AN INVESTIGATION INTO SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS’ VIEWS ON THE NATIONAL SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION PROGRAMME

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE MASTER OF ARTS IN ADDICTION STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Substance addiction continues to be a widespread and pervasive aspect of modern Irish society. The primary prevention effort directed at adolescents consists of the secondary-school substance abuse prevention programme, “On My Own Two Feet”, which has not been evaluated since its introduction in 1994. The present study aimed to investigate secondary-school students’ views on the programme. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach: a survey was administered to 102 5th-year students (58 females: 44 males) from three South Dublin secondary-schools, with supporting evidence from semi-structured interviews conducted with clients attending a substance abuse rehabilitation project, regarding the role of education as a preventive measure. The survey findings indicated considerably mixed views on the programme. The majority of students agreed that it is a “useful” source of information, although the sample was almost equally divided as to whether or not the programme would have any influence on their decisions regarding substance use. A substantial number of students indicated that the programme could be improved by the inclusion of more detailed factual information, realistic and relevant content, guest speakers with real-life experience of substance abuse and greater classroom discussion. The absence of focus groups from the current study is noted as limiting the scope of the findings. It is suggested that an overhaul of the existing outdated programme be undertaken so as to bring Irish primary prevention efforts in line with best international practice.
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Chapter introduction

Substance addiction continues to be a widespread and pervasive aspect of modern Irish society. In 2008 alone, some 22,458 individuals nationwide received treatment for problem substance use (Alcohol and Drug Research Unit of the Health Research Board, 2009 (a) & (b)) and the most recent data reveal a total of 3,465 drug-related deaths between the years of 1998 and 2007 (Health Research Board, 2010). The response at government-level to this significant and challenging issue has been to implement a National Drugs Strategy, the first of which was launched in 2001. While the introduction of a nationally co-ordinated response to substance abuse represents significant progress in addressing this issue, the drug problem in Ireland, reflecting the situation generally in other EU countries and beyond, nevertheless continues to expand. Whereas previously concentrated in urban areas, substance abuse has spread nationwide in recent years, and the range of substances available continues to increase (National Drugs Strategy, 2009). As has become abundantly clear, there is no “quick-fix” solution to this multi-faceted problem. The stated aim of the recently introduced interim National Drugs Strategy continues to be that of reducing the harm caused to individuals and society by the misuse of drugs through a “concerted focus on the five pillars of supply reduction, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and research.” In particular, a renewed emphasis has been placed on the area of prevention and its crucial role within the Strategy’s approach (National
Drugs Strategy, 2009). Brief consideration will thus now be given to the considerably complex concept of prevention.

1.2. “Prevention is better than cure”

With an aim of long-term minimisation of the threat of harm from drugs to the individual and society, it is of course essential that preventive measures be implemented to “stem the tide”, as it were. In the broadest sense, there are three levels of prevention strategies. Firstly, primary prevention, which aims to ensure that a problem does not occur in the first place; secondary prevention, which aims at reducing the prevalence of the problem or harm within the indicated community, and finally, tertiary prevention, which is aimed at stopping or impeding the progress of a problem development (Bassett, 2010). In terms of substance use, these three strategies equate generally to the prevention of initiation into substance use, the prevention of harm where drug-taking has initiated and the prevention of relapse where drug treatment has started, respectively. In terms of the primary prevention approach, or the prevention of initiation into substance use and abuse, the vehicle by which prevention is achieved is, principally, education (National Drugs Strategy, 2009).

Education, in this sense, refers not only to the provision of information and generation of awareness regarding the harmfulness and consequences of drug use, but also to the development of individuals’ social and personal skills and sense of self-efficacy.
Preventive education programmes, taking numerous forms and meeting with varying levels of success, have proliferated for some time, perhaps nowhere more notably than within the school domain. Schools are a natural and popular starting point for the delivery of many social education and prevention efforts: large numbers of young people can be reached, and relatively easily, compared with other non-institutional, e.g. family or community-based, programmes (Soole, Mazerolle & Rombouts, 2008). Secondary-school students fall into the age group at which the onset of alcohol and other drug use is most likely to occur (Morgan & Brand, 2009) and some researchers have estimated that the social benefits associated with the implementation of school-based substance prevention programmes to be roughly twice that of the costs incurred in their delivery (Caulkins, Pacula, Paddock & Chiesa, 2002 as cited in Soole, Mazerolle & Rombouts, 2008). The following will firstly explore international school-based substance abuse prevention programmes, before discussing the Irish approach.

1.3. International Substance Abuse Prevention Programmes and Approaches

One of the earliest such programmes, and certainly the most popular in the United States, was the “Drug Abuse Resistance Education” programme, or DARE as it is more commonly known. DARE was jointly developed in 1983 by the Los Angeles Police Department and a representative from the Los Angeles School District to combat the growing problem of substance abuse amongst students in the city (Bean, Bryman, Cramer & Nemitz, 1998). As a resistance training programme, DARE is designed to teach students to resist external social pressures, mainly from peers. In its original formulation,
the DARE training programme relied quite heavily on scare tactics, providing information designed to shock students into avoidance of substances. As well as being the most comprehensive and the programme most widely-used across the nation, it is also one of the most controversial, due primarily to its unique method of delivery by uniformed police officers in the classroom. The message of the programme has also been criticised as moralistic propaganda, rather than fact-based education (Bean et al, 1998). DARE remains the centrepiece of American substance misuse education policy to this day, operating in some 8,300 schools across the country (Merrill, Pinsky, Killeya-Jones, Sloboda & Dilascio, 2006). Although certainly most readily embraced in its country of origin, DARE’s popularity has not been confined to the United States alone, and now operates in more than 50 countries worldwide (Merrill et al, 2006).

The first meta-analyses of DARE outcome studies came from Tobler and her team in the early 1990s, and the findings were less than promising. Small effect sizes were found in terms of students’ substance use and attitudes subsequent to having received the programme, indeed, significantly smaller than those found amongst students receiving alternative school-based substance abuse prevention programmes. The crucial factor contributing to the difference in reported effect sizes was whether or not the programme was designed to be interactive i.e. the largest effect sizes were found amongst students who had received a programme delivered in an interactive teaching style (Ennett, Tobler, Ringwalt, Flewelling, 1994). DARE, on the other hand, relies heavily on the traditional teaching style, with the officer as expert, and with little encouragement of pupil interaction (Ennett et al, 1994). A much larger meta-analysis of 120 studies of school-
based drug prevention programmes also revealed interactive programmes to be
significantly superior to non-interactive programmes in preventing use of both licit and
illicit substances (Tobler & Stratton, 1997).

