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Investigating the extent of substance use by 14 - 16 year old students on the school premises in Malta

In 2001, a Maltese Ministry of Education publication stated, "Society today has become very conscious of the problem of substance abuse. This increased collective awareness embraces not only illicit drugs but also legal substances such as alcohol and tobacco. The problem of substance abuse cannot be kept outside that microcosm of society that is our schools"¹. There is however very little research into substance use on school premises.

This study explores whether adolescents make use of any legal and illegal drugs in Maltese schools. Besides that, it determines whether there is a significant difference between males and females who make use of substances on school grounds, and whether the type of school adolescents attend influences the rates of substance use on school premises. The differences between state school students and non-state school students are compared. The study also highlights the type of substances used in schools, as well as any reasons which might motivate students into such behaviour.

In the latest ESPAD study conducted in Malta (2003)², the figures presented were quite alarming. Results show that almost all of 15 - 16 year old adolescents have already tried alcohol at least once (93.6%), that almost half of them have smoked at least once (48.2%) and that a tenth of them have also experimented with some kind of illicit drug (11%). One must also keep in mind that, although cigarettes and alcohol are legally sold to adults, they are illegally sold to adolescents because of their age (though they are still legally consumed by adolescents under the age of 16 according to the current Maltese Law).

Research Method

A quantitative research method was used in this study. A questionnaire, provided in a Maltese and an English version, was distributed to 651 students who were chosen through random sampling from the total student population of Form Fours in the selected schools. The questions asked dealt with the respondent's personal perception about the school they attend and their use of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs on

the school premises. Other questions were related to reasons for using substances in the school, with special reference to the school's environment and disciplinary system. The authors also decided to include three dummy drugs; morphish, alphlibo and relevin. The targeted cohort for the questionnaire was that of fourth form students whose ages ranged between 14 to 16 years of age. The authors felt that this age group would have started socialising and making new friends. This would increase the probability of these adolescents coming into contact with legal and illegal drugs.

22 schools were chosen from the 52 available on the basis that their catchments included students from mostly all over the island. Arrangements with the schools to carry out the questionnaire were made following consultations with the Heads of Schools. The questionnaire was administered in the classrooms by both of the authors to ensure confidentiality. To enhance this aspect, the teachers on duty at the time of the survey were asked to leave the room.

The data were processed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS and the Chi-Square test was used in order to check for any statistical significances.

Results

General Substance Use and Gender

Gender		Substance use		Total
		Yes	No	
Male	Count	66	270	336
	% within Gender	19.6%	80.4%	100%
Female	Count	47	268	315
	% within Gender	14.9%	85.1%	100%
Total	Count	113	538	651
	% within Gender	17.4%	82.6%	100%

17.4% of the total students in the sample, claimed to having made use of one or more substances in school. This approximately accounts for one out of every five Form 4 students attending school. Males are the predominant users, but the data were not

statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.527$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.112$).

Cigarettes are the greatest and most widespread used substance with an overall one out of ten students (10.6%) having smoked cigarettes on the school premises. The second most commonly used substance in schools was alcohol, with illicit drugs being the least used substance. Of all the students, the findings show that 8.8% consumed alcohol, whereas 4.3% used illicit drugs in school. Spirits (6.9%) are the most commonly consumed alcoholic drinks in school. The next most common alcoholic drink was wine (4.3%), followed by beer (3.2%) and cider (0.9%).

The so called "soft drugs" are the most frequently used illicit substances. Inhalants (3.1%) are the preferred type of illicit drugs used on the school premises. However, a disturbing feature in this study is that a percentage of students are mixing alcohol with pills (0.6%). A small percentage of students have claimed to have used ecstasy (0.5%), cocaine (0.5%), and heroin (0.2%). LSD, crack and methadone were the only drugs that students never reported being used in schools.

The frequency of smoking among all the males (11.9%) in school is slightly more than that of females (9.2%). This gender similarity was also reflected in the consumption of alcohol on the school grounds. There was only a one percent difference, with males (9.3%) and females (8.3%). Illicit drug use prevalence was found to be 5.1% for all male students and 3.5% for all female students.

