

1987

Alcohol education: Are we providing what is needed?

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Recommended Citation

Coulson, Nina Renee, "Alcohol education: Are we providing what is needed?" (1987). *Graduate Research Papers*. 2215.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/2215>

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Alcohol education: Are we providing what is needed?

Abstract

"Alcohol abuse in the United States is a pervasive problem effecting many children and their families. 1 There are 100 million drinkers in the United States, and 10 million are chronic abusers; drunk drivers kill 28,000 people each year on the nation's highways; alcohol is associated with about 69% of all drownings; it is a factor in approximately 70% of all deaths and 63% of all injuries from falls; and \$19 billion a year is lost to business, government, and industry because of decreased work productivity caused by alcohol abuse" (Channing L. Bete Co., 1984, p.209). These statistics show a great need for some type of help. Fifteen million youngsters in the United States who live with alcoholic parents exist with many of the following symptoms; lack of attention, trouble with concentration, growing up too soon, "walking on pins and needles", "keeping it all inside", embarrassment, shame, and guilt (Ackerman, 1978). According to Cork (1969), both familial and peer relationships suffered. Schoolwork was seriously affected, and there was lack of trust of all adults. The majority of youngsters had little self-confidence and were anxious and easily upset by unexpected situations. Hindman (1975-76) summarizes several studies of child abuse and neglect and found alcoholism in as many as 90% of the cases. Children from alcoholic environments suffer from a high incidence 2 of behaviorial (sic), emotional, and psychological problems, not to mention the high risk of becoming "problem drinkers" themselves or choosing an alcoholic spouse (Newlon and Furrow, 1986). As many as 50% to 60% of the children of alcoholics will become alcoholics themselves or will marry one.

ALCOHOL EDUCATION:
ARE WE PROVIDING WHAT IS NEEDED?

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
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May 1987

This Research Paper by: Nina Renee Coulson

Entitled: Alcohol education: Are we providing what is
needed?

has been approved as meeting the research paper require-
ment for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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"Alcohol abuse in the United States is a pervasive problem effecting many children and their families. There are 100 million drinkers in the United States, and 10 million are chronic abusers; drunk drivers kill 28,000 people each year on the nation's highways; alcohol is associated with about 69% of all drownings; it is a factor in approximately 70% of all deaths and 63% of all injuries from falls; and \$19 billion a year is lost to business, government, and industry because of decreased work productivity caused by alcohol abuse" (Channing L. Bete Co., 1984, p.209). These statistics show a great need for some type of help. Fifteen million youngsters in the United States who live with alcoholic parents exist with many of the following symptoms; lack of attention, trouble with concentration, growing up too soon, "walking on pins and needles", "keeping it all inside", embarrassment, shame, and guilt (Ackerman, 1978). According to Cork (1969), both familial and peer relationships suffered. Schoolwork was seriously affected, and there was lack of trust of all adults. The majority of youngsters had little self-confidence and were anxious and easily upset by unexpected situations. Hindman (1975-76) summarizes several studies of child abuse and neglect and found alcoholism in as many as 90% of the cases. Children from alcoholic environments suffer from a high incidence

of behavioral, emotional, and psychological problems, not to mention the high risk of becoming "problem drinkers" themselves or choosing an alcoholic spouse (Newlon and Furrow, 1986). As many as 50% to 60% of the children of alcoholics will become alcoholics themselves or will marry one.

Needs and Objectives of Alcohol Education

Buckalew (1978) noted alcohol has been identified as our society's premier drug problem. He suggested the problem is not one of insufficient knowledge, but rather of public awareness of existing scientific knowledge and communication. Buckalew (1979) proposed that "if education is for the public good and if the provisions of education are to be functional and responsive to public needs, then education, as it touches all lives, must accept the challenge of disseminating knowledge reflecting on alcohol use and abuse" (p.52).

Many schools offer drug education as one complete program. Drug education (with alcohol linked in) has been purported as counterproductive and potentially harmful, in that "educated" youth were more likely to experiment with drugs (Psychology Today, 1973). Alcohol differs from other drugs, such as LSD, marijuana, and narcotics, in that alcohol is a legal drug the usage of which is socially accepted and governed by vastly different norms

and attitudes (Cooper and Sobell, 1979). Therefore, Cooper and Sobell believe it is appropriate that alcohol education should be considered separately from drug education and subjected to increased evaluation.

