

# **Educators' Notebook**

## **Reviews of Research of Interest to Educators**

### **Study of Risk Behaviors in Francophone Students**

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This *Notebook* presents the findings of a study that describes the risk behaviours of students in grades 9 to 12 in rural and urban schools of the DSFM. The results of the study may serve to adapt prevention and intervention programs with respect to the actual risk behaviour patterns of the young people in this community. The data may also serve to demystify some preconceived notions that students and their parents might have about adolescent behaviour. The principal goal is to help young people take responsibility for themselves, while making healthy and safe life choices.

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# Study of Risk Behaviors in Francophone Adolescents

## Introduction and background

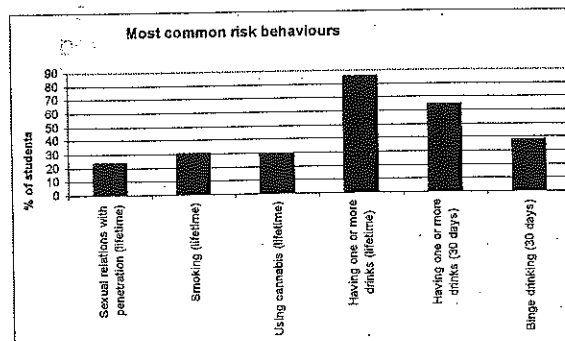
Adolescence is a stage during which the child undergoes many changes (Nurmi, 2004). This period extends generally from 12 to 18 years of age and involves considerable and sometimes stressful transformations (Bee & Boyd, 2003; Susman & Rogol, 2004). Due to the complexity and intensity of this life stage, certain young people behave in ways which put their health and lives at risk. To address this, a study entitled, *Enquête sur les comportements à risque des adolescents francophones vivant en situation linguistique minoritaire* (Study of risk behaviours of francophone adolescents in a minority language setting) was conducted in 2007 on francophone adolescents in the schools of the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine (DSFM) by a group of researchers from the Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface (CUSB).

A survey based on fourteen topics related to risk behaviours usually associated with adolescents was administered to rural and urban students of the DSFM. 1,027 students responded to the survey, representing 13 schools and 78% of francophone students in grades 9 to 12 in Manitoba. This *Notebook* reports on findings related to sex, smoking, use of alcohol and drugs, road safety, physical appearance and sexual identity.

## Sex, Smoking and Use of Alcohol and Drugs

Graph A shows the patterns of sex, smoking and the use of illicit drugs and alcohol by francophone adolescents. With respect to sex, 24% of students had had sexual relations with penetration, the proportion increasing with the number of years of schooling (10% in grade 9 and 45% in grade 12). Only 4% of respondents had had their first sexual experience before the age of 14. The most commonly used

Graph A



methods of contraception were the condom and the birth control pill. Some respondents claimed to have been forced to have sexual relations (4% physically and 5% in a manner other than physical). It should be noted that 25% of the sampling mentioned that they had not been informed about AIDS or HIV at school.

In this study, smoking was on the decline among students of the DSFM in comparison to data from an earlier study done by Dupré-Ollinik and François (1999). Only 30% of the participants in the current study had ever smoked in their lives, and the majority of those had smoked only a few cigarettes on an occasional basis.

According to Hotton and Haans (2004), experimenting with alcohol and drugs is a fairly common occurrence among adolescents. Drug use is more frequent among young people who are seeking comfort or who want to escape from stress (Allison & Mates, 1990). With respect to the francophone population, cannabis was the drug most often used by their youth. Thirty percent of students had used cannabis over the course of their lives, and 16% had done so in the month prior to the study. The age for first use of cannabis was between 13 and 14 years and the frequency of use was generally one to two times per month. Twenty percent of respondents had taken part in the illicit sale of cannabis on school grounds.

The data from the survey demonstrate that the most common risk behaviour was the consumption of alcohol, particularly among boys; often drinking was done at home, especially in rural areas. Approximately 86% of respondents had already consumed alcohol. Results showed that 13% of respondents had first consumed alcohol at the age of 11 or 12. The rate was highest (40%) amongst adolescents aged 13 and 14. The trend was towards occasional drinking, from one to nine times a month. However, 38% of respondents drank to excess (binge drinking: three to five drinks in the space of two or three hours), between one and five times a month.

