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Does prevention have any impact on substance use among teenagers?

This article is a brief reflection of a study about Lions Quest SFA (Skills for Adolescence) – in a pilot study from UNODC (United Nation Office on Drug and Crime) and LCIF (Lions Clubs International Foundation) in three south east European countries. A joint study was published this year.

Lions Clubs International (LCIF) owns the rights to Lions Quest (LQ) evidence-based prevention programmes. Lions Clubs are organized in more than 200 countries, and is a non-political, non-religious and non-profit organization. (<https://www.lionsclubs.org>)

Three countries were involved in the first implementation; and in the following study in South East Europe, Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia.

UNODC and LCIF started the project with the preventive school programme, Lions Quest “Skills for Adolescence” (LQSFA) specially designed for youths in ages 10-14, in the autumn 2014 and it continued in 2015.

UNODC studied the implementation process and made a pre- and post-test investigation to have the opportunity to follow the progress and to recognize eventual impacts from the implementation. Intervention groups and control/comparison - groups were found from the same school in the same ages and from the same environment. In all three countries there were 2964 students in the implementation groups and 2232 students in the control/comparison-groups.

The implementation in three South East European countries

Initially the process of acceptance and agreement to start the project, were handled by

UNODC and LCIF with the Ministries of Education in Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. The curriculum was translated from the American version into the local languages with local cultural adaptation of the material used, mostly relating to terminology. The importance of translation and cultural adaptation is essential for the outcome of the implementation of the programme (Talvio *et al.*, 2016).

A national coordinator arranged five three-day workshops, with 15-17 participants. Participants are mostly teachers or psychologists from nominated schools carrying out the programme. Two local trainer candidates were initially nominated by the Ministry of Education to follow through the envisaged TOT (Trainer of Trainer process). The trainer candidates were asked to participate in every training of the facilitator workshop (15 days in total) and gradually take over the facilitation of the workshop under supervision of the Senior Trainer Coach, with the last training workshop facilitated solely by them.

Following the capacity development process, coordination with local trainers and collaboration with the Lions clubs, would further support the implementation of the programme in nominated elementary schools. The same collaborative approach was used for the pilot study for the data gathering, monitoring and evaluation.

Follow-up workshops (booster sessions) for the facilitators were organized semi-annually in each country to empower and strengthen the facilitator’s dedication to actively utilize the programme. During one academic year facilitators were requested to implement 40 programme sessions with the intervention groups. Some results will be presented further down.

Lions Quest programme “Skills for Adolescence” - background

The Lions Quest programme “Skills for Adolescence”, an evidence-based youth development programme, aims to respond to the changing world of young people and their families and community. The programme focuses on and helps young people to train and develop skills needed in the 21st century. (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001).

Lions Quest has a long history and the programme is spread and implemented in over 100 countries. The programme is both focusing on prevention of drugs and encouraging social and emotional competences. Lions Quest provides programmes from Prekindergarten to grade twelve (K-12) (Lions Quest Universal Program Guide, 2016)

Lions Quest programmes are often categorized as prevention as well as social emotional learning programmes because they teach both the skills to choose healthy and productive behaviours and to resist unhealthy, negative and risky behaviours. Social and emotional learning as a whole is a process through which children and adults develop fundamental social and emotional skills to handle themselves, their relationships, and their tasks effectively and ethically. Research confirms that social and emotional learning is the foundation for learning because emotions dictate how and what we learn. It has positive effects on academic performance, health, relationships and citizenship (CASEL, 2003, 2005).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has a huge impact on prevention programmes today. Requirements for personal and social competences include:

- **Self-Awareness** (identifying and recognizing emotions; accurate self-perception; recognizing strengths, need and values; self-efficacy, and spirituality)
- **Social Awareness** (perspective - taking, empathy, appreciating diversity; respect for others)
- **Responsible Decision Making** (problem identification and situation analysis; problem-solving; evaluation and reflection; personal, moral and ethical responsibility)
- **Self-Management** (impulse control, stress management, self-motivation and discipline, goal-setting and organizational skills)

- **Relationship Management** (communication, social engagement, and building relationships; working cooperatively, negotiation, refusal and conflict management) (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Wahlberg 2004).

Lions Quest “Skills for Adolescence” has been identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning Institute (CASEL) as CASEL SELECT, their highest designation for programmes that teach social and emotional competencies.

LQ methodology

Positive school climate and interactive, student centred forms of instruction are at the heart of the Lions Quest programmes. Research shows and confirms that they are essential to maximize learning (CASEL, 2003, 2005).

The combination of a safe, supporting learning community with respectful relationships and trust, cooperative learning strategies, together with opportunities for meaningful participation in the school and community are key. Involvement of family and community members and evidence-based social and emotional learning curriculum, such as Lions Quest programmes, has as much impact on student learning as students’ aptitude (Blum *et al.*, 2002; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Wahlberg, 2004).

Having teachers who care and appreciate their students, is linked with lower rates of drug and sexual risk behaviours among high risk youth. Adolescents who reported low teacher connectedness were two times more likely to use marijuana and amphetamines, two times more likely to be sexually active. (Wang *et al.*, 1997)

Lions Quest programmes are built upon a set of core values that are supported by communities, parents and schools throughout the world. They want young people to grow up healthy and productive, able to take responsibility and form positive relationships in the family and community. (Lions Quest Universal Program Guide, 2016)

The Lions Quest philosophy underlines that values are demonstrated through behaviours and students are encouraged to act on their values through the demonstration of positive social and emotional behaviours. The values and attendant behaviours and actions emphasized in Lions Quest programmes are:

Self-Discipline: Persevering to achieve goals; postponing immediate gratifications when appropriate; being able to control behaviour, develop skills and talents and achieve goals.

