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Understanding the school culture: Guidelines for conducting gambling research in secondary schools

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the importance of youth gambling research, the methodological issues faced when conducting research in secondary schools, and recommendations for conducting effective youth gambling research that benefits academia, the community, staff, students and parents within the school systems. Based on our recent experience, we advocate a research approach that integrates the findings of youth gambling research into school curriculum, community youth agencies and the development, evaluation and enhancement of program and policy interventions. By doing so, we find that we are able to foster strong, respectful relationships with the community and encourage collaboration, co-operation and multidisciplinary alliances. If researchers follow these guidelines, they can ensure that youth gambling research goes beyond scholarly publishing and is transferred and applied within the community to reduce youth gambling problems.

Introduction

This generation of youth is the first cohort to grow up in an era when gambling is easily accessible, socially acceptable and extensively promoted. Prevalence studies continue to indicate that between 52% to 89% of youth gamble (National Research Council, 1999), 4% to 8% of adolescents have gambling problems (Gupta & Derevensky, 1996; Fisher, 1992; Jacobs, 2000; Shaffer & Hall, 1996, 2001; Wynne, Smith & Jacobs, 1996), while another 10% to 15% of adolescents are at risk of developing a gambling problem (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998; Shaffer & Hall, 1996, 2001; Wynne et al., 1996). Moreover, youth problem gambling is two to four times higher than adult problem gambling (Shaffer, Hall & Vander Bilt, 1999). Although recently these prevalence rates have been challenged as being inflated (Derevensky & Gupta, 2000; Shaffer & Hall, 2001), it is clear that gambling behaviours of adolescents should be of interest to parents, educators, researchers, social workers and others concerned about young people.

Need for further youth gambling research

While research on youth gambling has focused on prevalence rates, correlates, risk factors, theoretical frameworks and coping processes, these areas of research cover only a small part of a comprehensive understanding of youth gambling. To date, no research has examined protective factors that may act as buffers for youth problem gambling nor the interaction between protective factors and risk factors. Few longitudinal studies have been conducted and the development, evaluation and proven effectiveness of youth education, prevention and treatment

interventions are still in the early stages. Once compiled, this information indicates that youth gambling research is still in its infancy, and further studies need to be conducted in order to better understand this area of inquiry. A more comprehensive understanding of youth gambling and youth problem gambling will allow for the development and refinement of effective education, prevention and treatment interventions that reduce the harm of youth problem gambling. It is therefore very important that appropriate procedures be in place when research in schools is conducted to ensure that access to students is maintained.

Methodological issues

Although there is an urgent need for further youth gambling research, it is often difficult to access a representative population of adolescents. Currently, the majority of youth gambling studies consist of small samples of adolescents. While some studies recruit youth via telephone interviews, the majority recruit youth from the school system. Two approaches are generally used in order to obtain parental consent for a child's participation in school-based research. The first procedure involves active parental consent: parents are asked if their children can participate. The second type involves passive parental consent: parents are informed that their non-response implies permission for their children to participate in the study. At this time, many schools are moving toward the former consent procedure.

Unfortunately, the implementation of active consent procedures, employed to protect students, often result in low parental response rates, low participation rates and a distinct subpopulation of youth that threaten the external validity of the study (Anderman et al., 1995; Dent et al., 1993; Noll, Zeller, Vannatta, Bukowski & Davies, 1997; Ross, Sundberg & Flint, 1999; Severson & Ary, 1983). Research has found that youth who do not receive parental permission are quite unique compared to those who do receive permission. For example, youth without parental consent are rated by peers and teachers as being less popular (Frame & Strauss, 1987; Noll et al., 1997), less academically competent (Frame & Strauss, 1987; Noll et al., 1997), more socially withdrawn (Frame & Strauss, 1987; Noll et al., 1997), more aggressive (Frame & Strauss, 1987; Noll et al., 1997), higher in risk-taking (Dent et al., 1993), less assertive (Dent et al., 1993), have lower self-esteem (Dent et al., 1993) and tend to engage in substance use and other problem behaviours (Dent et al., 1993; Kearney, Hopkins, Mauss & Weisheit, 1983; Severson & Ary, 1983).

