

The Effectiveness of the RESPEK Program on Resilience and Coping Strategies among Adolescents in At-Risk Areas in Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract

The issue of drug abuse in Malaysia has posed a significant threat to national security. Despite various governmental efforts, it remains a challenge. One of the efforts to reduce this issue is by conducting prevention education programs, especially for high-risk groups. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a drug prevention education program called the RESPEK Program, focusing on resilience and coping strategies among adolescents in at-risk areas. Utilising a one-group pretest-posttest experimental design, the study assessed 200 adolescents from five public schools in Kuala Lumpur. The research sought to examine the effectiveness of the RESPEK program on resilience and coping strategies at the pre and post-intervention stages. The Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM) and the Measure of Adolescent Coping Strategies (MACS) were used for data collection. Results indicated significant improvements in resilience and coping strategies post-intervention across all schools. These findings underscore the importance of resilience and adaptive coping strategies in preventing substance use among adolescents. The study concludes that comprehensive prevention strategies, such as the RESPEK program, are vital in addressing the multifaceted risk factors of adolescent drug abuse and highlight the need for continued efforts to build resilience and coping skills among at-risk adolescents.

Keywords: Resilience, Coping strategies, Adolescent, Drug Prevention, Drug Abuse

Background

Issues of drug abuse have gradually increased over the years and have become a major threat to the nation especially in Malaysia. Recognising the escalating severity of the issue, the

government began to view drug abuse not just as a social problem but as a threat to national security. The Malaysian government has introduced several methods at various levels to eradicate drug abuse in terms of drug trafficking, drug sales, drug addiction and drug rehabilitation. For instance, the National Drug Policy was launched in 2004, aiming to create a drug-free Malaysia by 2015. This policy was intended to protect social cohesion, ensure national stability, and build resilience.

However, despite these efforts, drug abuse remains a significant challenge nine years beyond the target date, and the government continues to fight this pervasive problem. According to data from the National Anti-Drugs Agency Malaysia (NADA) in 2022, a total of 3,339 individuals aged between 15 to 19 were identified as drug addicts. This figure represents 2.4 per cent of the total 137,176 addicts recorded that year. Although this proportion appears small, its impact on the nation is substantial, considering that this demographic consists of secondary school students who are the future assets of the country.

A survey study conducted by Bistamam et al (2019), involving 2,984 school-going adolescents across Malaysia aimed to identify the profile of adolescents at risk of drug abuse based on demographic aspects. The findings revealed that 32.9% of the respondents exhibited behaviours associated with a higher risk of drug abuse. These behaviours included witnessing friends abusing drugs, smoking, inhaling glue, consuming hallucinogenic substances, associating with friends who smoke marijuana, and drinking *kratom* juice. Moreover, the study identified specific characteristics of adolescents at risk of drug abuse, which included adolescents aged 10-15 years, those experiencing family dysfunction, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and those with low academic achievement and lack of active participation in school activities. Furthermore, the study found that male adolescents were at a higher risk of drug abuse compared to their female counterparts.

From an academic performance and school involvement perspective, the data indicated that adolescents with low academic performance were at a greater risk of engaging in drug abuse behaviours compared to those with moderate or high academic achievement. Additionally, those who were very passive in school activities had the highest risk of drug abuse behaviours compared to their moderately involved peers. Another study by Yahya and Dzulkhissham (2015), focused on drug addicts undergoing treatment and rehabilitation at NADA rehabilitation centres. Their research identified significant profiles of these individuals, noting that many had dropped out of school between the ages of 15 and 18. These studies highlight the multifaceted nature of adolescent drug abuse risk factors, encompassing demographic, familial, socioeconomic, and educational aspects. The identification of these risk profiles underscores the need for targeted interventions and preventive measures tailored to address these specific vulnerabilities.

Program Implementation

The RESPEK program, an acronym for "Resilient, Smart, Positive, and Active," is a drug prevention initiative targeted at adolescents in selected at-risk secondary schools across Kuala Lumpur. This collaborative program involves the Malaysian Substance Abuse Council (MASAC), the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Council (MAIWP), and the Faculty of Human Ecology at Universiti Putra Malaysia as the module developers for the program. The RESPEK

program is grounded in a bio-psychosocial approach, which addresses the biological, psychological, and social factors influencing at-risk adolescents. The module is designed to enhance the capabilities of these adolescents by identifying their strengths and weaknesses, fostering resilience and effective coping strategies during this critical stage of their development.