Subsequent evaluations of DARE’s effectiveness have, by and large, revealed similarly
unimpressive findings. Clayton, Cattarello and Johnston, in their 5-year longitudinal
evaluation, found no significant differences between DARE and comparison school
students’ level of drug use, although noting slighter larger effect sizes in the expected
direction in terms of substance attitudes and knowledge (Clayton, Cattarello & Johnston,
1996). Other long-term studies have similarly revealed no long-term effect on drug use
(e.g. Rosenbaum, Flewelling, Bailey, Ringwalt, & Wilkinson, 1994; Dukes, Ullman, &
Stein, 1996), with the majority of short-term studies suggesting that DARE’s short-term
effects on drug use are, at best, very small (Lynam, Milich, Zimmerman, Novak, Logan,
Martin, Leukefeld, & Clayton, 1999). One notable large-scale longitudinal study, comparing
students who had received the DARE programme with those receiving standard drugs
information curriculum, has revealed that almost no differences existed between the two
groups at 10-year follow-up in terms of drug use and drug attitudes, and that any differences
found were in fact in favour of the standard curriculum (Lynam et al, 1999).

Elsewhere on the prevention programme research agenda, the past two decades have been
dominated by one key term: life-skills. The importance of the research carried out by the
hugely influential Gilbert Botvin, and directly leading to the development of the life-
skills training approach to substance education and prevention, cannot be overstated.
Botvin and his team, in their appraisal of the literature, realised that simply providing
information warning of the dangers of drug use did not prevent drug use (Stothard & Ashton, 2000). Crucially, Botvin noted that not only was accurate and balanced information required for a prevention programme to be successful, but that this needed to be provided in the context of a skills-based programme that would engage students in their substance education. In his experimental attempts to curb smoking behaviours among adolescents, he taught smoking resistance skills “within a broader programme fostering general social and personal skills and addressing the psychological factors- poor self-esteem, social anxiety, lack of confidence- which might impede exercise of those skills” (Botvin, 1980, as cited in Stothard & Ashton, 2000). His “Life-Skills Training” programme involves an interactive classroom delivery, and relies on role-plays and modelling of skills. A review of the programme’s effectiveness, assessing students from over 56 schools, revealed that students having received three years of life-skills training reported significantly fewer incidents of smoking, drunkenness and cannabis use, as compared with controls, although methodological flaws reduce the reported significance somewhat (Botvin, Baker, Dusenbury, Botvin & Diaz, 1995, as cited in Stothard & Ashton, 2000). The programme’s effects are specifically attributed to the associated increase in students’ assertiveness in drug refusal and heightened anti-drug attitudes, and to a lesser extent, the development of general personal skills (Stothard & Ashton, 2000).

1 This is not to say that the provision of facts around substance use has become redundant or is not a necessary component of a substance abuse prevention programme; what is important to note here is the specific nature of the information. Studies have suggested that the provision of information that highlights or exaggerates the extreme effects associated with drug-use (i.e. using the scare-tactic approach) be avoided; not only has such an approach been found to be ineffective in preventing substance use (Sussman & Ames, 2008; Morgan, 2001), the inclusion of information contradicting students’ own experiences with illicit and illicit substances and their consequences undermines the credibility of the source and indeed the entire programme (Morgan, 2001).
Although Botvin’s dedicated “Life-Skills Training” programme, consisting of fifteen 45-minute lessons in addition to subsequent booster sessions, has not been widely adopted, its message has been readily embraced. The use of broader life-skills based training programmes, replacing previous information-based programmes, has become standard across Europe. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), in their analysis of school-based drug prevention efforts across the continent, have concluded that the most successful programmes include four primary elements: personal skills training (e.g. decision-making and coping skills); social skills training (e.g. assertiveness and peer pressure resistance); accurate knowledge (regarding both licit and illicit substances and the consequences of taking them) and attitude development (especially relating to misconceptions of normative substance use) (EMCDDA, 2002). Additionally, in terms of delivery, interactive teaching amongst smaller class groups has been associated with the most significantly positive results for substance use prevention (EMCDDA, 2002). Tobler, in her large-scale and oft-cited meta-analysis, similarly reported that an interactive curriculum, the provision of information about drugs and their effects, a focus on personal, social and resistance skills and an emphasis on normative education, were all critical components in increasing the effectiveness of school-based programmes (Tobler, Roona, Ochshorn, Marshall, Streke & Stackpole, 2000).

One final model of substance prevention is relevant, and that is the “Social Influence” approach. The earliest social influence-based programmes, the first of which was introduced by Evans in 1976 (Sussman & Ames, 2008), were based on the assumption
that young people who use substances are motivated to do so by a combination of social pressures from peers, family and the media, as well as from internal pressures (to “fit in” etc) (Morgan, 2001). Behavioural rehearsal was used to strengthen students’ naturally negative attitudes towards substance use and to equip students with the skills required to resist social influence towards drug use (Van der Kreeft, Wiborg, Galanti, Siliquini, Bohrn, Scatigna, Lindahl, Melero, Vassara, Faggiano, & The EU-DAP Study Group, 2009). Cuijpers, on the basis of a systematic review of the literature, has put forth several evidence-based quality criteria for drug prevention programmes. All of these criteria matched those outlined by Tobler in her meta-analysis, with the addition of one: the inclusion of a social influence element (Cuijpers, 2002). Research has since further indicated that by extending traditional narrowly-based social influence programmes to include general life-skills training, such as decision-making and assertiveness, the resulting “Comprehensive Social Influence” (CSI) programmes exert an even stronger preventive effect than standard social influence programmes (Skara & Sussman, 2003).

In the EU-DAP (Drug Abuse Prevention) study conducted with students from 170 schools across seven European countries, the CSI model was tested and revealed that the programme significantly reduced the progression of cigarette-smoking and incidence of drunkenness amongst those receiving the programme compared with controls (Faggiano, Galanti, Bohrn, Burkhard, Vigna-Taglianti, Cuomo, Fabiani, Panella, Perez, Siliquini, van der Kreeft, Vassara & Wiborg, 2008).

Based on the findings of this study, the “Unplugged” programme has been developed for implementation across various European countries, and includes all of the programme
components that have been demonstrated to be effective by Cuijsters and Tobler’s meta-analyses: it is a CSI-based approach, including social influence training, life-skills training, information on a broad range of substances and normative beliefs, and is delivered in an interactive style, with supplementary peer-led and family components (van der Kreeft et al., 2009). The curriculum, designed to be administered to 12-14 year-olds, consists of 12 components and is the first of its kind; initial evaluations conducted as part of the EU-DAP studies point to its promise, and pending minor alterations to some of its tasks and materials, dissemination to a European audience is envisaged (van der Kreeft et al., 2009).

1.4. The Irish Approach to Substance Abuse Prevention

Since 1994, Ireland has had two Substance Abuse Prevention Programmes (SAPP) in place: “Walk Tall”, delivered to primary school students and “On My Own Two Feet” for secondary school students. Both programmes are subsumed within the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curricula. At secondary level, the SPHE curriculum consists of ten modules, of which the SAPP is one, and is implemented exclusively at Junior Cycle, with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) currently developing a framework for a Senior Cycle curriculum (NCCA, 2006).

