

Teachers' perceptions, difficulties, and actions facing drugs at the school environment¹

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Abstract

We aimed to evaluate the perception of high school teachers about their attitudes when approaching the topic of use of alcohol and other drugs in their work. This is a qualitative study, performed by semi-structured questions. Participants answered to a semi-structured questionnaire and the obtained data were entered into the Atlas.ti software, and thus we developed a thematic content analysis. We produced three categories of analysis: understanding the teachers regarding their role when discussing psychoactive substances; difficulties in approaching psychoactive substances in the work environment; actions and needs aimed at work with the theme of psychoactive substances at school. Some of these educators, in their perception, do not understand that discussing alcohol and drugs should be part of their work because they do not consider it as part of the role of the school. Educators realize the need for training for them to work in an interdisciplinary way with these problems not just directed to their own performances, but also concerning support networks and legislation on alcohol and drugs. It is necessary to create practical ways of providing specific training on the use of psychoactive substances to school managers and educators, investing in the implementation of spaces for discussion and reflection at the school environment between staff and students, and creating an intersectoral networking aimed at better addressing such issue.

Keywords

School – Teachers' training – Teaching work – Drugs.

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Introduction

The age of 12 is considered as a reference for the beginning of the use of alcohol in Brazil (CARLINI et al., 2010), which is worrisome, since the earlier the use, the greater the risk of developing dependence (WANDEKOKEN; VICENTE; SIQUEIRA, 2011). In 2012, 74% of teenagers aging up to 15 years started drinking regularly, and the practice of “binge” was observed in 22% of teenagers aging between 14 and 17 years (CARLINI et al., 2010; LARANJEIRA, 2014).

High prevalence of use of other drugs are also found among elementary and high school students. Between 1986 and 2010, there was a major increase in the number of students reporting the use of marijuana, even though in the period between 2005 and 2010 a reduction of this consumption was observed. In the case of cocaine, the same official survey published in 2010 also reported increase in the consumption in the last 23 years (CARLINI et al., 2010).

The phenomenon of psychoactive substance use in adolescence is considered a complex and multifaceted element, associated with school, family, sociodemographic, and behavioral contexts (MALTA et al., 2014; FIGUEIREDO; FREITAS, 2013). Hence, it is essential that professionals who have regular contact with people in this age group to be trained to face the situation, since such use directly affects their work, as it is associated with several problems – among them, the impairment of school performance and academic disinterest (LARANJEIRA, 2014; KELLY et al., 2015). Taking this into consideration, the guiding question of the study was: what is the teachers’ perception about their attitude facing the use of alcohol and other drugs in their work?

Although there are several studies on the use of psychoactive substances at school considering epidemiological perspectives (CARLINI et al., 2010; ELICKER et al., 2015), addressing implementation of programs (PEREIRA; PAES; SANCHEZ, 2016), related problems (CARDOSO; MALBERGIER, 2014), preventive practices (MOREIRA; VÓVIO; MICHELI, 2015), and (general) attitudes and perceptions of teachers about the subject (FERREIRA et al., 2010), conducting other studies with a more accurate perception, specifically on the work at school and its role vis-à-vis the problematic use of alcohol and drugs, may contribute to deepen the discussion and enable specific educational proposals that can assist and make the practice of this professional field on the subject possible. Therefore, we aimed to evaluate the perception of high school teachers about their attitudes when approaching the issue of the use of alcohol and other drugs in their work environment.

Methodology

A qualitative and descriptive research was performed, whose purpose was to question individuals or groups regarding how they perceive what they live, how they interpret their experiences, and how they structure their social world, considering as supporting themes experience, existence, common sense, and actions, leading the researcher to pursuit understanding, interpreting, and the dialectics of the studied phenomenon (MINAYO, 2012).