Responsibility: Making and keeping commitments; seeking wise counsel and making wise decisions, being dependable; taking responsibility for actions.

A Healthy Drug-Free Lifestyle: Taking care of one's body and avoiding unhealthy behaviors; developing drug refusal skills.

Respect for Self and Others: Being thoughtful about the needs, beliefs and feelings of others.

Kindness: Showing caring and concerns for others

Honesty: Being truthful, fair and trustworthy

Commitment to Family: Helping to build a strong and supportive family life

Service: Helping and serving others

Courage: Being brave; standing up for one's values; showing determination in the face of hardship. (Lions Quest Universal Program Guide, 2016)

How to teach and to practice these core values is provided in Lions Quests comprehensive K-12 curriculums, where the aims are to build relationship-centred classrooms. It addresses multiple intelligences and consistently reinforce student centred agreements for respectful behavior as guidelines for appropriate conduct inside and outside the class.

The short-term impacts of SEL-programmes, such as Lions Quest, include enhanced student self-confidence, increases in students' engagement with school, and reductions in problem behaviours. In the long-term, improvement in social and emotional competences have been shown to increase students preparation for success in post-secondary education or in a professional career; students with stronger social and emotional competences are also more likely to have improved mental health outcomes and positive peer relationships. (Greenberg *et al.*, 2017)

Other Lions Quest studies

A multi-year randomized study of Lions Quest in Norway found that the onset of alcohol experimentation and use were delayed; Lions Quest students had increased dialogue with their parents regarding alcohol and drug use. In addition, LQ students showed significant improvements in various social competences,

including self-esteem and social awareness (Malmin, 2007).

In a German study there were similar findings, LQ-students had stronger refusal/resistance skills regarding tobacco use, and those who were already smoking were more likely to try to quit (Kahnert, 2002). Similar studies in Austria show that LQ-students acquired skills and positive effects on conflict resolutions and reduction in bullying (Amtmann *et al.*, 2017).

Results from the UNODC and LCIF pilot study

The article was submitted jointly by UNODC and LCIF and discusses the implementation of Lions Quest in Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Programme implementation was utilized in three countries involving the intervention and comparison groups from nominated schools. The study was carried out during one academic school year, tracking mostly 27 implemented sessions (out of 40) due to the heavy programme material and lack of time.

The pilot-study summarises the results of the project that showed positive outcomes on preventing current use of alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana and on students' intention to use the same substances in the next three months compared to the control-groups.

More specifically, contrasting the results between the intervention and comparison groups on smoking cigarettes and marijuana and drinking alcohol showed the positive trend with the intervention group having less individuals using substances in the past 30 days. Statistically significant results were evident for smoking marijuana in Montenegro and smoking cigarettes and marijuana in North Macedonia. However, it is worth pointing out that the study was not set up as a comparison study between the countries, and the results should be read in context with each country.

Furthermore, the intention to use substances was lower among intervention groups (among users) contrasting the comparison groups in all three countries.

Comparison and intervention groups were selected based on having the most similarities and following criteria were considered (same age group, same social-economic conditions, same schools, same grade, same number of individuals per group). Realistically as the intervention

group was in most of the school grade students (e.g.VI/a) the comparison group was selected as students of other school classes (VI/b). No specific differences were noted among comparison and intervention groups at the initial recruitment phase.

The most frequently used substance in the last 30 days was alcohol. Smoking cigarettes was second place in all three countries. Marijuana was the third substance for use or intention to use. A larger number reported consumption of alcohol, smoking cigarettes or smoking marijuana in the comparison groups compared to the intervention groups.

The study recognizes that there is limited research on prevention programmes in low and middle income countries and the study aspires to bridge that gap. Long-term evaluations are needed.

Furthermore, it argues for the promotion of evidence-based interventions as part of drug prevention strategies, specifically regarding national policymakers.

Discussion

Using school-based prevention programmes are common in European countries, an example is EU-DAP with the programme *Unplugged*. (<https://www.eudap.net/>)

Adolescence is a stage during life when youth are exposed to new ideas and behaviours and their world and interests change very quickly. Good social skills, mental resilience and emotional health are key factors during adolescence. A pilot-study is an important step toward a longer clinical study.

This pilot-study points to some factors for a successful implementation and best outcomes; as in teaching young people to choose a healthy life, without using tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. It also underlines the necessity of evaluations of interventions, such as Lions Quest, since there are few carried out in Europe.

A longer implementation phase is preferable, two academic school years is recommended; to reduce stress and other problems according to the implementation. Research shows that around 15 lesson per school year is recommended (Matschek-Jauk & Reicher, 2015).

The implementation process and results would hopefully be based on more significant data in a long-term study. Systematic research over a

longer period of time is favourable for deeper social and emotional learning. Instructors' self-efficacy is an important factor when considering how accurately they implement the programme. The outcomes of a study are strongly connected to the teachers' interest in the subject, their teaching ability and them feeling competent and empowered to deliver the programme sessions in their classrooms. (Talvio *et al.*, 2016)

Training sessions in the classroom are important and impact on the students, thus teachers must go through the necessary LQ-workshops before starting to implement the programme.

The pilot-study is important for promoting evidence-based interventions as part of the action plans. They help articulate the drug prevention strategy and stress the teachers' own active education in social emotional learning in order to achieve a successful outcome.

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UNODC United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (<https://www.unodc.org/>)

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