When originally launched in 1994 by then Minister for Education, Niamh Breathnach, the stated aim of the programme was to “enable students to develop their ability to take charge of their health and specifically to make conscious and informed decisions about
the use of drugs (legal and illegal) in their lives.” (Department of Education Ireland, 1994). A pilot study of the programme found that the students in the pilot schools that had implemented the programme had less positive attitudes to alcohol than those from control schools, were more likely to choose an assertive response to given situations, and had higher levels of self-esteem; the results also indicated that the students with a stronger belief in assertiveness and higher self-esteem were significantly less likely to smoke or consume alcohol or other substances (Department of Education Ireland, 1994). The sample materials available for the “On My Own Two Feet” programme relate mostly to the role of alcohol in our culture, and to the effects of passive smoking, and have remain unchanged since their introduction some 16 years ago.

Speaking in 2006, the now former Minister for Education, Mary Hanafin, stated that she is “confident” that the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum is ensuring that the education system plays its role in combating drug abuse among young people, and that the “On My Own Two Feet” programme specifically constitutes a “comprehensive life-skills programme”, in line with best international practice, that draws on three approaches: the development of values and attitudes, decision-making and social competence (Oireachtas, 2006).

Several studies have investigated the implementation of the SPHE curriculum at secondary-level, the delivery of which has been mandatory at Junior Cycle since 2003 (SPHE Support Service, 2007). These evaluations have generally revealed that the majority of staff, parents and students perceive the quality of provision and value of the
SPHE programme to be quite high, and that the course itself is “challenging, worthwhile and helpful” (SPHE Support Service, 2007). Indeed, in a recent study, 41% of students surveyed said that SPHE classes helped them develop personal and social skills, such as self-confidence and self-esteem; 60% also responded that SPHE classes had helped them understand how to make good decisions (Roe, 2010). This same study revealed that some 79% of students believed it to be important that they learn SPHE in school (Roe, 2010), although elsewhere, the lack of status of SPHE in comparison to examination subjects has been acknowledged, with less than half of parents and students agreeing with the continuation of SPHE into Senior Cycle (SPHE Support Service, 2007).

Additionally, in the course of the development of the recent National Drugs Strategy, the effectiveness of the SPHE curriculum in preventing or delaying substance use was called into question during consultation with experts, teachers and focus groups of students (National Drugs Strategy, 2009).

Importantly, it must be noted that this, and all previous such investigations of SPHE and its implementation, explored general views on SPHE as a curriculum subject, with no reference to its component modules or content. Thus, there exists a gap in the literature with regard to exploration of the Substance Abuse Prevention Programme specifically as, to date, no formal student evaluation of the “On My Own Two Feet” programme has been conducted.
1.5. The Current Study

By way of introduction to the rationale of the current study, a brief discussion of the service-user approach will now be presented.

1.5.1. The Service-user Approach

One of the more notable developments within the social research literature in recent years has been the upsurge in the number of studies documenting the service-user’s experience. The role of service-user consultation in research, specifically in terms of social policy development, first became a topic of mainstream discussion in the last decade of the 20th century, and was accompanied by the introduction of a new rhetoric of “user-involvement” and “partnership” (Beresford, 2002). The U.K. government, for example, in its “Quality Strategy for Social Care”, has highlighted the importance of service-users’ views and identifies them as one of four key sources for evidence-based policy and practice (Beresford, 2002). Service-user consultation has also recently been listed as a central strategy for modernising the NHS and improving its quality of care (Owens, Ley & Aitken, 2008).

Applying the service-user approach to the field of substance abuse prevention in schools, the ESPAD (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) studies, conducted every 4 years, across 35 countries, require particular mention for their inclusion of student feedback on their received substance education. The ESPAD 2007
school experiences have prepared them to deal with alcohol and drugs. A large number of students surveyed expressed satisfaction with how their school had prepared them to deal with peer pressure, and agreed that their school had promoted an awareness of concerns with regard to drug misuse (Morgan & Brand, 2009).

As mentioned in the preceding section, Irish studies that have adopted the student service-user approach have done so with regard to student evaluation on the SPHE programme as a whole (e.g. Roe, 2010), and have not elicited student feedback on their substance education specifically.

1.5.2 Rationale for the Current Study

Recent draft consultations for a Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum have revealed that students believe substance abuse to be the single most important area of learning to be included in the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum (NCCA, 2006). To date however, no follow-up study has been conducted to further explore this issue. Although various previous studies have invited students’ feedback on the SPHE programme as a whole, students’ specific views regarding, in their opinion, the single most important element of the curriculum i.e. the substance use module, have yet to be addressed. A service-user evaluation of the current Substance Abuse Prevention Programme (SAPP) would thus seem justly warranted.
Since the publication of their draft consultation report, there have been no further updates from the NCCA regarding the design and content of the new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum. It is suggested that, rather than simply extending the existing programme into a Senior Cycle, this opportunity be taken to evaluate the current programme and consider potential improvements to its design and delivery, and that this be done by those for whom the programme should be designed: secondary school students.

Elsewhere, the effectiveness of SAPPs has typically been evaluated using measures of reported substance usage, attitudes and knowledge amongst students having received the programme as compared with students from control schools. Such an approach would not be possible in the current study since, in theory at least, all Irish secondary school students receive the same programme, and thus no control student sample exists.

Rather, the study will address the extent to which students believe the programme has influenced them: whether it has been a useful source of information and whether it has influenced their decisions and attitudes around substance use. Considering that the programme was first introduced some 16 years ago, and the huge body of research that has followed, some of which has been outlined above, the argument from the Department of Education and Science that the programme is in line with "best international practice" is certainly disputable, and the extent to which the programme remains relevant and useful to students, requires closer inspection.
1.5.3 The mixed-methods approach

In addition to the primarily quantitative student survey, the study will also involve a brief qualitative investigation of the issue from two recovering addicts’ points of view, and is thus best described as a “mixed methods” study. Mixed methods research has been defined as “the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004 as cited in Symonds & Gorard, 2010), with the purpose of achieving “breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007, as cited in Symonds & Gorard, 2010). The use of mixed methods within the social research domain is becoming increasingly common and is typically justified in terms of yielding a more complete picture of the phenomenon in question than would be possible by either quantitative or qualitative approaches alone (Pommier, Guevel & Jourdan, 2010). With this in mind, the current study will make use of qualitative interview techniques to complement the quantitative survey data, in order to gain a broader perspective on the issue of substance education at secondary-school level.
1.5.4. Aims of the current study

It is hoped that in conducting this exploratory study, a real insight will be gained into how the current substance abuse prevention programme delivered to this country’s secondary school students is being received and whether or not the programme is succeeding in influencing students’ attitudes and decisions around substance use.

As regards the qualitative interviews, it is hoped that by consulting with individuals who have had first-hand experience of overcoming substance abuse problems and asking them to consider their own experience of substance education, at secondary-school level (including a retrospective consideration of “that which they wish they had known then”, as it were) as well as part of their ongoing recovery, a greater understanding of the important elements required of an effective substance abuse prevention programme will be achieved.

Importantly, given the fact that a new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is currently being drawn up, this study also aims to reveal what it is specifically about the current Junior Cycle substance abuse prevention programme that has been positive and what could and should be improved in future, according to secondary school students.
Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY

2.1. Design

The current study has a mixed-methods, exploratory design, and consisted of a short original survey, comprising both open and closed items, as well as two semi-structured interviews.

