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10 September 2025

UCT study finds lack of trust in combating learners' substance abuse

Parents and school staff feel let down by lack of support from government



Dr Amanda Manqoyi-Ouamba

Photo: Supplied

Collaboration in managing learner substance use and abuse remains challenging, especially regarding parental involvement, according to a University of Cape Town (UCT) study, which sought to understand how the growing concern about learner substance use and abuse occurring in schools was being managed.

Many schools reported that parents are either difficult to contact or unresponsive.

"In cases where parents cooperate with the schools and a learner is successfully referred to a rehabilitation and treatment service, many of these services charge fees, which many parents cannot afford. As a result, these learners stay in the system and continue to disrupt the learning environment," says Dr Amanda Manqoyi-Ouamba about the findings of her PhD in [Social Work](#).

Manqoyi-Ouamba's thesis, titled: "Examining the role of trust in collaborative efforts in the management of learner substance abuse issues in schools: perspectives of parents, teachers, and school principals in Cape Town", was a deeper exploration of the key themes covered during her master's degree.

"The themes of trust and collaboration emerged consistently from every participant I interviewed in that study. I decided that I would explore these themes further in my PhD study," she says.

"I believe that addressing this issue requires collective effort; therefore, I was interested in exploring whether collaborative strategies exist in schools and what they look like. I wanted to hear experiences and perspectives from those on the frontline of response, the parents, teachers and school principals, to learn how they work together to address this escalating problem," says Manqoyi-Ouamba.

"Furthermore, I sought to understand how collaboration fosters mutual trust, which may enable more effective interventions for learners affected by substance use, allowing them to receive the support they need."

She says another issue raised was the lack of support from the government and the Department of Basic Education.

"Teachers and principals in the study reported feeling abandoned and left to manage on their own. Both parents and school staff feel let down by the lack of support from the Department of Basic Education and the government. When it comes to trust and collaboration, I discovered that trust is essential for building relationships, but in schools, it is a complex process shaped by role interdependency, power dynamics, individual positions, events and context.

"For example, many parents readily trust teachers and school principals to prioritise their children's academic needs. However, when it comes to reporting suspicions of substance use or abuse, parents often hesitate to come forward due to fears that their child may face suspension or expulsion from school," she explains.

Manqoyi-Ouamba says the study seeks to illuminate the escalating issue of learner substance abuse within our schools and to advocate for enhanced intervention strategies to address this critical problem effectively.

"I contend that the current framework for managing this issue is inadequate, as it predominantly relies on teachers and school principals, individuals who often lack the necessary training and expertise to act as first responders. Evidence gathered from this study indicates that both school principals and teachers are struggling to cope with these challenges."

She says substance abuse is a complex issue that requires specialised knowledge and skills, as well as a nuanced understanding of the principles of intervention.

"Unfortunately, the training provided to educators does not encompass these vital areas. The Department of Basic Education and government authorities must prioritise the well-being of our children by ensuring that trained professionals are available in schools around the clock. School social workers are particularly well-positioned to intervene in these situations, given their specific roles that include screening, problem identification, assessing learner needs, and providing targeted intervention services.

"Furthermore, their expertise extends to offering support for both parents and school staff. Delegating these responsibilities to school social workers will not only reduce the burden on teachers and school principals but will also facilitate a more conducive learning environment in our schools," she says.

Manqoyi-Ouamba graduated for her PhD in Social Work at UCT's Sarah Baartman Hall on Wednesday, 10 September 2025.

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