For the initial phase of the RESPEK program, five schools in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur were selected based on specific criteria established by the researchers. A total of 40 students from each school were invited to participate. Before their involvement, approval from the schools and consent from the parents was obtained. The RESPEK program spans one and a half days and utilizes interactive games and activities to impart awareness, skills, and knowledge that help adolescents resist substance use. The program was implemented separately in each school, resulting in five distinct sessions. The facilitators for the program were individuals in recovery who had been trained by experts from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Their selection as facilitators was intentional, allowing them to share real-life experiences related to substance use, making the program's message more relatable and impactful. Tailored to the Malaysian context, the RESPEK program aims to equip adolescents with the skills to navigate social influences and challenge prevailing beliefs about drug use. Thus, this study was conducted to evaluate the program's effectiveness, particularly in enhancing resilience and coping strategies among adolescents.

Literature Review

Substance abuse is a significant public health concern among adolescents, with far-reaching consequences for their physical and mental health, social relationships, and academic performance. While multiple factors contribute to the development of substance abuse, research has consistently highlighted the importance of resilience and coping strategies as protective factors against substance abuse among adolescents. This literature review aims to synthesize the existing empirical evidence on the relationship between resilience, coping strategies, and substance abuse among adolescents, highlighting the implications for prevention and intervention strategies.

Resilience refers to the ability to withstand, recover, and adapt to adversity (Wagnild & Young, 1993). Research has consistently shown that adolescents with higher levels of resilience are less likely to engage in substance abuse (Aschengrau et al., 2023; Kendler et al., 2021). Resilience is associated with better mental health outcomes, higher self-esteem, and more adaptive coping skills (Lee et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2013).

Coping strategies refer to how individuals deal with stress, adversity, or difficult situations. Effective coping strategies can serve as a protective factor against substance abuse by providing adolescents with alternative ways to manage stress and emotions. Studies have found that adolescents who use adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-focused coping and seeking social support, are less likely to engage in substance abuse (Kurtz et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2018).

Research has also examined the relationship between resilience and coping strategies. Studies have found that resilience is positively correlated with adaptive coping strategies, such as positive self-talk and problem-solving (Griffin et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2017). In contrast,

maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance and substance use, are negatively correlated with resilience (Wong et al., 2013).

Several moderating factors have been identified that can influence the relationship between resilience, coping strategies, and substance abuse. For example, studies have found that family support and social connections can strengthen the protective effects of resilience and adaptive coping strategies (Moore et al., 2018). Additionally, research has shown that cultural and environmental factors, such as peer influences and community norms, can also impact the relationship between resilience, coping strategies, and substance abuse (Fakaruddin & Nor, 2020).

The findings of this literature review have several implications for intervention strategies aimed at reducing substance abuse among adolescents. Building resilience and promoting adaptive coping strategies may be effective in reducing the risk of substance abuse. By fostering resilience and equipping adolescents with adaptive coping strategies, it is possible to reduce the incidence of substance abuse promote healthy development and reduce the risk of substance abuse among adolescents.

Research Method

Study design

This research adopted a one-group pretest-posttest experimental research design, as Creswell (2018), outlined. In this design, respondents undergo a pretest and a posttest to determine the effects of the treatment used in the study. A pretest provides a measure of some attribute or characteristic for participants before they receive an intervention, while the post-test measures the same attribute or characteristic after the intervention (p. 297). Creswell (2018), explains that experimental research is used when the researcher tests an intervention to determine whether it influences an outcome or dependent variable. In this study, the experimental group consists of adolescents from selected at-risk secondary schools who underwent treatment through the RESPEK program. By comparing the pre-test and post-test results, the study aims to assess the effectiveness of the RESPEK program intervention on the participants. The pre-test was administered during the initial phase of the study, while the post-test was conducted following the completion of the intervention. A comparison between the pre-test and post-test scores was done to assess changes in resilience and coping strategies among adolescents.