2.2. Participants

The “On My Own Two Feet” survey was completed by 102 South Dublin secondary-school students (58 females: 44 males), all of whom were 5th Year students. Their ages ranged from 15 to 17 years, with a mean age of 16. Three schools were represented in the study: School (1): A co-educational, V.E.C. community college; School (2): A co-educational DEIS (Designated disadvantaged) secondary school and School (3) A single-sex (girls) secondary school.

Interviews were conducted with two individuals currently attending Tallaght Rehabilitation Programme, a community-based rehabilitation day programme for individuals recovering from drug addiction. The two interviewees (1 female: 1 male) were 25 and 27 years of age respectively.
2.3. Measures

The “On My Own Two Feet” Survey:

A short, 8-item survey, comprising 5 Likert-scale items, and 3 open-ended questions, was created (See Appendix 1). The Likert-scale items were on a 5-point scale, ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. As the items on the survey were not intended to form a scale, reliability and validity assessments were not required.

Semi-structured interview schedule:

In advance of the interviews with the two clients of Tallaght Rehabilitation Project, a semi-structured interview schedule was drawn up (See Appendix 2), with questions relating to the clients’ experiences and thoughts around substance education at secondary-school level, as well as that received as part of their recovery.

2.4. Procedure: the Quantitative Element

2.4.1. Survey design

During the process of designing the survey, several potential items were considered for inclusion. It was deemed essential that the survey remain brief and the items unambiguous, to maximise the number of completed surveys and minimise
misinterpretation among the respondents. For this reason, the Likert-scale items consisted of short, positive statements. In order to enable some scope for respondent elaboration, for example, in terms of recommendations for the programme, open-ended questions were also required; a combination of the two question types was thus employed.

Likert-scale items were chosen so as to each capture a discrete component of the programme’s usefulness. Thus, the first item focused on whether or not the programme serves as a useful source of information for students, the second on whether the programme has had an effect on students’ attitudes, the third on whether the programme content was deemed realistic, the fourth on whether the programme would influence students’ behaviour, and the final closed item dealt with the importance or value that students attached to substance education.

The open-ended questions served in the first instance to elicit further information from the students as to how, precisely, the programme had had an influence on their decision as to whether or not to use substances, and in the second instance, to obtain suggestions from the students as to ways in which the programme could be improved or examples of different directions future such programmes could take.

2.4.2. Survey distribution

In order to represent as wide a cross-section of the South Dublin secondary school student population as possible, both co-educational and single-sex schools, fee-paying as well as non fee-paying, were contacted by telephone. The nature of the study was
explained, and an email containing the survey was sent. Several schools were contacted in this way until a substantial sample size had been achieved (See “Participants”).

The researcher met with a teacher from each school’s 5th year group, who agreed to administer the survey when a suitable time arose, so as to minimise disruption of the students’ schedule.

2.4.3. Survey Analysis: Likert-scale Items

As the purpose of this study was to explore rather than compare students’ views regarding the “On My Own Two Feet” programme, statistical tests were not required. Instead, descriptive statistics were obtained for the responses to each of the five Likert-scale items i.e. the frequency with which students responded “Strongly Agree”/“Agree” and so on was calculated for each item.

2.4.4. Ethical concerns

Student participation was entirely voluntary, and teachers were instructed to remind students to read the consent form carefully (See Appendix 3). This document informed students that they may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice, and also that any information they provide would remain confidential and anonymous.

All consent forms were detached from the survey and filed in a separate envelope.
2.5 Procedure: the qualitative element

2.5.1. Semi-structured interviews and ethical concerns

The manager of Tallaght Rehabilitation Project was contacted and the nature of the project was described to him. Two clients of the Project volunteered to participate in the study, and a suitable time was agreed to visit the premises. A private room was made available to the researcher, and a dictaphone was used to record the interviews, conducted individually, with the two clients.

Prior to each interview, the client was given a consent form (See Appendix 4), informing them that their participation was entirely voluntary and that any information they provide would be remain anonymous and confidential.

Interviews were transcribed, with all names and identifying information removed and stored carefully.

2.5.2. Thematic Analysis

Braun & Clarke (2006), in their recent delineation of thematic analysis best practice, described the various steps of the process; this has been used as a guiding reference in the current study. Firstly, the interview data, as well as the survey open-ended responses, were transcribed. In doing so, the researcher familiarised herself with the data, and re-read the transcripts several times, generating initial codes for the interesting features of the data set. Codes were grouped into potential themes, with all data relevant to each theme being gathered. Themes were reviewed and, eventually, named.
Chapter 3: RESULTS

3.1. Survey Analysis: Likert-scale Items

Descriptive statistics were obtained for each of the five closed-items of the survey and these will be presented individually as follows (See Appendix 5 for raw data):

**Item 1:** “I have found SPHE classes on drugs and alcohol to be a useful source of information about these substances”

![Pie Chart](image)

Some 68 students either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, and thus a clear majority of students, i.e. 66%, indicated that they did indeed find SPHE classes relating to substance use to be a useful source of information about these substances.
**Item 2:** “What I have learned about drugs and alcohol in SPHE class has had an effect on my attitude toward these substances”

![Pie chart showing responses to Item 2](image)

**Fig 2. Students’ responses to Item 2 on the “On My Own Two Feet” Survey**

Although a substantial 48% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that the SPHE programme has had an effect on their attitudes, a sizeable minority of students, some 33%, either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this same statement.
Item 3: “The examples of situations involving drugs and alcohol in the SPHE handbook are similar to real life”

Some 42% either agreed or strongly agreed that the situations depicted in the SPHE handbook are similar to real life, 33% did not know and 25% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.
**Item 4:** “What I have learned from SPHE classes would have some influence on whether or not I decide to use drugs or alcohol”.

![Pie chart showing responses to Item 4](image)

**Fig 4. Students’ responses to Item 4 on the “On My Own Two Feet” Survey**

An almost equal number of students indicated that they agreed as disagreed with this statement, 37% and 35% respectively, with 18% responding that they did not know.
Item 6: "It is important that students learn about drugs and alcohol in school".

A clear majority strongly agreed with this statement, some 63%, and when taken together with those who responded that they agreed, 98% of the entire sample indicated that they believe it to be important that students learn about drugs and alcohol in school.
3.2. Thematic Analysis

3.2.1. Open-ended Survey Items

Item 5 in this survey relates to item 4, namely “What I have learned from SPHE classes would have some influence on whether or not I decide to use drugs or alcohol”.

**Item 5:** “If you circled “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” to question 4, could you give some information on how it has influenced your decision?”

