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Junior High and High School Students' Perceptions of School Based Drug Prevention

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Age distinctions and perceived effectiveness of drug prevention programs among secondary students is not well understood. The present qualitative study investigated the personal meaning students express after exposure to drug prevention programs. Data collected from five randomly selected eighth grade students and five randomly selected high school students revealed preferences and perceptions of effectiveness in curriculum among age groups. Additionally, five purposively selected non-drug using high school seniors described factors they believed important in their successful resistance to drugs. These results may aid school counselors when developing drug prevention programs as part of comprehensive guidance and counseling programs.

Junior High and High School Students' Perceptions of School Based Drug Prevention

School-based drug prevention programs have been documented as early as the 1960's (Midford, 2000). Since that time, effective substance abuse prevention programs have been identified and utilized within schools (Black, Tobler & Sciacca, 1998; Botvin, 2000; Botvin & Griffin, 2004; Froeschle, Smith, & Ricard, 2007; Pentz, Trebow, Hansen, Mackinnon & Dwyer, 1990; Williams). Further, research suggests that students exposed to drug prevention programs experience decreased substance abuse when compared to non-participants (e.g. Botvin, 2000; Froeschle, Smith, & Ricard, 2007). Despite the efficacy of current programs, drug prevention within the school setting has not always been effective.

The Evolution of School Based Drug Prevention

School based programs based on a scientific approach were introduced in the 1960's. Schools implemented behavior theories and education on the consequences of drug use. Educators used scare tactics and didactic teaching methods that were later shown ineffective (Midford, 2000).

The following decade focused on the belief that increased self esteem would lead to decreased drug use. New programs were created to address students' self esteem. Research indicated addressing self esteem in isolation did not decrease drug use (Midford, 2000). In 1990, President Bush created a project entitled the *National Drug Control Strategy* (National Drug Control Strategy, 1990). This program placed an emphasis on school based drug education and assisted in funding the evolution of over 100 drug prevention programs (National Drug Control Policy, 2004). Researchers studied these programs resulting in insight into techniques and factors that might decrease drug use.

The government had identified seven model drug prevention programs by 1995 (Zavela, Battisch, Gosseling, & Dean, 2004). Each of these programs had three common elements: a significant bond between students and families, a focus on specific needs of children and families, and goals to improve protective factors and reduce risk. The programs were shown to improve school attendance, relationships with others, family communications, drug resistance skills, conflict resolution skills, and to decrease drug use (Zavela, et al., 2004). Since that time, over 45 programs have been titled model programs, more than 46 programs have been found to elicit positive outcomes, and over 52 programs indicate promising results (Zavela, et al., 2004).

Factors Influencing Effectiveness of Programs

The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention details six research proven factors to include in drug prevention programs (Hogan, Gabrielsen, Luna, & Grothaus, 2003):

- 1) Information and education about the drug problem (effects on society and individuals along with referral information)
- 2) Interactive activities such as discussions, group sessions, parenting and family involvement, and peer leader programs
- 3) Supplying appealing alternatives to drug use
- 4) Involving community volunteers and coalitions. Mentoring programs have been shown to reduce drug use and increase positive attitudes toward academics.
- 5) Changing community attitudes and norms on drug use. Interventions that affect knowledge, attitudes, and norms based on the person's interaction with the environment are effective (Botvin, 1996, p. 224).

Other factors also appear to influence the effectiveness of drug prevention programs as follows:

- 1) Approaches using an interactive method of presentation appear to outperform other methods (Dusenbury & Falco, 1995; Lloyd, Joyce, Hurry & Ashton, 2000; Black, Tobler & Sciacca, 1998).
- 2) Social and life-skill development through the curriculum has been shown to increase outcomes (Botvin, Baker, Dusenbury, Tortu & Botvin, 1990; Lloyd, et al., 2000; Botvin & Griffin, 2004).
- 3) Parent involvement has been shown to increase program effectiveness (Dusenbury & Falco, 1995; Lloyd, et al., 2000).
- 4) Drug education should begin in primary school and continue throughout secondary school (Lloyd, et al., 2000).

