

Reclaiming the Future: A Philosophical Exploration of the Role of Education in Preventing Drug Abuse and Promoting Sustainable Development Among Youths in Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State Nigeria

Prof. (Barr.) Samuel Asuquo Ekanem, Dr. Chinenye Precious Okolisah, Yohanna Amachondi Hikon

Department of Philosophy Federal University Wukari, Taraba State -Nigeria

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0095>

Received: 24 January 2026; Accepted: 29 January 2026; Published: 25 February 2026

ABSTRACT

Youth drug abuse in Nigeria has emerged as both a public health crisis and a threat to national stability, with prevalence rates far above global averages. In Wukari Local Government Area (LGA) of Taraba State, empirical findings reveal that drug abuse among youths is closely linked to poverty, unemployment, inadequate prevention training, and the absence of a deliberate education policy aimed at curbing substance use. This paper philosophically and empirically interrogates these findings, situating them within John Dewey's democratic education, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, and Amartya Sen's capability approach. Drawing on a mixed methods study of 500 youths aged 15–29 in Wukari, the study found that over 40% reported lifetime use of psychoactive substances, often connected to violence and conflict. The paper advances an “ESD-Plus” (Education for Sustainable Development + Evidence-Based Prevention) model, proposing an integrative approach that combines school-based prevention, vocational capability-building, and community peace education. It concludes by recommending policy realignment between Nigeria's National Drug Control Master Plan (2021–2025), the National Policy on Education (2013), and UNESCO's ESD 2030 framework. Education, reconceptualized as liberation, habit-formation, and capability expansion, is presented as the most effective means of reclaiming the future for Wukari's youth and beyond.

Keywords: Drug Abuse, Wukari, Nigeria, Philosophy of Education, Youth Development, Sustainable Development, Critical Pedagogy, Capabilities

INTRODUCTION

Drug abuse among Nigerian youths represents one of the most pressing challenges confronting public health, social stability, and sustainable development. The 2018 National Drug Use Survey, conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), found that 14.4% of Nigerians aged 15–64 years approximately 14.3 million people used psychoactive substances in the past year, excluding alcohol and tobacco (UNODC/NBS 19). This figure is nearly three times the global average and highlights the disproportionate vulnerability of Nigeria's youth, especially those between ages 15 and 29. In Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State, a region historically vulnerable to communal conflicts, youth drug abuse has been strongly associated with violent episodes, declining educational participation, and public insecurity. Preliminary findings confirm that substance use in Wukari is driven by poverty, unemployment, inadequate drug-prevention training, and a lack of coherent educational policy interventions.

Philosophically, the issue transcends criminology or pathology. It raises questions about the very nature of education, freedom, and social justice. For John Dewey, education is “a social function, securing social continuity” (12). When schools fail to integrate prevention and empowerment, they betray this function. Paulo Freire condemned such failures as products of “banking education,” which deposits inert knowledge into passive learners instead of fostering critical consciousness (72–73). Amartya Sen, in *Development as Freedom*, reframes development as the expansion of substantive capabilities, rather than mere economic growth (3–4). This paper investigates the role of education in preventing drug abuse and enabling sustainable development in Wukari

LGA, guided by a threefold framework: Dewey’s democratic education, Freire’s critical pedagogy, and Sen’s capability approach. The central claim is that education, reconceptualized as prevention and empowerment, is the most viable pathway for reclaiming the future of Wukari’s youth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Perspectives on Youth Drug Abuse

Globally, the World Drug Report 2024 highlights increasing adolescent vulnerability, noting that early initiation into drug use significantly raises the risk of dependency and violence (UNODC 67–69). Volkow et al. stress that adolescent prevention must be evidence-based, sequenced across developmental stages, and embedded in broader health systems (248).

Nigerian Context

Nigeria’s high prevalence is compounded by weak policy coordination and socio-economic deprivation. Olanrewaju et al. found a 37% prevalence of drug use in some Nigerian communities, with tramadol and cannabis being most common (68–70). Ajayi-Ayodele et al. observed that NDLEA’s public awareness campaigns often fail to achieve impact due to poor adaptation to youth contexts (22–25).

Education and Sustainable Development

UNESCO’s Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Roadmap emphasizes that education must empower learners to address interconnected challenges, including health, violence, and employment (UNESCO 4). SDG 4.7 specifically mandates that education promote knowledge and skills necessary for sustainable lifestyles, human rights and conflict resolution.

Philosophical Contributions

Dewey argued that education must cultivate habits and “social intelligence” through participatory engagement (87, 102). Freire advocated dialogical pedagogy to empower oppressed groups to transform their conditions (83–84). Sen positioned freedom and capabilities as central to any credible model of development (18). This literature establishes the need for a comprehensive, philosophical and context-specific educational model to address youth drug abuse in Wukari.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative focus groups and interviews. This design ensured both statistical generalizability and deep contextual understanding. The study targeted youths aged 15–29 years in Wukari LGA. Using stratified random sampling across 10 wards, a total of 500 respondents participated. Equal representation was ensured between in-school (secondary and tertiary) and out-of-school youths.