**Themes:**

(1) **Awareness of negative effects of substance use:**

Of those students that responded to this item, almost every response mentioned an increased awareness of the negative effects and consequences of substance use. There was some variation in terms of the students’ focus on the nature of the negative effects, with some students emphasizing the physical dangers e.g. “I realized you can die and it’s not worth it” and “You are more aware of what the substances do to your body”, whereas others focused more on the interpersonal consequences e.g. “These classes showed me how hard it would be for your family if you take them”.
(2) Awareness of need for moderation:

To a lesser extent, some students noted that the SPHE programme has made them re-assess their own relationship with substances. For example, some students mentioned that:

"It's made me try to be aware of how much I drink"

"You think more about what the drink is doing to your body when you're out".
Item 7:

"Is there anything else you would have liked to be included in your classes? (For example, information about substances from "head shops")?"

Themes:

(1) Need for detailed information about substances themselves:

Of those students that responded to this item, almost all expressed a desire to learn more about the specific nature of drugs and what effects different substances bring about.

Examples of responses include:

"It would probably have been a good idea to learn about the actual drugs"

"More information because not many people actually know much about drugs and what they all do"

"We need less bias, more scientific facts"

"We need to know more about head shop drugs because some students think that they're ok because they're legal but they don't know what the stuff does to you"
(2) Need for more realistic examples of substance use experience

Several students indicated that they would prefer to learn about the "real" experience of substance use. Some expressed a desire for

"More real life situations and not just people's ideas of what it's like"

"Don't pretend it's not happening out there, talk about safety and tell people to be aware of where drug use takes place"

"More information about people's actual experiences"
Item 8

“Do you have any suggestions on how the SPHE classes on drugs and alcohol could be improved?”

Themes:

(1) The need for a more “real-life” programme.

Of the large number of responses to this item, the most frequently used term was “real-life”. A great many students expressed a desire for a guest speaker with experience of substance use, to visit the class, as well as seeing more real-life documentaries.

“We should have a guest speaker in to talk about their experiences to bring it to life for us.”

“They need to get someone in who has been there and wants to stop others doing the same things....it would be good cause then we can see that people are not making this stuff up”

“Bring in an alcoholic to talk to students about how it ruined their life”
“Show graphic videos of what drugs really do or look at case studies of how drugs affect real people’s lives”

Many students noted that the course should relate more to the reality of their lives.

“They should make the scenarios more realistic, more up-to-date information”

“Make information relevant to everyday life”

“They should talk more about real-life problems to help everyone get a better idea”

Additionally, some wanted the programme to acknowledge that many students use substances.

“If it taught you how to manage alcohol and not just say you shouldn’t do it”
(2) Improved delivery of the programme

Several students mentioned the need for greater discussion of topics amongst the class and for smaller discussion groups.

"We need more debate, students would pay more attention"

“They should let (students) get involved in discussion and not just be sitting there”

“Small groups of people makes it more comfortable to talk”
3.2.2. Semi-structured Interviews

The data from the two semi-structured interviews yielded two main themes.

Themes:

(1) Importance of learning about the actual effects of drugs

Both clients expressed the need for students to learn of the actual effects of substances on the individual.

"I never remembered anyone telling us about what heroin actually does to you (in school). I always thought it was dangerous like in the same way as a cigarette, I didn’t know anything about the physical withdrawals and all the rest of the, you know, side effects" (Client 1)

"Maybe I would have just seen stuff about drugs on an ad or hear something from my parents that they’re dangerous, and the thing is kids not knowing anything about it, about drugs....and I didn’t learn about what drugs actually do to you” (Client 2)

"Its only going through the treatment programmes and coming here that I actually know, really about what happens when you take all the other drugs” (Client 2)
"You know with the head shops, we had a pharmacist in to talk to us about it, but it scared me like, and I said, why don't they do that with kids in school who will be thinking of using the stuff." (Client 1)
(2) Value of exposure to real-life experience

To a lesser extent, both interviewees indicated that it would be in the students’ benefit to learn from someone who has dealt with substance problems of the reality of the experience.

"Because I see my son’s Da has lost his leg using drugs, and I think something like that would have (had an effect on me)...kids might need to see something like that to realize" (Client 1)

"It would be good, for people to go into schools.... I didn’t learn about what drugs actually do to you... yeah they need to hear about things like that." (Client 2)
Chapter 4: DISCUSSION

4.1. Chapter Introduction

The current study was undertaken to investigate students' views concerning their received substance abuse education, i.e. the "On My Own Two Feet" programme, delivered as part of the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum. In light of the imminent Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum, currently under development, students' recommendations regarding possible directions for future substance education programmes were also solicited. Finally, in an attempt to gain a broader perspective on the issue of substance education at secondary-school level, interviews were conducted with clients attending a substance abuse rehabilitation project, discussing the role of education as a preventive measure. The following constitutes an interpretation and discussion of the results of the student survey and the semi-structured interviews, as outlined in the preceding section. Some strengths and limitations of the study will also be discussed, as well as recommendations arising from the present study's findings.

4.2. Interpretation and Discussion of the Study's Findings

The five Likert-scale items of the survey focused, individually, on whether or not the programme serves as a useful source of information for students, whether the programme has had an effect on students' attitudes, whether the programme would influence students' behaviour, whether the programme content was deemed realistic, and, finally,
the importance or value that students attached to substance education. Additional open-ended questions served to further probe students’ views regarding the programme, including recommendations for future improvements.

4.2.1. The Usefulness of the Programme as a Source of Information

In terms of whether or not students found the programme to be a useful source of information about substances, a clear majority of students, some 66%, either agreed or strongly agreed that it was. This would seem to indicate that a large number of the student sample found the information delivered within the “On My Own Two Feet” programme to be of some level of usefulness to them. Of course, students were not asked how useful they found it relative to other sources of information about substances, but simply whether they agreed it was useful in its own right. Equally, to agree that a programme was a useful source of information does not imply that its “usefulness” could not significantly be improved; the findings from the survey item relating to recommendations for programme content improvement are particularly relevant here.

Almost every student that replied to the open-ended item relating to programme content improvement (i.e. Item 7: “Is there anything else you would have liked to be included in your classes?”) expressed a desire to learn more facts and detailed information about the substances themselves. One student wanted “more information because not many people actually know much about drugs and what they all do” and another believed that “It would probably have been a good idea to learn about the actual drugs”. This finding is
in line with developmental research revealing that, contrary to later stages in life, youth and young adulthood is generally characterised by a pursuit and gathering of information, with a focus on the objectivity of assimilated information (Gould, Saum & Belter, 2002); thus the need for, as one student put it, "less bias, more scientific facts".

Interestingly, the importance of learning about the actual nature and effects of drugs was also one of the two main themes emerging from the interviews with the Tallaght Rehabilitation Project (TRP) clients. For example, one of the clients commented:

"I never remembered anyone telling us about what heroin actually does to you (in school). I always thought it was dangerous like in the same way as a cigarette, I didn’t know anything about the physical withdrawals and all the rest of the, you know, side effects" (Client 1) and:

"You know with the head shops, we had a pharmacist in to talk to us about it...and I said, why don’t they do that with kids in school who will be thinking of using the stuff" (Client 1)

The first comment reflects the need for accurate and comprehensive information to be included in a substance education programme, and the second, that such accurate and up-to-date information is particularly important when it comes to secondary-school students who comprise a large proportion of the age group at which onset of substance experimentation is most common (Morgan & Brand, 2009).
4.2.2. The Effect on Students’ Substance Attitudes

The students’ responses to the second item, concerning their substance attitudes, revealed that 48% were in agreement that the “On My Own Two Feet” programme has had an effect on their attitudes towards drugs and alcohol. Although this item was worded in an intentionally neutral style so as not to lead the respondent, it does limit interpretation of the direction of the effect the programme has had on these students’ attitudes.