- 5) Grouping all at risk students together may not be as effective as approaches that do not label student as problematic (Lloyd, et al., 2000).

Outcome Studies

Few outcome studies have focused on the efficacy of drug prevention programs in the secondary school setting. According to Roe and Becker (2005), the majority of researched programs are based on teaching students to overcome social influence. For example, Griffin, Botvin, Nichols and Doyle (2003) implemented a Life Skills Training prevention program focusing on drug refusal and social skills in 29 inner-city middle schools in New York City. Students exposed to the treatment self-reported decreased frequency of drinking, smoking, marijuana and inhalant ingestion as compared to those not exposed to the program. Chou, Montgomery, Pentz, Rohrbach, Johnson and Flay (1998) found a reduction in adolescent cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use after implementing a social influence program in 57 Indianapolis schools.

A few effective secondary drug prevention programs focus on the provision of counseling as the major component. Froeschle, Smith, and Ricard (2007) found that eighth grade girls exposed to a school-based drug prevention program consisting of solution focused brief therapy, mentorship, and action learning significantly reduced drug use, increased positive behaviors, knowledge of drug use, and demonstrated attitudes less favorable toward drug use than those in the control group. Valentine, Griffith, Ruthazer, Gottlieb, and Keel (1998) offered individual, pair, or group counseling to middle and high school students and found decreased 30 day use of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, inhalants, and cocaine as a result.

In short, research indicates that school based programs have the potential to reduce drug use (Black, Tobler & Sciacca, 1998; Botvin, et al., 1990; Botvin & Griffin, 2004; Froeschle, Smith, & Ricard, 2007; Pentz, Trebow, Hansen, Mackinnon & Dwyer, 1990). Comprehensive group programs containing educationally relevant topics and strategies (personal and social skills, concrete information and information about negative social consequences of drug use, peer pressure, normative education, decision making, goal setting, and interactive learning) have been effective in reducing drug use among adolescents (Cella, Tulskey, Sarafian, Thomas & Thomas, 1992; Dusenbury & Falco, 1995).

The Statement of the Problem

Studies indicate that over one third of eighth grade students and half of high school seniors have experimented with illegal drugs (Botvin & Griffin, 2004). As a result, prevention programs are increasingly seen as crucial elements in curbing drug abuse (Botvin & Griffin, 2004). Students have been exposed to a variety of programs including skills programs, mass media campaigns, societal warnings, legislation, and school based programs ranging from didactic approaches to those focusing on competence enhancement (Botvin & Griffin, 2004). Research indicates that effective drug prevention programs take into consideration cultural and local considerations (Corneille, Ashcraft, & Belgrave, 2005; Kumari, 2004) yet student perspectives have been overlooked in the literature. Student views may be an important consideration when selecting drug prevention curriculum as part of guidance and counseling programs.

The Purpose of this Study

Despite evidence that certain drug prevention components are effective with secondary students, little is written to aid in understanding junior high and high school student perspectives of drug prevention programs. Increased understanding of student perceptions within school based drug prevention and trends among drug resistant students may contribute to curriculum improvement and programs geared to the developmental needs of different age groups. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the personal meaning students in junior high and high school obtain through exposure to drug prevention programs. The researchers also sought greater understanding of student perceptions of factors that may lead to drug resistance.

Method

Methodology

A qualitative design was conducted using phenomenological interviews in order to obtain the meanings junior high and high school students applied to their experiences. Patton (2002) contends that reality is a synthesis of experience and personal meanings. Phenomenology has been defined as a method of researching the way people interpret individual experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Focus groups were used to empower potentially unresponsive or reluctant students. In addition, focus groups allowed the researchers to highlight group norms that might not be evident through individual interviews. Kitzinger (2005) states that focus groups are helpful when investigating people's experiences and in clarifying perspectives that might be overlooked.