Population and Sample

The study population comprised adolescents from five different public secondary schools in at-risk areas in Kuala Lumpur. Purposive sampling was utilized due to the specific criteria of the respondents (Chua, 2020). In this study, the criteria of the respondents are as follows: 1) all participants of the RESPEK program were automatically chosen as respondents, 2) aged between 13 and 17 years old; 2) residing in at-risk areas for drug abuse; and 3) having no history of drug use. A total of 200 respondents from the overall five schools participating in the RESPEK program were asked to fill in a questionnaire during pre and post-program (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Based on G*Power analysis used to determine the appropriate sample size of a paired sample t-test analysis with an effect size of $d_z=0.05$ and α err prob = 0.05 is a minimum of 27 samples.

Instrument

The instruments used for data collection in assessing the effectiveness of the RESPEK program included the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM) and the Measure of Adolescent Coping Strategies (MACS). Data comprised scores from pre-tests and post-tests using these instruments. The CYRM is a psychological tool designed to assess social-ecological resilience in individuals. It includes two subscales: (a) personal resilience and (b) relational resilience (Jefferies et al., 2018). It consists of 17 items rated on a five-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from 'Not at all' to 'A lot'. The MACS assesses various coping strategies that adolescents use in response to stressors and challenges. It encompasses (a) adaptive strategies, which include stoicism or distraction, engaging in self-care, and seeking social support, as well as (b) maladaptive strategies, such as rumination and acting out. The MACS contains 34 items rated on a four-point Likert scale, with options being 'Never,' 'Sometimes,' 'Often,' and 'Very often' (Sveinbjornsdottir & Thorsteinsson, 2014). In this study, both instruments demonstrated acceptable reliability values. The CYRM showed a reliability coefficient of .87, while the MACS had a reliability coefficient of .73. According to Chua (2020), reliability values ($\geq .70$) indicate that the instruments are reliable.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29 software, to compare the pre and post-implementation effects of the RESPEK program on adolescents's resilience and coping strategies. A paired sample t-test was used to measure the mean differences.

Results

Demographic Background

The participant descriptors indicate a balanced distribution across schools, gender, race, and grade levels among the 200 participants. Each of the five schools (A, B, C, D, and E) contributed 40 students, representing 20% of the total sample each. Gender distribution was equal, with 100 males (50%) and 100 females (50%). The racial composition was predominantly Malay, with 190 participants (95%), followed by 10 Indian participants (5%), and no Chinese participants. Regarding grade levels, the majority of students were in Form 4, with 175 students (87.5%), while 16 students (8%) were in Form 3, and 9 students (4.5%) were in Form 2.

Table 1

Participant descriptors

Participant Descriptors	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
School		
School A	40	20
School B	40	20
School C	40	20
School D	40	20
School E	40	20
Total	200	100
Gender		
Male	100	50
Female	100	50

Total	200	100
Race		
Malay	190	95
Indian	10	5
Total	200	100
Grade		
Form 2	9	4.5
Form 3	16	8
Form 4	175	87.5
Total	200	100

Resilience and Coping Strategies

Table 2 shows that the results of the study reveal significant improvements in resilience and coping strategies among students across five schools post-intervention. A paired samples t-test indicated the participant's level of resilience from pre-intervention ($M = 68.37$, $SD = 8.37$) to post-intervention ($M = 69.77$, $SD = 8.158$; $t = -1.898$, $p < .005$). This enhancement in resilience was further reflected in the subscales: personal resilience scores improved from a mean ($M = 39.42$, $SD = 5.281$) to ($M = 40.53$, $SD = 5.33$; $t = -2.254$, $p > .005$), while relational resilience scores rose from ($M = 28.69$, $SD = 4.078$) to ($M = 29.25$, $SD = 3.852$; $t = -.878$, $p < .005$). Specifically, the resilience scores increased for all schools: School A's ($n=40$) mean score rose from 70.28 to 71.25, School B ($n=40$) from 70.30 to 71.15, School C ($n=40$) from 66.20 to 67.53, School D ($n=40$) from 66.10 to 69.28, and School E ($n=40$) from 68.98 to 69.65.