Goodstadt (1986) analyzed the research and practice of alcohol education. Researchers felt that evidence was sparse, incomplete and methodologically weak, while the practitioners possessed more confidence in the benefits of alcohol education. According to Goodstadt there has been very little research done to assess the impact of alcohol education. In educational settings it has included classroom instruction; school-wide information programs; parents' programs; school policies regarding drugs (including alcohol); and community outreach programs emanating from the school. He suggests several possible conclusions for the different reactions from the researchers and practitioners. They are as follows:

1. Implementation of unevaluated programs is better than doing nothing.
2. Unevaluated alcohol education runs the risk of increasing alcohol use.
3. Current alcohol education programs benefit some recipients, some of the time, with respect to some outcomes. Glaser (1984) cites the "rule of the 1/3". It will help 1/3, hurt 1/3, and do nothing for 1/3, so let's match up to those 1/3 it will help.

4. We do not know about the impact of alcohol education programs, at this time Goodstadt felt this to be the most reasonable conclusion.

Goodstadt concludes his analysis by making several recommendations for alcohol education programs:

1. "Programs should be targeted to specific subpopulations" (p. 358).
2. "Programs should have a sound theoretical base:
 - a) the personal, social and societal factors associated with development of alcohol use/abuse
 - b) the educational objectives and proposed processes of change" (p.358-359).
3. "Programs should be explicit-realistic in their objectives. The objectives must be achievable for the majority of the target group, within a limited time frame, and lasting for a reasonable time" (p.359).
4. "Programs involving hypothesized intervening variables or processes should be evaluated with caution" (p.360).
5. "Programs should be incorporated or be associated with as much evaluation research as is feasible" (p.360).

The "knowledge-attitudes-behavior model" assumes a series of relationships between a person's knowledge about alcohol, his feelings concerning alcohol, and his behavior relating to alcohol (Gonzalez, 1982). Opponents of this model claim that the available evidence has not

supported such assumptions and that other means to control alcohol should be pursued (Stalcup, Kenword and Frigo, 1979). Gonzalez (1982) felt that the "knowledge-attitude-behavior model" could be effective in reducing alcohol problems if efforts are based on carefully conceived implementation. He felt it was essential first to agree on the behavior desired. In this way education could be focused on promoting the agreed upon alcohol behavior rather than seeking to restrict undesired behavior, such as problems resulting from alcohol misuse. The general lack of evaluation programs based on the "knowledge-attitude-behavior model" is due more to the focus of these programs than to some inherent deficiency in the model itself (Goodstadt, 1978). The Report on the Education Commission of the States on Responsible Decisions About Alcohol (1977) as cited by Gonzalez (1982), recommended that in addition to information, alcohol abuse prevention programs should seek to increase the participants' decision-making skills. Fort (1973) also suggested that the communication of objective, factual information along with training in thinking, problem solving and decision-making be among the goals of alcohol education. "There is now evidence, albeit limited, that alcohol education efforts, when properly planned and implemented, can produce significant changes in knowledge, attitudes and more importantly

behavior. In view of this new evidence, it would be premature and ill-advised at this time to abandon or deemphasize research into alcohol education as a means of prevention of alcohol related problems" (Gonzalez, 1982, p.11).

Current Programs

Newlon and Furrow (1986) developed a process for identifying children from alcoholic homes through the use of classroom guidance discussions and activities. Classroom guidance lessons on alcoholism followed by an invitation to join a small group, which would deal with the subject on a more personal level, would be the most efficient and least threatening method of identifying children who come from alcoholic homes. General concepts to be presented were a) alcoholic versus responsible drinking behavior, b) alcoholism as a family illness, and c) children of alcoholics: characteristics and effects. At the end of the classroom sessions, the children voluntarily filled out a simple form that reflected their feelings and had a space to indicate interest in joining a group. There was then a screening to provide an opportunity to get a better idea of which children came from alcoholic homes. After working through their program, they found 11 out of a possible 16 children who could be from alcoholic homes so concluded that classroom guidance activities combined with small group counseling offers a way

to reach the "forgotten children" (Newlon and Furrow, 1986).