Overall, the literature suggests that youth who typically would not receive parental consent are generally at a higher risk for a number of health and social problems. Given that research on youth gambling often looks at many of these comorbid risk factors, our research team believes that it is imperative for high-risk youth to be included in our research samples — especially when assessing the effectiveness

of youth gambling prevention programs. If they are not included, youth gambling prevention programs, interventions and policies will not meet the needs of this population of youth, who in fact are the target of the intervention in the first place (Dent et al., 1993; Noll et al., 1997; Ross, et al., 1999; Severson & Ary, 1983). We believe that school board officials need to be educated about these issues, and researchers need to advocate for the adoption of an informed but passive parental consent procedure, which will provide a more representative sample of youth.

However, given the likelihood of having to continue with active consent procedures, we would like to suggest to youth gambling researchers several strategies that we have found to be effective in boosting response rates. Based on our past experience, we will recommend a set of guidelines for conducting school-based research that have been accepted favourably by school officials, teachers and parents in our region. As a result of these positive experiences, the school environment/community remains open to continuous research.

School-based research

Before our research team developed any protocols for our youth gambling research, we hired an educational consultant who was both a former teacher and principal in many of the secondary schools in our region. The consultant's role was to educate our research team about the secondary school system and to liaise with school officials in order to recruit secondary schools for participation in our study. During the process of contacting school administrators, our educational consultant found that the majority advocated youth research and understood its importance; however, several well-merited criticisms about past school-based research were also brought to our attention. Many school administrators reported problems with past research efforts:

- youth surveys were too long;
- survey questions were not age-appropriate (or contained unsuitable content);
- surveys were not administered in an organized fashion;
- surveys placed too many demands on school and staff time;
- the research process often disrupted the school schedule, and;
- survey results often were not disseminated to schools (and the community) in a comprehensive manner.

Based on these criticisms, it was evident to us that past researchers often did not meet the needs of the schools. Procedures for school-based research appeared to be both unreasonable and impractical, taking up far too much of the teachers' and students' time, and significantly disrupting the school schedule. Conversations with school administrators in our region demonstrated that such procedures gave school staff a poor impression of school-based research. To our knowledge, these

issues led school board officials in our region to move away from passive consent procedures and to adopt informed and active parental consent procedures, to develop their own research review committees, and generally, to overhaul their procedures and protocols for school-based research. Despite these difficult circumstances, our research team felt that it was our duty to address the concerns and criticisms that were voiced by many school officials. To do so, we developed a new set of guidelines and protocols for conducting school-based research. The guidelines that our research team developed were effective for data collection and received favourably by school officials, teachers and staff as indicated in their project evaluation forms. Our research team would like to share the protocols and guidelines that we used with other youth researchers, and hope that by doing so, we can advance procedural standards for youth research and lay a foundation for improved practices in school-based research.

Forming a multidisciplinary committee to guide the research project

As researchers, we have an obligation to understand school culture and to plan well so that disruption to the school schedule and demands upon school staff are minimized. As mentioned previously, our research team hired a former principal to fulfill a role as our educational consultant. Our consultant's background and knowledge about the school system ensured that our research team was conscientious about school culture and did not repeat past mistakes. In addition, our research team recruited several other persons who became part of our advisory committee, which guided the youth gambling project. Members of our committee included researchers, parents, youth and clinicians from a community alcohol, drug and gambling treatment agency. Our multidisciplinary team was crucial in developing survey materials and procedures that met the needs of school administrators, teachers, students, parents and the community. Committee members provided helpful suggestions and ensured that our research project overcame the many difficulties often faced when conducting research in schools. The committee made certain that our survey contained suitable and comprehensive questions for youth. Parent committee members ensured that the consent procedures and materials were comprehensive and reasonable, given the busy schedules of most parents. Our educational consultant ensured that the research procedures were both reasonable and feasible within the school system. In addition, we pilot tested our survey two grades below our target audience to ensure that the survey was set at an appropriate reading level and was comprehensible to teens with a wide range of reading skills.

Ensuring minimal disruption to the school, staff and students

Our research team decided that the most effective way to gather data in the shortest period would be to survey an entire school. The challenge for us was to find a time within a school's busy schedule when students could complete a

survey. We were mindful that surveying students would ultimately result in a loss of instructional time for the schools. For example, if 1,000 students were to complete a 30-minute survey, the school would have to give up 500 hours of instruction time. As researchers, we were conscious of this and developed a 20-minute survey. Our concern was that a survey which ran over the time limit would have a serious effect on the atmosphere, efficiency and order in the school.