What is indisputable, however, is that some 33% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the programme had had an effect on their substance attitudes at all, and that a further 19% did not know. As was stated earlier, the “On My Own Two Feet” programme has, as one of its core aims, the “development of values and attitudes” regarding substance use. It is widely accepted that attitudes are learned rather than innate, that they are an integral part of the socialisation process and that they can be influenced via the cognitive pathway i.e. through receiving information relevant to the formation of the attitude (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). The “On My Own Two Feet” programme is thus not without basis in its attempt to influence student attitudes regarding substance use through its curriculum. What must be considered however, are the various factors involved in determining whether or not a given programme, or message, is likely to bring about an effect on the attitudes of its audience, in an attempt to understand the reasons underpinning this programme’s fairly poor effectiveness in this regard.
Firstly, research indicates that communication coming from perceived experts rather than perceived non-experts is more likely to influence an audience's attitude (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). It is important to note that a recent report commissioned by the SPHE Support Service revealed that one of the biggest challenges schools face in implementing SPHE is the lack of teacher confidence in delivering the curriculum, as “(SPHE in-service) training itself is not very extensive” (Burtenshaw, 2007). All of the SPHE teachers questioned raised this issue, and felt that significantly more training was required, as that which is currently provided “is not leaving teachers feeling competent and confident with the teaching methodologies in SPHE and the sensitive nature of much of its content.” (Burtenshaw, 2007). Thus perhaps unsurprisingly, Roe's recent study revealed that 49% of the students surveyed would prefer an outside facilitator for their SPHE classes (Roe, 2010). A communicator's credibility is apparently vital in the process of attitude influence, the most effective communicator being one who is deemed to be presenting the truth in a confident and knowledgeable manner (Passer & Smith, 2001). If teachers lack confidence and feel ill-equipped to deliver the curriculum, this will likely reduce the effectiveness of the programme in impacting on students' attitudes.

Importantly, attitudes are not formed exclusively by received knowledge relating to the attitude-object, but also via personal and vicarious experiences (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). It is an undeniable fact that many secondary-school students will have had a personal experience of substance use during their school years. According to the most recent ESPAD figures, 52% of Irish 15-16 year olds surveyed have smoked at some stage, almost 20% having done so more than 40 times; 86% of the sample had consumed
alcohol, 24% having done so 40 times or more and just over 20% had smoked cannabis by the age of 15 (Morgan & Brand, 2009). Such personal experience, as well as being central to attitude formation, may also cause students to discount the credibility of any programme that seeks to highlight the extreme dangers associated with drug use, especially if the student's own experiences have been positive.

In the recent student consultations regarding the SPHE Senior Cycle curriculum, students reported that they didn’t want teachers to assume that they weren’t using substances (NCCA, 2006); as one student commented in this study, it would be preferable if “(the programme) taught you how to manage alcohol and not just say you shouldn’t do it”.

According to a recent Australian study, traditional drug education programs that focus exclusively on abstinence are unlikely to be realistic, thus limiting their potential for success (Guzys & Kendall, 2006). The credibility of the programme and thus its effectiveness in informing students’ attitudes would perhaps be improved if the information relating to substances’ harmfulness was accompanied by some acknowledgement or discussion of substance use management.

4.2.3. The Effect on Students’ Decisions regarding Substance Use

Of course, the development of student attitudes is not intended as an end in and of itself, as the implicit assumption, this being a prevention programme, is that these attitudes will subsequently serve to affect the students’ behaviour. The relationship between attitude and behaviour is far from straightforward. Some have concluded that attitudes tend to be predictive of behaviour only to a modest degree (e.g. Kraus, 1995); others contend that
attitudes are more predictive of behaviour under certain circumstances, for example, when counteracting situational factors are weak (e.g. in the presence of peer pressure) (Passer & Smith, 2001), or when the attitude in question is one that is strongly held, consciously available and formed through personal experience (Millar & Millar, 1996).

Countless studies attest to the inconsistent relationship between the two and thus in the current study, rather than inferring from students' attitudes as to their likely behaviour, students were asked explicitly about whether or not the programme would influence their behaviour. The response was considerably mixed, with 44% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the programme would have some influence on their decisions around substance use, and 38% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this same item. In addition, some attention must be given to the high number of “don’t know” responses: 18% of students chose this option for this item, and 19% chose this option for the item regarding attitudes. Morgan and Brand, in their analysis of the ESPAD 2007 figures, noted that 15-20% of the student sample also chose this option in response to items regarding whether or not their school experiences had prepared them to make decisions regarding substance use. It was suggested that this finding may reflect the fact that attitudes and behaviour relating to substances involve a great number of interacting influences, and thus to isolate the particular role played by their school in contributing to these attitudes and behaviour, is a difficult task (Morgan & Brand, 2009).

In order to further explore the issue, those students who indicated that they either agreed or strongly agreed that the programme would have an influence were asked to provide
more information on how and why their SPHE classes on substance use would influence their decision around substance use. Two themes emerged here from the responses given: those students whose decisions around substance use had been influenced by the programme expressed either an increased awareness of the negative effects and consequences of substance use or, to a lesser extent, an increased awareness of the need for moderation regarding substance use.

There were some indications in the responses to this item of the effectiveness of the programme in causing some students to think twice about their use of drugs or other substances, with some students noting it had made them more "aware" of how much they drink, and others stating that it would make them avoid trying substances at all, for example "I realized you can die and it's not worth it". It would seem that although, as discussed earlier, a great many students wanted more specific information regarding various substances and their effects, for others, the information received under the current programme was sufficient to deter them from substance use (at least, some substance use, as the substances were not specified), likely reflecting various individual differences, as would naturally be expected in any sample.

4.2.4. The Extent to Which the Programme’s Content is Realistic

Another item receiving a mixed reaction from respondents related to whether or not the content of the programme was deemed to be realistic. Some 42% of students either
agreed or strongly agreed that the situations depicted in the programme handbook were similar to real life, 25% disagreed and 33% did not know.

Certainly the extent to which the programme’s content is close to real-life is an important one, considering the fact that the SPHE Senior Cycle draft consultations revealed that students number one priority for a Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is that the content be “relevant to students’ lives now and in the future” (NCCA, 2006). The present finding that only 42% of students believe the programme content to resemble real life thus reflects quite poorly on the current programme, and its likely outdated content.