Besides identifying the students who need help, Tarnai, Fagan, Hopkins, Mauss and Eichberger (1981), had another idea for an essential element in an alcohol education program. Kenny (1977) found that there is substantial agreement among educators that appropriate teacher training is extremely important for effective alcohol education. Indeed, a study by Weir (1969) indicated that the most important factor determining the success or failure of an alcohol education curriculum was the instructor. Mullins (1968) notes that untrained teachers tend to be uncomfortable in teaching alcohol education to students and, thus, are presumably less effective than if trained. Therefore, the Educational Service District Curriculum Project in King County Washington has devoted a significant portion of its time and resources to teacher training (Tarnai, Fagan, Hopkins, Mauss and Eichberger, 1981). Major emphasis is given to affective education techniques through example and participation rather than through lectures. Teachers learn the theory of using affective skills in the classroom and practice conducting open-ended discussions at the workshop. Teachers are also taught strategies for establishing a nonjudgmental classroom milieu in which students feel free to make their own

decisions and to consider options and alternative behavior. Training in alcohol education effectively attained the goal of increasing teacher knowledge about alcohol and alcoholism, about community resources, and about new curriculum for facilitating open-ended discussions and improved some aspects of coping skills.

Ostrower (1987) discussed the program, "What We Need to Know About Alcohol" for grades 6-8. It focuses on alcohol and personal problems associated with alcoholism. It had three objectives:

1. To provide correct information on the subject, so that students can begin to make informed and reasoned decisions about their own drinking.
2. To offer an educational process that fosters the development of decision-making skills, so that students will be able to make responsible choices when confronted with situations involving alcohol.
3. To develop a counseling and referral system to help specific youngsters cope with personal and family difficulties that occur and to enable them to admit that they or someone in their family is abusing alcohol.

Another program is based on the reasoning that drug and alcohol abuse is often seen as a response to unfulfilled needs of the individual (Malvin, 1982). According

to this reasoning, chemically-induced highs are sought to relieve boredom, frustration, or low self-esteem, and to satisfy needs for excitement, identity, or social belongingness. One corollary of this philosophy is that, provided non-chemical means for fulfilling needs, individuals would be less inclined to abuse substances.

"Alternatives" is an approach to substance abuse prevention that evolved from this philosophy (Malvin, 1982). It calls for the development of opportunities for individuals to improve skills and pursue interests that can replace the need for drugs. Many alternatives for satisfaction of immediate need have been used but they will probably fail to compete with drug induced highs. Therefore, she suggested that the alternatives concept be narrowed to reflect those activities that enable individuals to lead more productive lives. Specifically, alternatives should provide achievement goals, practical skills, and services to others (Malvin, 1982). They should also be pleasurable, but they must be involving, active, incompatible with intoxication, and must stimulate commitment. Such alternatives are called service opportunities.

In Malvin's paper two programs were integrated into a junior high as courses. They combined classroom learning with fieldwork in a service setting. There was a "Cross-Age Tutoring" course, where students were trained

in tutoring and communication skills and tutored children in elementary schools. In the second course, "Students in the School Store", students were instructed in business and interpersonal skills, and operated a campus store. Students were expected to benefit from their participation by adopting more positive attitudes and behaviors with regard to themselves and school (Malvin, 1982). She felt that because such attitudes and behaviors are correlates of drug use that positive changes would ultimately reduce students' use of psychoactive substances. But it was found that the effects of participation in "Cross-Age Tutoring" or "Students in the School Store" were negligible for they did not form an interpretable pattern. She felt that methodological limitations of the study and possible weaknesses in the design of the courses may explain the lack of significant findings.

Recent reviews of educational efforts aimed at preventing alcoholism (Blane, 1976; Globetti, 1975; Milgram, 1976) indicate that a variety of programs exist. As these and other investigators have noted, however, rigorous research concerning the effectiveness of various models of alcohol education is virtually nonexistent (Tarnai, Fagan, Hopkins, Mauss and Eichberger, 1981). There exists a need for rigorous evaluation of all efforts aimed at the prevention of alcoholism (Blane, 1976).

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