The school's timetable should dictate the length of data gathering sessions, and researchers must work within these parameters. Our research team was fortunate because the participating schools had timetables that included a block of time for a Teacher Advisory Group's (TAG) class. In Ontario, TAG is a class that is not part of the mandatory school curriculum. Instead, this class promotes development of yearly educational plans, goal-setting and decision-making skills and helps students come to understand themselves as individuals. One teacher is assigned to approximately 20 students, and these students attend the same TAG class regularly until they graduate from high school. Our research team was fortunate because the research conducted during TAG classes raised awareness about the issue, provided an opportunity for class discussion and did not infringe upon school curriculum.

Not all schools will have such an ideal setting for administering a survey; however, most schools will have blocked-off time for football games, assemblies or other special events, which are more amenable to accommodating research than regular classes. It's not difficult to set up a special timetable for an event such as a research survey provided the research team presents a specific request and then ensures they abide by the terms. Having an educational consultant as a member of your research team can be very useful as she or he will already understand the schools' timetables and be able to work more easily with school officials. to find an appropriate time to administer the survey. Our educational consultant brought knowledge, sensitivity and understanding to this process; often other research team members do not possess a broad understanding of the secondary school system.

To further accommodate the schools' busy schedules, our research team also ensured that demands on teachers and other staff were minimal. For example, our team was responsible for mailing consent forms directly to parents, tracking responses, forwarding reminder slips, conducting telephone follow-ups and administering the survey. In addition, we recruited and trained senior students who administered the surveys in every classroom and ensured consistency in the way the survey was conducted and reduced the demands on the teacher. Preparation, including maps of the school and class lists indicating which students have parental consent, was critical to minimizing the burden on school staff and disruption to the students' timetables. School Survey Procedures and Protocols in

Appendix A contains the procedures for administering the survey, which all research assistants followed.

Educating school administrators and staff

In addition to accommodating the schools, it is also important to educate all staff by providing them with a brief overview of the study and the research procedures. This step is beneficial because it reduces resistance, increases awareness and establishes support and co-operation. To meet these objectives, our research team sent an information package to all principals for review. In addition, this package remained in each school's office for parents, staff and other interested parties to view at their convenience. The information package contained the following: cover letter, overview of our research, research objectives, survey, copy of the alternative task (see description of alternative task below), parent and youth consent forms, debriefing form, thank-you letter and a set of detailed procedural instructions. **Appendix A** contains all of these documents.

The cover letter indicated that the project manager would be in touch to schedule a meeting with the principal to discuss the information package and to set up a time and date to administer the survey if permission was granted. Our educational consultant and project manager then met with each principal and explained the purpose of our research, its importance to youth, schools and the community, and the procedures that would take place from the beginning to the end of the research project. If the principal gave permission for the survey to be administered, then the educational consultant and project manager set up a date to present the same information to all school staff. This 15 minute presentation allowed the teachers and research team to develop a rapport as teachers were fully informed of the procedures and given the opportunity to express any concerns or ask questions. This presentation increased teachers' awareness of youth problem gambling and motivated them to join us in this endeavour. The importance of the issue, the minimal work required by the staff, and the promise to feedback comprehensive results and recommendations to school staff seemed to motivate parents, students and school staff to assist us with our research project. Principals announced when the survey would be administered, information was printed in school newsletters, and teachers reminded students to have their parents sign and return consent forms.

Obtaining parental consent

In the past, a process of passive consent was the norm, whereby parents only indicated that they did not want their child to be involved. But now it's more likely that school board policy will require active and informed consent. This procedure not only requires more administrative time but also demands careful presentation. Our research team employed several strategies to increase response rates since

active and informed consent was required. Firstly, our team used several communication channels such as school newsletters, parent council meetings, student council meetings, morning announcements, local newspapers (an article about the project that coincides with the consent process) and radio stations to inform schools, teachers, parents, students and our community about our research project. It was also useful to educate teachers at staff meetings about our research and to prepare homeroom announcements to assist in promoting the survey. As well, we developed a package for parents that included the consent form; a brief description of the study, written in appropriate language, and contact names and phone numbers for addressing concerns. Parents could check off a section on the consent form indicating that they wanted a copy of results.