Data were collected in state public schools located in cities with different cultural and demographic characteristics, in order to approach teachers who work in heterogeneous situations, thus cooperating for the convergence of data about the phenomenon investigated and emphasizing one of the elements of data triangulation, which is the collection based on different sources and environments (CARTER et al., 2014). Hence, we have selected state schools from a small municipality in the state of São Paulo and another, from a bigger municipality, in the state of Minas Gerais. The study population consisted of N=113 teachers of high school and all were invited to participate in the study. Subjects were selected by purposive sampling. To compose it, we used the criterion of verification of common characteristics of the sample that could portray the context dimension (i.e., teachers dealing with psychoactive substances use in their work environment) and quality of the information gathered to meet the research objectives (FONTANELLA; RICAS; TURATTO, 2008). There was a sampling loss due to non-return of research instruments (n=81) and the exclusion criteria of the study (n=13). Therefore, the sample consisted of n=19 participants. Permanent and temporary teachers who agreed to participate in the study were included by signing the Informed Consent Form. Exclusion criteria were: being a trainee; do not fill in the semi-structured questionnaire completely; and be on leave for any reason. Data were collected between March and June 2015.

We elaborated a self-applicable and semi-structured questionnaire seeking to understand how teachers perceive what they do in their work routine when dealing with the problem of the use of psychoactive substances at the school environment. To do so, we prepared questions about teachers' perceptions regarding psychoactive substances, the actions carried out, difficulties and easiness in their work in the face of such problem, and the strategies considered important to broach the subject in the school environment. The questionnaires were printed and distributed to teachers, who responded in writing, and then returned to the researchers. The option for such data collection strategy was due to the study planning, which initially pointed out to a large number of teachers to conduct individual interviews and, subsequently, to the difficulty in reconciling schedules for the construction of groups.

Data analysis and treatment were focused on the frequency of themes, using the technique of thematic content analysis, according to the proposal of Laurence Bardin (BARDIN, 2011). Firstly, we performed a pre-analysis, skimming the material for knowing it and the initial impressions about the issue. Then, we explored the material by cross-sectional reading, establishing registration units, according to perceptions obtained regarding the replies given by the teachers and, later, the definition of analysis categories. The analytical process was separately conducted by two researchers who sought to compare the individual analysis, producing an end-result from dialogue and consensus. To assist in these stages, all the answers to every question were typed and imported into the Atlas.ti 5.2 software by a trained researcher in order to organize and manage the encoding of messages, nuclei of meaning, and finally, thematic categories. Teachers (T) received a sequential alphanumeric code (T1, T2,...T24) to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of responses.

The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Federal University of São Carlos, by opinion no. 716,596, respecting the ethical aspects contained in Resolution no. 466/2012 of the National Health Council of Brazil.

Results and discussion

Participants' characterization

Nineteen (19) high school teachers of state public schools participated in the study. They were from two municipalities, one in the countryside of the state of São Paulo and another in countryside of the state of Minas Gerais. Most of them were women (84%), average age of 45 years old, and average working time in the school of 11 years (Table 1).

Table 1 – Teachers' profile. São Paulo (SP) and Minas Gerais (MG), Brazil (n=19), 2015

| State | N | Female | Male | Average age | Working years | Subjects taught |
|--------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|---------------|--|
| São Paulo | 11 (57.8%) | 9 (47.3%) | 2 (10.5%) | 44.6 | 12.8 | Philosophy, Portuguese, Arts, physics, Geography, Sociology, Biology, Chemistry, History, and English. |
| Minas Gerais | 8 (42.1%) | 7 (36.8%) | 1 (5.2%) | 45.2 | 8.6 | Portuguese, Spanish, Mathematics, Biology and English. |

Source: Research data.

From the data analysis, we created three thematic categories: (1) teachers' understanding regarding their role when discussing psychoactive substances; (2) difficulties in approaching psychoactive substances in the work environment; (3) actions developed and to be implemented on the theme of psychoactive substances inschool.

All participants addressed the aforementioned themes in their responses.