Indeed, the student responses to the open-ended item number 8, on how the programme could be improved in future, related to the need for the programme to address the reality of students’ lives, with the most frequently used term being “real-life”. For example, one student commented that “they should make the scenarios more realistic, more up-to-date information” and another, that there should be “more real life situations and not just people’s ideas of what it’s like” and that the programme should “make information relevant to everyday life”. Clearly, for a certain proportion of the students, there is a disconnect between that which they are reading about in their SPHE handbooks, and their own lives and understanding of the issues relating to substance use. If the programme content is perceived as being out-of-date or irrelevant by those for whom it is intended to influence, then this would certainly seem to be a fundamental aspect of the programme that needs to be addressed.
4.2.5. Student Recommendations for Programme Delivery

Not only do students want the programme to relate to their own lives, but they also want to learn about the “real-life” experiences of others who have experienced substance abuse problems. A great many students responded that the programme could be improved by incorporating guest speakers with experience of substance use: “We should have a guest speaker in to talk about their experiences to bring it to life for us” and “They need to get someone in who has been there and wants to stop others doing the same things....it would be good cause then we can see that people are not making this stuff up”. It was interesting to note that the second quote acknowledges the potential lack of credibility of SAPPs, that there would be a suspicion that some of the content is being “made up”.

The interviews also touched on the value of individuals “seeing the consequences for themselves”. One client noted:

“I see my son’s Da has lost his leg using drugs, and I think something like that would have (had an effect on me)...kids might need to see something like that to realize” (Client 1)

while the other agreed that:

“It would be good, for people to go into schools.... I didn’t learn about what drugs actually do to you... yeah they need to hear about things like that.” (Client 2).

Roe’s recent study regarding students’ feedback on their SPHE classes found that 78% of students who had had SPHE lessons delivered by an outside speaker found this to be useful (Roe, 2010). However, only 1/3 of the students surveyed had actually received any
talks from an outside speaker. On this topic, the SPHE website states the following:

“Carefully selected outside speakers can complement the work of the SPHE teacher but should never replace it” (SPHE Support Service, n.d.). Roe’s study revealed that the only visitor students had had in relation to substance use was a member of the Garda Siochana, who spoke about drinking and smoking (Roe, 2010). As this study has clearly shown, many students are of the belief that the programme could be improved in future by including a talk delivered by a “guest speaker”, specifically one with personal experience of substance abuse, so as to provide students with a deeper understanding of the effects of substance abuse. Whether or not the new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum will provide greater scope for the inclusion of such a guest speaker element remains to be seen.

Another theme that emerged from the students’ recommendations for the programme related to the need for greater classroom discussion. One student noted that;

“They should let (students) get involved in discussion and not just be sitting there” and another, that: “We need more debate, students would pay more attention”.

This finding can be related back to the insufficient training received by SPHE teachers. SPHE, as a subject, is designed to be taught “using experiential or active learning methodologies which differ substantially from traditional teaching methods. The approach requires a very facilitative teaching style and a high level of participation by students” (Burtenshaw, 2007). As Burtenshaw notes, however, the degree to which these methodologies are actually and consistently used within the classrooms is a real concern, as evidenced by the difficulties experienced by teachers in using these methodologies as part of their in-service training (Burtenshaw, 2007). As
mentioned in Chapter 1, several meta-analyses of international SAPPs have consistently revealed that an interactive delivery style is one of the key components of an effective programme (e.g. Cuijpers, 2002; EMCDDA, 2002; Tobler et al, 2000 & Tobler & Stratton, 1997). If students are not being encouraged to discuss substance use as part of their SPHE class, the research would suggest that the potential effectiveness of the programme is being compromised.

4.2.6. The Perceived Importance of Substance Education

The most conclusive finding of the present study was that students think they should be learning about substances as part of their secondary-school education; 98% of students strongly agreed or agreed that it is important to learn about drugs and alcohol in school, that is, 100 of the 102 students in the sample. This is an important indication that students do in fact value the role that their school has to play in teaching them about licit and illicit substances. A previous investigation of students’ views on the SPHE curriculum revealed that the majority of students perceived the value of SPHE to be high; however, this same study found that less than half of students were in favour of SPHE being continued into Senior Cycle. It may be the case that students value SPHE and substance education more in theory than in actual practice, this sentiment being summed up by one SPHE Co-ordinator: “I would say its highly valued by the school ... (but) this would be well down the priority list you know ... the way we would see it is that it is a filler in, it wouldn’t be priority” (SPHE Support Service, 2007). Of course, this conclusion cannot be drawn on
the basis of the data presented, as students’ views on the relative value of SPHE in the overall curriculum were not a focus of the current study.

4.3. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

In terms of the study’s strengths, it is noted that a substantial sample was achieved, representing three different schools (a co-educational V.E.C school, a co-educational DEIS school and a single-sex (girls) secondary school). A short and readily comprehensible survey, combining closed and open ended questions, was designed; few items were unanswered, likely due to the survey’s brevity and clarity, and there was a good average response rate to the open-ended items, of approximately 70%.

Another of the study’s strengths relates to the mixed-methods approach taken: the inclusion of qualitative interviews with clients of Tallaght Rehabilitation Project gave a greater depth and breadth to the study than would have been achieved through survey administration alone.

In terms of the study’s limitations, it is noted that since the programme has never before been evaluated by students, an original survey was required: thus, there are no comparable figures to indicate whether or not students are now more or less positive in their evaluation of the programme than at a previous point in time, or whether new themes have emerged over time.
Another limitation relates to the fact that students were not asked to evaluate the amount of influence the school-based programme has on their attitudes and decisions around substance use, relative to other sources of influence, such as the peer group and media, which may potentially have yielded some interesting results. It is noted however, that this would likely be a difficult experience to quantify, and that student focus groups would be required in order to shed light on such a complex network of interacting influences.

Finally, one limitation inherent to an exploratory survey study relates to the fact that the items of interest must be anticipated in advance, and unforeseen issues that students may have wished to provide feedback on, remain unexplored. The absence of student focus groups from the current study is regrettable, as a detailed discussion of their views on the “On My Own Two Feet” programme might have revealed additional areas of focus that could not have been captured by the survey alone.
4.4. Implications of the Current Study and Future Directions

The current study has revealed that students' views on the “On My Own Two Feet” programme are largely mixed. While a majority of students agreed that it is a “useful” source of information, a great many indicated that they would have liked to have learned significantly more detailed facts about the substances themselves. There was a roughly equal three-way split between whether students agreed, disagreed or didn’t know whether the content of the handbook was “similar to real life”. A substantial 48% agreed that the programme has had some effect on their attitudes towards substances (direction unspecified), while a sizeable minority disagreed. Students were almost equally divided on whether or not the programme would have an influence on their decisions to use drugs or alcohol, but were almost completely unanimous in their agreement that it is important that they learn about drugs and alcohol in school.

Thus, based on the Likert-items of the survey, it can be concluded that the programme was moderately well-received by the students.