General Substance Use and Type of School

More state school students (20%) made use of at least one of the substances during this scholastic year, as opposed to non-state school students (13.1%). This difference also resulted to be a statistically significant one ($\chi^2 = 5.056$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.025$).

The results show that state school students are more likely to smoke than non-state school students. This difference is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 15.47$; $df = 1$; $p < 0.01$). In fact, 14.3% of all state school students reported smoking in school whilst

only 4.5% of all non-state school students reported this.

A higher percentage of non-state school students, (10.7%), than state school students, (7.6%), reported drinking alcohol in school. This difference was not statistically significant ($t = 1.826$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.177$).

Almost an equal percentage of students attending state (4.4%) and non-state (4.1%) schools claimed using drugs in school.

Discussion

Gender

The results show that nearly 20% of the males are substance users compared with 15% of the females. Does this have an impact on the males' attitude to school? Research shows that males have a less positive attitude towards school compared with females⁴. This may also be related to males' lower achievement. They may counter the threat that academic failure poses to their self-esteem by looking for alternative sources of status. This could include trying to impress their friends - whose attitude towards school is probably similar - by delinquent behaviour³. Emotional maturity in males may take longer to develop than in females and may mean they take longer to deal with pressures experienced during this period. It is also relevant to consider if gender issues affect the disclosure of information about personal substance use.

Type of School

One of the most important variables influencing the prevalence rate of substance use is the type of school. Research shows quite clearly that school types do make a difference³. There may be many reasons to explain why students who attend state schools are more likely to abuse substances more than non-state school students. Research suggests that students' delinquent behaviour can be influenced by the features and processes of a school. One may suggest that there exists a connection between the school's physical environment and a students' substance use. Scruffy, disorderly classrooms without plants, posters or displays of students' work may contribute to substance use within the school's premises³. Some of the state school buildings in Malta are insufficiently maintained; flair in these schools simply does not exist. For example, classrooms are sometimes painted in dull colours, school uniforms are seldom redesigned, and the surrounding open spaces are often neglected.

Closely linked to the school's physical environment is the atmosphere. Related research reveal that a school with a negative atmosphere will suffer more from substance abuse than schools with a positive atmosphere³. Certain symptoms which Elton³ identified that include a negative atmosphere in a school are litter and graffiti, teachers starting lessons late and finishing them early, teachers ignoring bad behaviour

in corridors and playgrounds, students regularly missing lessons and getting away with it and the regular use of inappropriate reprimands.

Another factor which may affect the level of substance use within state and non-state schools is parental involvement. Parents have a vital role in promoting good behaviour in schools. Church and Independent schools give high priority to promoting the active involvement of parents in as many aspects of school life as possible. They encourage parental involvement in a number of ways. Parents are found in classrooms using their talents and experience to work with individual pupils or groups. They are also encouraged to involve themselves in their own children's learning out of school through home reading and other similar schemes. For this reason non-state schools may have had a lower percentage of substance use than state schools.

Use/Non-Use and Student Perceptions

Research findings suggest that social and psychological factors play a part in an individual's risk of readily becoming a substance user. The primary intention of this study was to show that pressure resulting from social and psychological influences related to the school could encourage adolescents to seek an escape and extricate themselves from such unpleasant circumstances. Unfortunately, this escape may take the form of substance use.

When analysing the students' perceptions of their school, the results were similar to other findings that showed dissatisfaction and disaffection with the school increased the likelihood that the students would smoke cigarettes, consume alcohol and take illicit drugs in school⁵.

Student involvement in curriculum design in order to meet their needs can be an important factor in promoting good behaviour³. One example is the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) in England which is making a positive contribution area by developing practical, technical and work-related elements in the curriculum for 14 to 18 year olds.

Students who do not have an excellent relationship with their teachers are more likely to be substance users. This was pointed out by Ausubel (1977)⁶ who found that such a situation may enhance the student to rebel against the teacher by turning to deviant behaviour.