Setting of the Study

Junior high students were selected for this study from a rural school, population 651, in a southwestern state. This population consisted of 60% Anglo, 35% Mexican-American, 4% African American, and 1% Asian students. High school study participants were selected from those who attended a rural high school with a population of 1237 students. The school's overall population comprised 62% Anglo, 33% Mexican-American, 3% African American, and 2% Asian.

Formal consent was obtained from parents, students, teachers, and school administrators prior to participation in the study. The study was approved through the West Texas A & M University Internal Review Board.

Participants

Ten randomly selected eighth and twelfth grade students (five students per grade level) attending one rural public junior high or high school in New Mexico participated in separate age segregated focus groups. In addition, one group of five purposively selected drug free high school seniors was interviewed to ascertain themes among those who refused drug use throughout adolescence. Interviews were structured yet students were allowed the freedom to voice perspectives on any aspect of school based drug prevention. Unstructured written

questionnaires administered two weeks after the interview allowed students to write personal opinions without influence from peers.

Sampling Methods

Three levels of sampling were employed within this study. First, every eighth grade student's name within one junior high school was placed into a jar and five names were drawn forming the first group. The resulting group included one Mexican-American male, one Anglo male, two Mexican-American females, and one Anglo female.

The second group was randomly selected using the same procedure as the aforementioned group. Five high school seniors were randomly selected from all twelfth grade students within one high school resulting in a final group consisting of one Mexican-American female, two Anglo females, one Anglo male, and one Mexican-American male.

The final group of high school seniors was purposively selected based on their reputation as being drug free (based on interview responses by two high school clerks, three high school teachers, one high school counselor, and 30 fine arts students) and consisted of two Anglo females, one Anglo male, one Mexican-American female, and one Mexican-American male. Criteria for placement in each group also included parent permission, student willingness to participate, and permission from the teacher and principal within the school to attend the interview.

Procedure

Three focus groups (each consisting of five students) were conducted by the researchers. The first author facilitated the tape recorded (for purposes of transcription) group interviews. Students in each group (randomly selected junior high group, randomly selected high school group, and purposively selected high school group) responded to open ended questions such that data would reflect unbiased participant perspectives as follows:

- 1) Tell me about drug prevention programs and activities in which you have participated.
- 2) What are your thoughts on drug prevention?
- 3) What memories do you have of drug prevention programs?
- 4) Tell me about peer pressure.
- 5) Is there anything I didn't ask that you would like to share?

Two weeks after the initial one hour interviews, individual questionnaires were filled out by students. Each student was given a questionnaire that stated, "Please write any thoughts or opinions you have on drug prevention programs." This allowed students an opportunity to state perceptions without peer influence.

Data Analysis

Data was collected through focus group interviews and written questionnaires administered the fall of 2006. A transcript consisting of 68 typed pages contained verbatim text from the 3 focus groups. In addition, 15 pages of student written text was typed into manuscript

form and reviewed. After reviewing and analyzing transcripts taken from the randomly selected junior high and high school students numerous times (as per the constant comparison method; Charmaz, 1983), the main researcher identified several categories under the theme: What experiences (as related to drug prevention) have personal meaning to students in junior high and high school? Additionally, transcripts from non-drug using high school seniors were read and analyzed repeatedly to identify themes tying in to the question: What meanings do students place on drug resistance? Word processing allowed the main researcher to sort each concept (based on participant age and group) into folders depicting common experiences. These experiences were organized into themes.

Themes were reviewed by the second researcher for internal consistency and complete inclusion of data (Patton, 2002). Additional data was categorized and included under existing or new categories. Credibility of data was further ascertained through student self checks. Students were given a typed copy of the transcript containing focus group dialogue and asked to individually and privately verify responses. Students corrected information perceived as inaccurate representations of meanings allowing an opportunity to correct any response misinterpreted or influenced by peers.