Given the substantial response to the open-ended items relating to programme recommendations however, there exists clear and considerable room for improvement. As well as requiring more detailed factual information about substances, students requested that the content of the programme closer reflect the reality of their lives, and include up-to-date information that is relevant to them. The potential benefits of the inclusion of a “guest-speaker” element in the programme were independently suggested by a substantial number of students, as well as the need for more classroom discussion.
As was discussed in Chapter 1, extensive research on the area of substance education at secondary level has been conducted in the 16 years since the “On My Own Two Feet” was developed. Although the statement from former Minister for Education Mary Hanafin that “On My Own Two Feet” reflects best international practice (Oireachtas, 2006) was at one time true, a significant body of literature accruing over the last decade has rendered the “life-skills approach” in isolation as obsolete. Several large meta-analyses have revealed that optimally effective preventive programmes should now include social influence training, detailed information on a wide range of substances, normative education, as well as a focus on life-skills training, and that this must be delivered in an interactive style (Cuijpers, 2002). The “On My Own Two Feet” programme does not include any element of social influence training, nor does it provide normative education on substance usage. Additionally, student recommendations for greater interactivity and more detailed factual information would seem to indicate that these are two further areas in which the current programme is lacking.

At what stage the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is in development has not been revealed, nor how markedly the SAPP will diverge from that which is currently in place. Most likely, the new Senior Cycle module will represent an extension of the Junior Cycle module, so as to be consistent; there has been no mention of a review of the existing Junior Cycle programme. If this proves to be the case, it is the strong opinion of this researcher that a valuable opportunity to improve the quality of the SAPP received by this country’s secondary-school students will unfortunately have been wasted.
It seems that elsewhere in the Irish substance prevention domain, progressive steps have in fact been taken to introduce newer approaches. The Drugs Education Workers Forum (DEWF), for example, have identified the need for up-to-date, practical information on best practice in substance use education for the voluntary, community and statutory drug education workers of Ireland. An evidence-based manual for quality standards in substance use education within this sector has since been produced by the DEWF, accompanied by a “skills and competencies” audit for all practitioners (Butler, Keane, Rowley & Smith, 2007) Yet when it comes to the national substance abuse prevention effort, reaching every secondary-school student in the country, it seems that an out-of-date programme, delivered by teachers that feel ill-equipped to do so, continues to suffice.

Following the example of the recent “Unplugged” programme, which, pending minor alterations, will likely reach a wide audience of continental European secondary-school students, it is suggested that Ireland takes a similar evidence-based approach. The various elements of an optimally effective SAPP have already been specified and incorporated into the “Unplugged” curriculum; a large-scale pilot study to support the use of a similar such programme amongst Irish students is required, and it is strongly suggested that focus groups of students be consulted so that the relevance of the programme content can be evaluated. Additionally, although not a focus of the current study, the issue of inadequate SPHE teacher training is one that has been raised consistently by SPHE teachers themselves (e.g. Burtenshaw, 2007) and is certainly an area that requires urgent attention so as to maximise effective implementation of the current, or any future such SAPPs.
Students have indicated that they place value on the role of schools in providing them with substance education; their response to the programme as it currently stands, however, is considerably mixed, with their specific suggestions regarding content and delivery indicating substantial room for improvement. It is recommended that the feedback of the programme’s service-users, i.e. the students, be incorporated in a large-scale pilot study of a new SAPP, following international guidelines. In order to maximise the effectiveness of primary prevention level efforts at tackling the national drugs problem, it is advised that an overhaul of the existing, out-of-date Substance Abuse Prevention Programme is urgently needed.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix 1

The “On My Own Two Feet” Survey:

Instructions:

Please read the following statements carefully and circle one of the five options, indicating how strongly you agree or disagree with the statement.

(1) “I have found SPHE classes on drugs and alcohol to be a useful source of information about these substances.”

Strongly Agree  Agree  Don’t Know  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

(2) “What I have learned about drugs and alcohol in SPHE class has had an effect on my attitude towards these substances.”

Strongly Agree  Agree  Don’t Know  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

(3) “The examples of situations involving drugs and alcohol in the SPHE handbook are similar to real life.”

Strongly Agree  Agree  Don’t Know  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
(4) "What I have learned from SPHE classes would have some influence on whether or not I decide to use drugs or alcohol".

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(5) If you circled "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" to question 4, could you give some information on how it has influenced your decision?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

(6) "It is important that students learn about drugs and alcohol in school"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(7) Is there anything else you would have liked to have been included in your classes? (For example, information about substances from "head shops")

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

(8) Do you have any suggestions on how the SPHE classes on drugs and alcohol could be improved?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix 2

Semi-structured Interview schedule:

(1) Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and how long you’ve been coming to TRP?
   • Could you tell me about your experiences that led to you coming here?

(2) Can I ask when it was that you first became involved in using drugs?
   • What substances were you using to begin with, how did this progress?

(3) What influenced your starting to use these substances initially?
   • How did that affect your school life and your life in general at the time?

(4) Looking back, what do you think it would have been helpful to have known about substance use at that young age?
   • What do you think that students should learn about substances that might prevent them from developing substance abuse problems?

(5) In the rehabilitation programme here, you learn about life skills and how to avoid using substances as a way to cope. Could you tell me a bit about your recovery here and what has been particularly useful?
   • Is there anything that you’ve learned here that might be useful for a substance education programme for secondary school students?

(6) In general, what would you say you know now that you wish you had known as a teenager?

(7) What would you think about people in recovery visiting secondary schools to talk about their experiences?
Appendix 3

Consent Form: Students

**Consent Form**

My name is Maeve Wallace and I am currently carrying out research for my Masters in Addiction Studies with DBS. This study will investigate secondary school students’ attitudes towards the SPHE programme on substance use (i.e. drugs and alcohol).

Completing the questionnaire should take approximately 5-10 minutes. All information gathered in this study will be stored safely, and will remain both confidential and anonymous. In accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 1997, you are entitled to access your personal data should you wish to do so. You are free to withdraw from the study, at any stage, without prejudice.

Should you have any questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your participation!

I ................................................ give my full consent to participate in this study.

Maeve Wallace

wallacemaeve@gmail.com
Appendix 4

Consent Form: Interviewees

**Consent Form**

My name is Maeve Wallace and I am currently carrying out research for my Masters in Addiction Studies with DBS. This study will focus on the area of substance use education and related issues.

All information gathered in this brief interview will be stored safely, and will remain both confidential and anonymous. In accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 1997, you are entitled to access your personal data should you wish to do so. You are free to withdraw from the study, at any stage, without prejudice.

Should you have any questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you kindly for your participation.

I……………………………………… give my full consent to participate in this study.

Maeve Wallace

wallacemaeve@gmail.com
Appendix 5

Survey raw data:

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**Item 1:** “I have found SPHE classes on drugs and alcohol to be a useful source of information about these substances”

**Item 2:** “What I have learned about drugs and alcohol in SPHE class has had an effect on my attitude toward these substances”

**Item 3:** “The examples of situations involving drugs and alcohol in the SPHE handbook are similar to real life”

**Item 4:** “What I have learned from SPHE classes would have some influence on whether or not I decide to use drugs or alcohol”.

**Item 6:** “It is important that students learn about drugs and alcohol in school”.

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