In this study, substance users seem to be less optimistic about their school performance, than do the non-users. A large proportion of the users feel they have difficulties with learning at school. As Hirschi⁷ suggests,

"The academically competent boy is more likely to do well in school and more likely as a result to like school. The boy who likes school is less likely to be

delinquent. Thus by hypothesis, academic competence is linked to delinquency by way of success in and attachment to school."

Those substance users in this study tend to have a poor self-image regarding their school performance as compared to the non-users. It is possible that in our schools, adolescents are learning to accept they may never succeed which will affect their self esteem and could lead to increased depression and anxiety. Substance use can be used as a means of escape from this situation.

Methods Of Procuring Substances

The most common methods of procuring substances in school are through other school friends and bringing them directly from home where alcohol and inhalants are more available and present in larger quantities at various places in the household.

Substance Use: Times and Venues

Cigarettes and alcohol were reported being made use of mostly in the playground, during break. Lack of adequate supervision in the playground may be a reason for this, and students look for those unsupervised areas which become a sort of blind spot for the school authorities. Alcohol consumption is also very common in the classrooms, both during and in between lessons. Spirits and wines are the most common type of alcoholic drinks consumed in schools, since they are easier to disguise in the form of a non-alcoholic drink. This is also the case for illicit drug use. Illicit drugs are mostly made use of in classrooms, particularly during lessons. Use of inhalants is more often than not unnoticed by teachers and hence action is not taken against it. During break times, classrooms may also be the least supervised areas of the entire school. This makes it even less problematic for the students to find areas where they can make use of substances. Most illicit drugs and alcohol leave no tracks of smell behind and thus their use remains unnoticed.

Persons With Whom Substances Are Taken

Socialization theory suggests that adolescents will look out for similar adolescents who share the same interests⁸. Hence, the estimated drug use among friends might reflect prevalence of personal use. In fact, the study's findings showed that students use substances in school in the company of other school friends who are liable to be doing the same thing. Peer pressure appears as another factor contributing to the use of substances.

A small percentage of the users do so alone; thus indicating that where peers do not exist, the numbers are rather low. This could also be reflected in the students' capability of making new friends. The research findings illustrated that those who do not have a problem in trying to make new friends, are more likely to be users than

non-users, and those who do find it difficult to make new friends are more likely to be non-users. This was expressed in the Strommen study (1979)⁹.

Reasons For Using Substances

The reasons given by the students for making use of the various substances differ from one substance to another. In the case of cigarette use, addiction was reported to be the main reason. With regards to alcohol and illicit drug use, the majority of the students' reasons were related to pleasure and curiosity. These reasons correlated well with Santrock (2003)¹⁰ and the self-control theory - substances are taken to satisfy adolescents' curiosity and to obtain quick, short-term pleasure.

The next most common reason given by the students was the use of substances as stress relievers. Some students find school very stressful and turn to substances to help them cool off and escape from the frustration¹¹.

Peer pressure did not seem to be as important as could be expected. Almost 5% of the users in the sample blame peer pressure for using substances in school. This is relatively low when compared to the amount of users who hold 'rebellion' or 'testing the school's disciplinary system' to be the cause.

28.5% of all the students perceive their school to be quite authoritarian and could be a possible factor for substance use in school. There were clear gender differences when it comes to rebellion against and testing out the school's disciplinary system. Males always prevailed over females in choosing rebellion. Hirschi (1969)⁵ also relates the phenomenon of poor school achievements with rejection of the school's authority. Males appear to adopt rejection and rebellion as anti-school behaviour and they do so by adopting various behaviours, such as substance use.

Females prevailed over males in choosing to test out the school's disciplinary procedures in all three substances. Girls give the impression of wanting to find out how much they can stretch the schools' disciplinary procedures in their favour, until actions are taken against them.

Conclusion

Substance use has become one of the main issues in today's society and has penetrated through the gates of our schools.

School authorities must ensure that school is a pleasant experience for the students. Experiencing an exciting school day makes a student look forward to another day at school. Actions at school to help reduce the pressures associated with adolescence could also halt the development

of a school substance use subculture.

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