to help a learner.* [sic]

### Being a positive role model

Educators expressed their aspirations to be an example to learners, and to be a positive role model in the school community. Many participants shared their views about how their personal experiences of family members dealing with substance abuse or addiction had led them to a better understanding of the learners involved in drug use. There were participants with family members, who were addicted to drugs, and one participant even shared his own personal struggle with alcoholism. Educators who did not have personal experiences with addiction shared their experiences of growing up in similar social circumstances to the learners. In this way, the educators were able to use their personal experiences to model positive behaviour to the learners. In a study by Mazer, Murphy and Simonds (2009), it was noted that educators who self-disclose are seen as more trustworthy and caring, which would help in the further building of positive relationships. Participants attempted to show learners their understanding, so as to inspire those learners with their own tales of resilience.

The following verbatim response supports this:

> P6: *I normally refer them to myself, just because I've been there, I've [...] grew up in the township you see, so I know how life is in the township. I did smoke, I did drink, so at the end of the day, I'm talking from personal experience that these things are not gonna take them anywhere.* [sic]

### Following up and trust

Participants were of the opinion that following up with learners about how they were doing and taking an interest in them was very important. It was highlighted that the participants were concerned that, without care and support, the learners might be at heightened risk of dropping out. Hamre and Pianta (2006) also indicated the importance of following up with learners. The participants felt that because learners had often experienced people disappointing them, it was important for the learner to see that their educator could be trusted and cared about them.

The following verbatim response supports this:

> P7: *It is something I've learned very early in my, in my, um, relationship with my learners. Because I taught at a school in Uitsig, where gangsterism used to be rife, that the family members could either be, um, in prison etc. that you've learned that, it mustn't change your relationship with them um, because we call it in Afrikaans 'drop' them. And maybe you are the only anchor that they are holding onto.* [sic]

The intentional use of such skills and strategies as outlined above is vital in creating a supportive and accepting school community. And yet, in education today, there is often such great emphasis on achievement, performance and results that the relational aspects are not attended to sufficiently (Osterman, 2000; Seligman et al., 2009). This can be a problem in education, since the deliberate building of quality relations can encourage upward spirals of personal and collective well-being (Osterman, 2000; Seligman et al., 2009).

The empirical results of this research project have given some insight into the challenges that are faced by educators dealing with learners involved in drug use. It has also highlighted the ways that educators, through their own lived experiences, have found means by which to cope with these challenges, whilst still nurturing positive relationships with such leaners. Findings indicate that when learners who are involved in drug use are exposed to the magnitude of hardships related to a high-risk community, the educator-learner relationship is a vital life-line.

## Recommendations

A recommendation for school communities is to enhance the well-being of educators in a deliberate manner, in particular, creating a mutual environment of care and concern at the individual and organisational level. The well-being of educators themselves is important, and particularly for learners involved with drug use, toward resourceful interactions and healthy relations within the school community. Also, burnout of educators poses a significant risk and preventative measures need to be put in place. For this reason, educators' well-being is important and needs to be purposefully protected and promoted through various means.

Furthermore, future research may also focus on the experiences of the learners involved in substance use themselves, and the nature of their relationships with their educators, exploring what they found to be helpful in building and maintaining those relationships.

## Limitations

A limitation of the study is that the findings cannot be generalised, as participants were not representative of all educators and South African cultures. However, much rich information about their experiences can be used to assist educators who may find themselves in similar circumstances.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, educators are faced with many challenges in the building and maintaining of relationships with those learners involved in substance abuse. The pressure to play multiple roles within the school context, experiences of mostly negative emotions, and dealing with rude behaviour from learners, constrains relationships. Experienced educators, however, shared their collective knowledge of what has worked for them, leading to a number of general principles, such as being approachable, following up with learners, knowing the high-risk context learners live in and maintaining motivation in the face of adversity. These principles are especially important in high risk communities, where resources are scarce and the opportunities for assistance are limited, meaning that the educators themselves may be the only professionals with whom these learners come into contact.

This study offers a distinctive contribution to the science of positive psychology, by illuminating the relevance of positive interrelatedness in the context of a school community situated in a high-risk community. Despite many challenges, educator-learner relationships are important networks of mutual support.

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