Results

Five themes emerged from data collected by all three groups. Regardless of age, participants described the following as meaningful experiences: interactive components such as discussions, games, or active student involvement in the program; information considered realistic for age levels; music as part of the program; a sense of belonging, and the incorporation of cultural and individual differences.

Subcategories found imbedded among themes were also noted for each age group. Junior high school students described the following components as being fulfilling: action games; musical groups; club memberships as part of the program; peer teachers/mentors (high school aged); and realistic pictures, videos, and speakers. High school students described other experiences including: help setting future goals; extracurricular activities; nonjudgmental/ self made choices; enhancing self esteem; and peer pressure reversal skills.

Non-drug using high school seniors mentioned experiences that evolved into three themes: setting firm future goals early in life; learning to be assertive and saying no to peers, and exhibiting high self esteem even when rejected by peers. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the small groups, names and gender information are not used to describe participants below.

Interactive Components

The high school and junior high students described memories and experiences that involved active involvement. The groups alluded to the idea that these experiences made an impact in decisions regarding drug use.

Junior High Student 1: "I remember this really cool game we played when I was in 6th grade. I always think about that game when I'm out with friends now."

Junior High Student 2: "Yeah, (name of another student), remember when that group taught us how to dance? I loved it when we didn't have to just sit and listen to stuff."

High School Student 1: "I think the grim reaper thing we did made a difference for me... They pulled people out of class like they died from drugs. I got to be one of the dead ones."

High School Student 2: "I remember that car crash scene. It was so real...I definitely won't be drinking and driving after that."

High School Student 5: "I guess I just liked it when the teachers would sit down and ask us what we thought...you know and discuss it instead of boring us to death. I actually listened instead of sleeping when they'd do that."

A positive for programs seemed to be active participation in lessons including games, discussions, dancing, and other methods of delivery beyond traditional didactic instruction. Junior high school students described action games as important while discussions resulting in self made choices seemed to be more meaningful to high school students.

Information Considered Realistic for Age

The groups felt many programs focused on topics that were not relevant to their age group.

Junior High Student 1: "They always say don't drink and drive. That is so funny because I won't be driving till, like, forever. Believe me, that doesn't stop us from drinking." All students nodded in agreement.

Junior High Student 3: "I'm tired of hearing how awful my life will be in the future if I use drugs. How about just telling me why this matters to me now?"

High School Student 2 (on written questionnaire): "These programs will only work when they stop telling us stuff that has nothing to do with high school kids."

High School Student 3: "This woman came in and actually thought it mattered to us that our future children would be affected. How stupid is that?" All nodded in agreement.

As the participants shared, it was obvious that much of the information they received was not developmentally appropriate for their age level. They were not interested in something that was going to happen many years in the future.

The Incorporation of Music in Programs

Music was described as important to both groups but junior high students mentioned singing groups as part of the program while high school students mentioned music as important for emotional involvement. Musical groups were described by junior high students as creating a trend or cultural fad that reinforced acceptance of drug resistance.

Junior High Student 4: "I never could dance but I liked the music that group they brought in (performed)...everyone wanted that guy's autograph."

Junior High Student 5: "That (musical) group was very good...and their outfits were so great...we all thought it was cool to do whatever they said."

High school students highlighted the way music connected with them emotionally.

High School Student 3: "The music in that (referring to a program depicting those who died from drug use) made it feel more creepy too."

A Sense of Belonging

The students mentioned experiences that fulfilled a need to fit in and belong as reinforcement for resisting drugs.

Junior High Student 4: "Only the cool people were in the club. It was fun and it kept me out of trouble after school... Yeah, I would've been out smoking Mary Jane (marijuana) with my brother if I hadn't been in the club."

Junior High Student 5 (on the written questionnaire): "I think having (name of high school student) as a mentor during that semester helped me stay clean and really think about the people I was hanging out with. They were using. Knowing (name of high school student) was on my side really helped me to say no and feel better about myself."