The understanding of teachers regarding their role when discussing psychoactive substances

In this category of analysis, we found that some teachers did not consider the discussion on the use of alcohol and other drugs as their function, understanding that their actions are restricted only to the identification of students who use them and to inform those in charge, especially the family, considered as the main responsible to such occurrences. These data corroborate the results of literature, when mentioning that the family's responsibility can be understood as a strategy for dealing with complex issues and criticism, such as psychoactive substances, delegating such responsibility to other in order to be absolved from it (MOREIRA; VÓVIO; MICHELL, 2015):

In my opinion, the discussion about alcohol and drugs should be a family responsibility. (T2G).

The school should just warn the parents about changes in their child that suggest drug use [...] (T8U).

Although in the strategic and political plan the use of psychoactive substances is currently a problem that requires sources of problem-solving capacity, which comprise elements of a secondary social network that must be intersectoral (and which covers education) and multidisciplinary (SEGOVIA; GONÇALVES, 2011), what is actually observed is a still stigmatized view on the part of educators, in addition to the difficulty in establishing a dialogue between school and the family (ARALDI et al., 2012). Such perception may arise resistance among teachers, students, and their families to discuss the problem in a broad and dialogic way, making the problem veiled, although part of the everyday life of school environments.

The reports showed that, at the school environment, dialogues and open discussions on the topic do not arise very often. Such issue is commonly approached in a specific and individual way, with punitive nature and only brought up in cases of suspicion of substance use among school students. Thus, the matter is not discussed on a permanent basis, collectively, and with an educational, preventive, or health-oriented purpose.

The mediator teacher talks in private with every student that we suspect to be involved with some kind of addiction. (T7G).

The school office works intensively together with the supervisory service towards prevention, keeping the "bad eggs" away from the gates of the school and advising students. (T5U).

Such attitudes demonstrate the belief, very common in society and not just in the school context, that all efforts and actions must focus on the problem itself, in a medical-biological model (MOREIRA; VÓVIO; MICHELI, 2015). This reflects on the attempts to suppress the consumption of drugs, which eventually pathologize, judicialize, or policialize the issue. This may contribute to perpetuate stigmatizing and exclusive practices, since it limits the possibilities of changes of users or the so-called users, characterizing them as unrecoverable (NASCIMENTO; VITALE; AVALLONE, 2012).

On the other hand, some teachers consider the school as a privileged environment to discuss, in an educational and transformative way, the issue of drug use among teenagers.

As arguments to the emergence of this action, respondents highlighted that the school is a locus where young people coalesce in the conviviality and socialization for a significant period of their lives. We perceive that, for some teachers, the school environment generates educational processes not only in terms of production and exchange of information and knowledge, but also of developing citizenship and social transformation. Such perceptions become crucial, enabling these educators to be aware of the importance of developing educational and preventive actions regarding drug use.

At school there is a large concentration of young people who experience the reality of the world of alcohol and other drugs. By working with this topic we can minimize the situation a bit. (T10G).

To address the topic of alcohol and drugs is of extreme urgency, because the school is where students spend most of their time. (T6G).

Information is everything, and the school is an environment able to provide it. (T9G).

Because the school, in addition to addressing general knowledge, must contribute to the human formation of citizens. (T7U).

Corroborating these findings, several authors (MOREIRA; VÓVIO; MICHELI, 2015; FERREIRA et al., 2010; RONZANI; SILVEIRA, 2014) emphasize that educators recognize the role of the school for educating people aware of themselves and of their role in society, capable of making their own choices and decisions. Therefore, the school environment becomes ideal for developing programs and/or actions of substance use prevention. However, what we verified in our study was the practice of fragmented and specific activities. It is possible that such paradox can be understood from the analysis of the following issues.

Difficulties in approaching psychoactive substances in the work environment

Some speeches of educators have revealed that they use personal resources, and not technical ones, to deal with drug use in their everyday life at work. When asked about how they identify the use of drugs among students in the school environment or in its surroundings, they reported they constantly supervise the students' behaviors that are considered suggestive, or gather information through employees, other teachers, and students.

We recognize drug use by observing students, and several of them tell us who are the users and those who sell drugs. (T11G).