Survey Questionnaire: Adapted from UNODC’s Youth Prevention Toolkit, covering prevalence, risk perceptions, refusal skills and exposure to prevention.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): 15 FGDs with 8–10 youths each.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): 25 interviews with teachers, NDLEA officials, community leaders, and health workers.

Quantitative: SPSS 26 was used for descriptive (percentages, frequencies) and inferential (chi-square, regression) analyses.

Qualitative: NVivo 12 coded transcripts thematically, identifying recurring drivers, narratives, and policy gaps. Approval was secured from the Taraba State Ministry of Education. Informed consent was obtained from participants, with confidentiality assured.

FINDINGS

4.1 Prevalence and Substances Used 42% reported lifetime drug use.

Common substances: cannabis (28%), tramadol (22%), codeine syrup (19%), methamphetamine (7%).

Drivers Of Drug Abuse

Unemployment: 68% cited joblessness as primary driver.

Poverty: 55% reported drug use as coping with economic stress.

Peer Influence: 47% acknowledged peer networks as source of initiation.

Consequences

31% reported involvement in violent episodes while under influence.

Teachers linked absenteeism and dropout rates to drug use.

Health workers observed rising cases of psychosis and addiction.

Prevention Gaps

70% had never received structured education on dangers of drugs.

Teachers admitted absence of formal prevention modules in curriculum.

Philosophical Analysis

Drug abuse reflects what Freire described as the oppressed misdirecting energy due to lack of critical consciousness (96–97). Prevention must be dialogical engaging youths in problem-posing discussions that connect their lived experiences of poverty and conflict to substance use. Dewey emphasizes that education is “life itself” and must cultivate habits of constructive participation (87). The failure of Nigerian schools to integrate prevention and vocational creativity creates alienation, leaving youths vulnerable to drugs. Sen identifies poverty, unemployment, and lack of education as unfreedoms that constrain capabilities (3–18). Drug use in Wukari thus represents a rational but destructive response to curtailed freedoms. Prevention, then, must expand real opportunities through vocational and civic empowerment.

Education For Sustainable Development, Expanded (Esd-Plus)

Evidence-Based Prevention Modules: sequenced skills-based education (refusal, decision-making, stress management).

Vocational Capability Track: green skills (solar installation, agriculture, recycling).

Civic and Peace Education: mediation and conflict transformation.

Teacher and Parent Training: professional development in prevention pedagogy.

Community Hubs: safe after-school spaces with sports arts, and counseling.

Policy Implications

1. Integrate Prevention into Curriculum: Taraba State Ministry of Education should align with NDCMP 2021– 2025.
2. Fund Teacher Training: through UBEC and international partners.
3. Establish Youth Sustainability Hubs: as PPPs.
4. Embed ESD 2030 Competencies: in secondary and tertiary curricula.

CONCLUSION

Education is not merely an instrument of literacy; it is the foundation of prevention, liberation and capability expansion. In Wukari, where youths are ensnared by drugs, poverty and violence, a deliberate educational model rooted in Dewey, Freire and Sen offers the most promising path to reclaiming the future. If operationalized through ESD-Plus and aligned with Nigeria’s policies, Wukari can become a model for holistic youth empowerment in Africa.

WORKS CITED

1. Ajayi-Ayodele, Tolulope A., et al. “Assessment of NDLEA’s Public Relations Strategies Against Substance Use among Youths in Oyo State.” *South Sight Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2025, pp. 19–34. Ibadan: South Sight Publications.
2. Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916.
3. Federal Republic of Nigeria. *National Policy on Education*. 6th ed., Abuja: NERDC Press, 2013.
4. Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th Anniversary Edition. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2000.
5. International Narcotics Control Board. *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2021*. Vienna: United Nations, 2022.
6. Olanrewaju, J. A., et al. “An Assessment of Drug and Substance Abuse Prevalence.” *Pan African Medical Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2022, pp. 67–74. Nairobi: African Field Epidemiology Network.
7. Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the United Nations. “Statement at the High-Level Segment of the 68th Commission on Narcotic Drugs.” New York: United Nations, 2025.
8. Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.
9. UNESCO. *Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2020.
10. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). *Drug Use in Nigeria 2018: Summary Findings of the National Drug Use Survey*. Vienna: UNODC, 2019.
11. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *World Drug Report 2024*. Vienna: UNODC, 2024.
12. Volkow, Nora D., et al. “Prevention, Treatment and Care of Substance Use Disorders among Adolescents.” *Neuropsychopharmacology*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2024, pp. 246–262. London: Nature Publishing Group.
13. We acknowledge TETFUND for the support of this research work