High School Student 1 (on the written questionnaire): "I think being in activities outside of school gives kids something to do besides use drugs. You can find friends who will stick up for you and make you feel ok when others bother you."

High School Student 4: "I liked that old lady who showed us how to say no to people. It was stupid but it kinda worked... At least it made you feel like you weren't a total outcast."

As junior high students discussed their perceptions depicting a need to fit in with others, they revealed an importance placed on club memberships and peer mentorship consisting of high school students. High school students placed meaning on belonging through extracurricular activities, methods to resist peer pressure and the incorporation of self-esteem enhancement.

Individual and Cultural Differences

Students mentioned experiences that appealed to them due to factors related to culture, family, or individual needs.

Junior High Student 2: "I remember that picture they showed us of the black lung. It was so gross but so (pause) like real. I will honestly never smoke after seeing that because I know now what my parents lungs are like."

Junior High Student 3: "That one lady who showed us the hole in her neck was disgusting. But, yeah, I guess because she was young and (mentions speaker's ethnicity as a commonality), I won't smoke."

High School Student 3: "I needed help finding out what to do after I graduate. Funny that the guy who taught that (drug prevention) class asked me about that. It was really the first time I considered how using could affect my future."

Students revealed aspects of drug prevention programs that affected them personally because of family experiences, cultural differences, or personal needs. Junior High students found meaning through realistic pictures, videos, and speakers while high school students mentioned the importance of receiving assistance with future goals. This goal setting was a theme shared with the high school seniors' group.

Goal Setting

Non-drug using high school seniors perceived themselves as non-drug using due to an emphasis on goal setting at an early age.

High School Senior 1: "When I was in, like, first grade I already knew I was going to college...No, nothing could keep me from my goals...especially not stupid people using drugs."

High School Senior 2 (on written questionnaire): "I think the fact that I knew I was going to be a doctor from the time I was really little kept me focused and out of trouble."

The group viewed drug use as an impediment toward future goals and placed high value on achievement.

Assertiveness

The students mentioned times when they rejected peers and believed they no longer faced peer pressure as a result. Students believed early assertiveness prepared them to select supportive non-drug using friends in high school.

High School Senior 2: "...I remember this kid when I was in junior high...He wanted me to go party with him. I just told him to find someone else. Him and his friends, they never asked me again."

High School Student 3: "I don't really face peer pressure. I guess everyone knows that the answer is no before they even ask."

High School Senior 4: "I hang out with people like me who don't do drugs so I don't have pressure. Those people know we think they are stupid...(All nod in agreement). I did have to tell some guys to get a life in junior high so they leave me alone now."

Self-Esteem

Non-drug using high school seniors described themselves as having high self esteem even when rejected by peers. The selection of supportive friends was mentioned as an important ingredient in the successful resistance of drugs.

High School Senior 1: "I would never let what people think of me affect my decisions. I hang around with people who like me the way I am and if they don't, I really don't care because I feel good about myself."

High School Senior 2: "Funny, I think they're more afraid of being rejected by me than I am of them...cause I don't care what they think. My friends aren't in to all that."

One recommendation from these students was, "hang out with people who don't do drugs and it is easy not to get into that. Also, don't worry about what other people think. Just like yourself and pick friends who like you."

Discussion and Implications

Comparison with Current Literature

Many factors mentioned in previous research support the opinions expressed by the students. As indicated in previous research studies, interactive teaching methods are considered effective (Black, et al., 1998; Dusenbury & Falco, 1995). Perceptions of the students supported this notion as they described interactive events as motivating and perceived them as catalysts in drug using decisions.

Information and education about the effects drug use has on society and individuals has been touted as effective in the reduction of drug use (Hogan, et al, 2003). While the participants did not state the importance of this educational component, they did find humor in programs that focused on consequences that might occur years into the future. The students not only found this funny but mentioned the lack of personal meaning futuristic discussions held. Even three years was considered too far into the future to be realistic.