By observing employees who watch the yard and school dependencies [...]. But the greatest indicators are the students' symptoms and behavior in class: sometimes they are sleepy and/or with reddish eyes. (T3U).

Feelings of insecurity and discomfort also emerge when teachers do not consider themselves able to deal with it, especially when they consider such issue embarrassing or far from their educational field.

I don't think we actually have trained professionals, with bold proposals to work with this issue. (T3U).

I hold a master's degree, I mean, I'm well trained to teach the subject to my class, but I'm not able to work with these issues. (T5G).

This is a difficult issue to be addressed by a Physics teacher, even if he feels comfortable and talks a lot with his students, it is uncomfortable when the subject is drugs. (T5G).

Accordingly, the results also show that the approach of the topic at school commonly turns to teachers of specific areas, which involve themes such as health, science, and biology. Other subjects, in particular those of exact sciences, are not involved in such actions. This tends to focus the discussion on drug use in the school environment on some educators, thus preventing the development of broader and interdisciplinary actions.

I believe it is important knowing how to deal with the problems that, it seems, tend to increase. However, I understand the need to train teachers of Biology and Science to make a permanent work at the school and in the community. (T7U).

I can't describe the type of activity that occurs at school to work with the use of alcohol and other drugs. I know that the Biology teacher has been working with the students. (T5G).

I didn't think about any activity involving Mathematics. (T6U).

It's not part of the context of my classes. (T11G).

These perceptions can be related to the way the syllabus is divided in the public education system. Literature points out that, in the state of São Paulo, for example, the topic, in addition to being little discussed, is covered in books of Science and Biology, implicitly suggesting that the task of working with this subject, within the school environment, is performed by teachers who teach such subjects (NASCIMENTO; VITALLE; AVALLONE, 2012).

Such reality, in addition to indicating a fragmented vision of the problem, could lead to disclaim of responsibility and the complacency of educators from other areas, resulting in the poor motivation of those involved and, consequently, to failure of actions.

Participants in the study also highlighted that the school managers do not always invest in continuous training or encouragement of teachers concerning the psychoactive substances issue among their students, being scarce the actions aimed at training of teachers through courses, guidance, among other investments.

There's lack of support from the school office. It doesn't support us on some issues. (T6G).

We do not take courses that prepare us to deal with these situations. (T6U).

Unfortunately, there's lack of professional training to deal with this kind of audience, because there is a lack of investments for such purpose. (T1G).

We could verify that the aforementioned speeches converge on what people know about the operation of the public school system: multiple demands and demands; hiring per hour/lesson and low pay; compliance with the school calendar; lack of time and space for evaluating and reflecting on the work performed; and lack of communication and

coordination among teachers, principals, and pedagogical coordinators (DALAGASPERINA; MONTEIRO, 2014; SANTOS; SOBRINHO, 2011).

We found that, of the 19 respondents, only 5 claimed to have already taken courses and/or educational programs related to the addressed topic. In this context, we believe there is need not only for preparing educators through the provision of specific trainings on use and abuse of alcohol and other drugs, but also for offering spaces for discussion and reflection for the school staff (MOREIRA; VÓVIO; MICHELI, 2015).

It is noteworthy that, nowadays, although there are opportunities for education and courses for educators focused on the topic of psychoactive substances approach in schools (ARALDI et al., 2012; ADADE; MONTEIRO, 2014), most respondents (about 74%) claimed to have never participated in training programs. Paradoxically, they reported to have already executed or to have been developing some activity on the approach to the use of psychoactive substances in the classroom (primarily focused on health promotion and use prevention). However, they do not believe their behavior to be effective, meaningful, or transforming, generating a pessimistic stance before the subject.

It's a way to alert, raise awareness, and try to make students reflect, but honestly I don't think that it will produce good results. [...] I feel that information itself is not enough, because every day increases the number of drug users. (T3G).

Difficulties in inserting this subject in students' activities have also been reported, in the sense that the extensive syllabus to be compiled in a short period usually prevents them from performing such activity, which corroborates the previous findings (NASCIMENTO; VITALLE; AVALLONE, 2012).