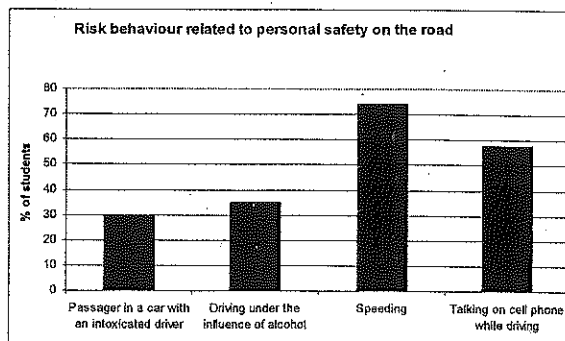
### Road Safety

The findings of this study show that some young people behave in ways that put their personal safety at risk. Graph B summarizes current patterns for Grade 12 students (based on the month prior to the survey) related to personal safety on the road. Although 86% of students wore their seatbelts most of the time, 30% percent said that they had been a passenger in a car where the driver's faculties were impaired by alcohol and 35% had driven a car or other motor vehicle after having been drinking. As well, 74% of students admitted having exceeded the speed limit, and nearly half of these had done so six or more times in the month prior to the survey. Talking on a cell phone while driving was reported by 58% of the students in grade 12.

### Physical Appearance and Sexual Identity

According to Harter (1999), physical appearance plays a major role in the feeling of physical and psychological well-being during adolescence. Notions of obesity among young people can lead to problems of perception and behaviour during adolescence, such as wanting to lose weight or to maintain one's weight at all costs (Cloutier & Drapeau, 2008).

Graph B



In Manitoba, 64% of young francophones fell within the healthy weight range according to the Body Mass Index (BMI). In general, more girls were under the healthy weight range. More young people were overweight in the rural areas. If one examines the link between a person's perception of their state of health and their BMI, of those who thought they were in good or excellent physical health, 21% were underweight and 34% were overweight or obese. In other words, young people's perception of their weight was not always accurate.

According to the present study, 65% of young francophones engaged in physical activity to attain or maintain a healthy weight. Thirty-eight percent admitted to controlling their caloric intake and 10% had used radical methods, such as abstinence or refusal to eat, in the month prior to the study. Most of these radical methods are not recommended, particularly during puberty, as they affect growth and development, thus the physical and psychological state of adolescents.

The development of sexual identity has a critical place in adolescence. Whereas only three percent of respondents admitted that revealing their sexual identity was a problem for them, nearly 40% of students would be afraid to reveal their sexual identity if they were homosexual, bisexual or transgendered, because of the intimidation that might ensue. According to Cloutier and Drapeau (2008), intimidation, a form of physical or psychological abuse, has serious, lasting consequences for the victim, such as loss of self-esteem, anxiety, fear of

social situations, academic problems, depression and suicidal behaviour. The DSFM study showed that of the 24% of students who had been intimidated, 42% of threats were associated with appearance and 29% referred to identity (race, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and being a francophone).

### Conclusion

According to Cloutier and Drapeau (2008), adolescence is a period of one's life where young people explore and experiment with various roles to find their own paths, develop their personalities, construct their identities, choose a career, etcetera. They are influenced by various factors which sometimes lead them to take certain risks. By understanding the risk behaviour and tendencies of adolescents, the various stakeholders in the school

system are better prepared to respond to their needs and to equip them with the appropriate skills. This research suggests that alcohol consumption was the most common risk behaviour among francophone adolescents, with a negative impact on road safety. Obesity and perceptions related to weight are issues of concern, as well as the finding that one quarter of students have been intimidated. As risk behaviours begin at a very young age, interventions should target youth before the age of 11. Alcohol use should be more closely monitored throughout adolescence, with increased vigilance as students gain access to driving motorized vehicles. The effectiveness of current interventions should be evaluated and adolescents should be involved in developing new preventative measures to decrease these health risk behaviours.

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This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture a full body of research, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.