The students expressed a need to belong in the school setting. Supportive friendships were sought through extracurricular activities, mentorship, and club memberships. Hogan, et al. (2003) states that supplying appealing alternatives to drug use and involving the community through mentoring are effective methods of prevention.

Music was mentioned by both age groups as a way to either create a sense of vogue or to tie emotions to the consequences of drug use. Music groups emphasized drug resistance as a current trend and therefore, a new mind-set was created among junior high students. For high school students, music was described as reinforcing the consequences of drug use on themselves and others. Hogan, et al. (2003) contends that drug use is influenced through information on the consequences of drug use while Botvin (1996) states that changing a community's attitudes and norms is preventative. The students' perceptions supported these views through their discussions about programs containing music.

The students did express a connection with family and culture. It seemed they viewed information affecting family as more relevant and bonded with speakers from the same cultural group. This supports Zavela, Battisch, Gosseling, & Dean's (2004) emphasis on family bonding within drug prevention programs. Other students mentioned unique needs fulfilled through programs as meaningful. Botvin (1996) indicates that effective programs influence knowledge, attitudes, and norms based on the person's interaction with the environment.

The high school seniors' story supports information from the literature concerning goal setting and peer pressure resistance. Lloyd, et al. (2000) state that effective drug prevention programs begin in primary school and continue until graduation while Botvin & Griffin (2004) support the early development of social and life skills. The information given by the students gives credence to these ideas through the emphasis placed on setting goals and attaining the ability to assertively avoid peer pressure at an early age. A few students remembered lessons on peer pressure resistance but many never thought of assertiveness or peer pressure resistance as skills. They thought the ability to resist peer pressure was due to a strong belief in personal abilities combined with the tenaciousness required to attain long term goals.

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors should consider the data attained through this study as they implement school-based drug prevention programs. Using age appropriate materials and writing programs for each age group independently may be in order. For example, junior high students would benefit from the dissemination of information through musical groups, action games, the establishment of school clubs, mentorship, concrete pictures of body parts affected by drug use, and modeling by those from similar ethnic backgrounds. High school programs should include career counseling and goal setting as part of the program, encouragement to participate in extracurricular activities, questioning methods such as the Socratic method that encourage discussions at a higher level of thinking while maintaining a nonjudgmental stance, music to enhance emotional attachment to consequences, and methods to overcome peer pressure. Both groups would benefit from interactive teaching strategies with more emphasis on games for junior high students and discussions in the high school setting.

One of the most instrumental findings in this study involves themes among non-drug using high school seniors. These students attributed non-drug use to the fact that they set firm future goals early in life. It appears that more emphasis should be placed on career counseling and goal setting early in a child's life. School counselors should ensure that students are exposed to drug prevention as early as possible. Further, these students indicated they learned to be assertive and avoided peer pressure even when peers rejected their decisions. In order to provide programs that appeal to students, school counselors should incorporate these skills into both drug prevention and everyday social learning. As an extension of the guidance program, all school staff need to become more focused on intervening in situations where students might be gravitating toward negatively influencing peers.

Limitations

Although valuable, the author does recognize some limitations with the current findings. It is important to note that qualitative findings intend to share meanings conveyed by participants within the study and are not generalizable to the population at large. Second, efforts were made to assure that meanings were individually rather than peer influenced. Nonetheless, no guarantee can be made to this effect. Third, students were exposed to a limited and variable number of drug prevention programs prior to this study. Fourth, the main researcher was an Anglo female and her previous knowledge of drug prevention programs and biases might have influenced responses. Finally, students came from a rural environment that may have contributed to their world view.

Suggestions for Further Study

While this information is simply an overview of drug prevention programs from the perspective of a few students, it can be a springboard for further qualitative or quantitative research. A replication of this study would offer more insight into views of students from different geographical areas and cultures. In addition, quantitative studies should examine if factors mentioned by students as being effective result in decreased drug use.

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