I do not work with the topic not to delay the syllabus. And this is already undermined by holidays and days that students don't show up at school. (T5G).

Furthermore, they mentioned that many teachers teach in three different shifts, often in different schools, hindering the creation of bonds with the school environments and the students. It is known that the excessive workload of teachers implies a lowering of the level of quality of life and affects the social conviviality (KOETZ; REMPEL; PÉRICO, 2013).

Another barrier identified by teachers on the use of psychoactive substances in their working contexts is the fear in dealing with students who are already involved with the use of substances. Such circumstances involve potential risks of exposure to violence and lack of information about how to face the issue, to guide, or to seek other resources to these students.

Aggression: the student becomes irrational and violent [...] You have to know what you're talking about, what you do, you can't touch them, it's hard. In theory, the school is aware of everything, laws, articles of association, what you can and cannot do, but when the problem arises we are inert, we don't know what to do if we can't control the student. (T9G).

Prevention should be carried out by us, educators, but it is an uncomfortable problem when young people are addicted, 'cause they do not accept advice to stop this addiction [...]. The school is in a very difficult position [...] because we don't know how to act, what to say, what to say to the parents, if we tell the police etc. (T7U).

The teachers' speeches refer to ignorance on the part of the school body not only of laws (SEGOVIA; GONÇALVES, 2011), but also of actions that may support them in daily facing situations involving drug use, including episodes of aggression.

Actions and needs aimed at work with the theme of psychoactive substances at school

Although a significant part of the participants of this study has not participated in any training program about it, a significant number states to have already developed actions directed to the use and abuse of psychoactive substances in the classroom, especially in a preventive perspective, in individual and collective activities with students.

I developed research and debate about the effects and consequences of alcohol and other drugs on the human body with the students. (T10G).

I've already organized lectures, testimonies, marches, banners, murals etc. on the use of alcohol and drugs. (T4U).

We watched videos, studied themes about ethical values, and asked the students to research on the use of alcohol and drugs. (T7G).

These allegations raise some important points for reflection. First, it is evident that, although some teachers claim to develop activities that somehow address the use of drugs, these happen, mostly, individually and in an isolated manner from an institutional project.

From the teachers' perceptions about the topic, and considering their potentialities and difficulties in addressing the use of psychoactive substances among the student community, study participants mentioned the possible actions to be carried out by teachers at school, in order to overcome the challenges and promote concrete actions.

It was stressed the importance of developing active methodologies when discussing the issue, listening to the students, in addition to the need for a special attention to younger students aiming at early prevention and health promotion.

Games, activities, songs, but in a way that raised the awareness of young people concerning drugs, and not only giving a lecture or doing other activity just to achieve a purpose. (T3G).

Through classes motivated by the theme. Engaging students in projects, such as radio, newspaper, is a good way of preventing, because such themes are prioritized in these projects. Inviting people who are former users to give testimonials would also be an interesting proposal. (T3U).

[...] I think that prevention should start back in the elementary school. (T7U).

In order to create a fertile field for effectively doing a work directed to the issue of the use of psychoactive substances, educators also mentioned the importance of addressing the subject in discussions with faculty and not to be limited to the students' context. Aligned with the lack of training programs on the issue, teachers stressed the relevance of school managers and/or other employees in enabling the provision of permanent education regarding the issue in the school itself, by actions that address general aspects of existing drugs (types, characteristics and effects) and, in particular, how to identify the use and how to act when faced with such situations.

I think we could attend lectures that present true stories about the effects of drugs and alcohol on the body and on life. (T8G).

We need to be prepared to understand the causes that lead people to use drugs; types of drugs and their reactions; how to identify a person who uses drugs; and what should be our attitude when we suspect that a student uses drugs. (T3U).

Besides the theme of use and abuse of drugs, we should receive guidance on the treatment of adolescent victims and of the best places in our region (specialized clinics). (T2U).