We were only permitted to obtain parental consent in writing; however, other researchers may find it useful to establish multiple channels for providing consent (mail, phone, e-mail). Lastly, parents who did not forward a consent form by the specified date were forwarded a reminder notice and then sent an additional package if a response was still not sent. Telephone follow-up is also another strategy to increase response rates if the school board and university's ethics committee allow for this protocol. We found that by providing parents with the project manager's phone number and e-mail address, we increased response rates and opened channels of communication. In fact, many parents contacted our project manager to ask for additional consent forms, to discuss the issue of problem gambling and to indicate their support for the project. Of note, one parent, whose son had already completed the survey, offered to assist with the administration of the survey in the remaining schools.

For those students who do not receive parental permission, it is important to provide an alternative activity. We developed a brief activity: a reading on youth gambling, followed by open-ended questions related to this reading. The purpose of this alternat activity was to ensure that all students were kept busy, to decrease the likelihood that students without permission would be identified, and to ensure that all students were involved in an educational experience. The majority of students and teachers who recently participated in our survey and the alternative activity showed a genuine interest in youth gambling and expressed a new awareness afterwards. Many teachers requested additional copies of the alternative activity to use and discuss in follow-up TAG classes.

Disseminating the results

One of the most important elements in the contract between our research team and the schools was to provide comprehensive and clear results from the survey, and recommendations based on these findings. Without this effort to disseminate information, the schools, students and parents might have felt that their time and energy was wasted. The results were presented in both written and verbal formats.

We developed a comprehensive executive summary of our results (written in simple language), which we mailed to parents who expressed an interest in the study's findings. **Appendix B** contains the executive summary for parents.

Similarly, we developed a comprehensive report for school administrators and youth agencies in the community, which included the results of our study, illustrative graphs and applicable recommendations. **Appendix C** contains the comprehensive report.

Interesting and interactive presentations were made to principals, students, teachers, parents and youth agencies to increase awareness about youth gambling, provide a snapshot of our results, suggest recommendations based on these results and provide an opportunity for discussion. Where applicable, we provided specific recommendations based on the surveys' results along with links to youth gambling prevention materials, curriculum and treatment resources. These presentations provided a nice transition from research to application while further increasing awareness. All of these steps helped to ensure that our research team left a positive impression, which in turn led the schools to welcome our research team back for further research.

Ethical issues

One of the ethical questions that our committee faced was over how specific the feedback to individual schools should be. On one hand, some schools hoped that the information gathered in the survey could be used to inform administrators about the extent of problems or activities in their schools, and thus, help them decide whether or not they need prevention/education and/or treatment interventions. But on the other hand, there was the potential complication that the media would compare the results of different schools, which could have ramifications for the school boards. In the end, we did not provide any separate feedback to individual schools. In hindsight, this ethical issue should have been discussed with all school administrators before the surveys were administered. If a particular principal is interested in his or her school's results, we recommend that these results be provided verbally and that a comparison is made only to the overall results — not to each school individually.

Conclusion

With youth gambling on the rise and youth gambling research still in its infancy, it is imperative that researchers continue to have access to the school system and its target population. An acceptance and understanding of the school environment is needed to carefully plan and organize school-based research that is both effective and unobtrusive. Most importantly, findings from youth gambling research need to

be disseminated in a comprehensive manner that benefits teachers, principals, parents, students and the community. Transferring and gearing research findings to different audiences (besides just academia) can increase awareness and in itself act as a prevention tool. If findings are disseminated appropriately and comprehensively, other community members will have the opportunity to take advantage of the practical applications of this research. In turn, youth gambling research can be used to guide the development of new policies, education, prevention and treatment interventions all aimed at reducing the harm of youth problem gambling. It is hoped that this article, our experiences and the proposed guidelines will lay a foundation for best practices in youth gambling school-based research.

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Appendices

Appendix A Sample information package for principals

Letter to principal

Information sheet on youth gambling

School survey procedures and protocols

School newsletter and announcement

Letter to parent/guardian

Parent/guardian consent form

Student consent form

Youth gambling survey

Alternative activity – Level I

Alternative activity – Level II Debriefing form for students

Appendix B Cover letter to principals

Evaluation form

Comprehensive report for principals

Appendix C Letter to Parent/guardian

Executive summary of results for parents

Article Categories:

- Research methods

Keywords:
adolescent gambling
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