Another demand mentioned by teachers is the need to know, in terms of legislation, the conduct of the school concerning students who make use of psychoactive substances. Considering that the view of teachers facing the issue is always permeated by feelings of fear and insecurity, such understanding may contribute to decision-making and more secure and appropriate actions on the part of everyone involved with the school.

More knowledge about how to deal with the matter according to the law. What can and cannot be done. (T3G).

Which are the laws that support the work of the school when dealing with this problem? How can we deal with the problem when it is identified? [...]. (T7U).

Finally, survey respondents also reiterated the importance of creating support networks and partnerships in the pursuit of dialogue on drugs, which should not be limited only to the classroom or the school walls. They stressed how crucial is the interdisciplinary work involving teachers, family, local managers, the Government, and the whole community in the pursuit of integrated measures aimed at approaching the use of drugs among young people and adolescents within the school environment.

The topic needs to be addressed in an interdisciplinary way, involving the school managers, employees, and the entire school community. (T6G).

[...] That involved the whole community, especially the parents of the students. (T9G).

I guess it's the duty of the family, the Department of Health, and school orientation. This partnership is very important to face the problem of drugs. (T4G).

We need projects carried out in partnership with other public and private entities to face the issue of drugs. (T1G).

Although Brazilian laws mention the shared responsibility in the implementation of actions related to the use of drugs (RONZANI; SILVEIRA, 2014; BRASIL, 2005), initiatives, such as training of teachers on the issue, are insufficient and current programs need to be reviewed (FERREIRA et al., 2010).

It is necessary to shape the school actions according to the demands presented by the reality mentioned by teachers, requiring the planning of strategies between health and education, involving several social policies and institutions (SILVA et al., 2014; FELIPE; LOPES, 2009), focusing not only on technical aspects that can remedy the lack of information, e.g., the low perception of the risk associated with the use of legal drugs (FERREIRA et al., 2010), but also emphasizing motivational aspects and interpersonal skills.

Similarly, discussions on the cultural and ideological problems involving the theme at the school environment, including the disclaimer before the exposed problem by delegating its solution to health professionals and specialists, may collaborate for breaking preestablished paradigms and creating a new perception for teachers about their actions in the production of expected results (NASCIMENTO; VITALE; AVALLONE, 2012).

Final considerations

The school environment must be understood as a space which promotes educational processes and articulates social and health public policies, in this case, involving the issue of the use of psychoactive substances on the part of the teachers. Our study showed, however, that due to legitimate reasons most teachers work in an isolated and specific way with the theme. In addition, the perception of some of these educators when discussing on the use of alcohol and drugs is not seen as part of their work, let alone to be considered as part of the school responsibility. Several factors that support the aforementioned reality were also identified: lack of training to address the use of psychoactive substances in school; school culture of assigning the work with the issue to teachers of Science and Biology; pessimism regarding the work carried out; accumulation of functions in the face of an extensive syllabus to be complied; multiple workloads and difficulties in dealing with students who are drug users.

In addition, actions, such as research, debates, lectures, testimonials, educational materials, and videos, are carried out by the participants of the study as part of their work activities, accordingly to findings of other research that has been produced in this field of study. We also verified other adopted strategies that also aim to stimulate the

reflection and dialogue on the issue of psychoactive drugs at school: playful activities and lessons motivated by the theme. Such actions illustrated the efforts made by teachers and demonstrated their responsibility when facing the problem.

Results also show that educators realize the need for training for them to work in an interdisciplinary way with this issue, therefore, not only directed to their own performances, but also concerning support networks and legislation on alcohol and drugs.

The limitation of our study is to not perform individual interviews, which may have excluded some findings, but it satisfactorily illustrates how some teachers have been working with the use of alcohol and drugs with their students. More importantly, it is necessary to create practical ways of providing specific training on the use of psychoactive substances to school managers and educators, investing in the implementation of spaces for discussion and reflection at the school environment between staff and students, and creating an intersectoral networking aimed at better addressing such issue at the school environment.

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