Similarly, a paired samples t-test on coping strategies also showed that the participant's level of coping strategies also improved from pre-intervention ($M = 54.78$, $SD = 10.35$) to post-program ($M = 56.32$, $SD = 10.78$; $t = -1.76$, $p < .005$). Detailed examination of coping subscales revealed that stoicism scores rose from ($M = 15.56$, $SD = 3.42$) to ($M = 16.18$, $SD = 3.38$; $t = -2.10$, $p < .005$), self-care scores increased from ($M = 13.51$, $SD = 2.74$) to ($M = 13.83$, $SD = 3.11$) ($t = -1.22$, $p > .005$), and social support scores improved from ($M = 12.76$, $SD = 3.59$) to ($M = 13.18$, $SD = 3.67$; $t = -1.24$, $p > .005$). While rumination scores showed a slight increase from ($M = 10.03$, $SD = 3.36$) to ($M = 10.11$, $SD = 3.53$; $t = -0.303$, $p < .005$) and acting out scores rose from ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 2.52$) to ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 2.90$; $t = -0.340$, $p < .005$). For each school, the results showed the following improvements: School A ($n=40$) increased from 57.58 to 59.33; School B ($n=40$) from 52.98 to 55.28; School C ($n=40$) from 50.58 to 52.65; School D ($n=40$) from 58.78 to 59.05; and School E ($n=40$) from 54.00 to 55.30.

Table 2

Pre and post-test results for resilience and coping strategies

Overall factor scores	M	SD	t	df	Sig (p)
Resilience					
Pre (n=200)	68.37	8.372	-1.898	199	.002
Post (n=200)	69.77	8.158			
i) Personal resilience					
Pre (n=200)	39.42	5.281	-2.254	199	.025
Post (n=200)	40.53	5.330			
ii) Relational resilience					
Pre (n=200)	28.69	4.078	-.878	199	.001

Post (n=200)	29.25	3.852			
Coping Strategies					
Pre (n=200)	54.78	10.35			
Post (n=200)	56.32	10.78	-1.76	199	.001
i) Stoicism					
Pre (n=200)	15.56	3.417			
Post (n=200)	16.18	3.379	-2.100	199	.001
ii) Self-Care					
Pre (n=200)	13.51	2.744			
Post (n=200)	13.83	3.111	-1.219	199	.007
iii) Social Support					
Pre (n=200)	12.76	3.586			
Post (n=200)	13.18	3.668	-1.244	199	.014
iv) Rumination					
Pre (n=200)	10.03	3.359			
Post (n=200)	10.11	3.530	-.303	199	.001
v) Acting Out					
Pre (n=200)	2.95	2.517			
Post (n=200)	3.03	2.903	-.340	199	.001

M = Mean SD = Standard Deviation t = t-Test Sig (p) = Significant

Table 3

Mean scores for resilience and coping strategies across different schools

Overall factor scores	N	Pre (M)	Post (M)	Mean Difference
Resilience				
School A	40	70.28	71.25	-0.97
School B	40	70.30	71.15	-0.85
School C	40	66.20	67.53	-1.33
School D	40	66.10	69.28	-3.18
School E	40	68.98	69.65	-0.67
Coping Strategies				
School A	40	57.58	59.33	-1.75
School B	40	52.98	55.28	-2.30
School C	40	50.58	52.65	-2.07
School D	40	58.78	59.05	-0.27
School E	40	54.00	55.30	-1.30

M = Mean

Discussion

The RESPEK program has a significant positive impact in improving the results of resilience and coping strategies among adolescents. The findings of this study suggest that resilience is an important factor in preventing drug use among adolescents. This is consistent with previous studies suggesting that resilience is important in preventing substance use disorders (Yang et al., 2020; Hodder et al., 2016; Rudzinski et al., 2017).

Apart from that, the result of this study is similar to the finding made by Kendler (2020) which indicated that low resilience during adolescence significantly predicts future drug abuse, with approximately 40% of the association between low resilience and drug use being causal. This aligns with research by Kennedy (2019), and Kurtz et al. (2019), who similarly found that low resilience is a critical predictor of substance use disorders, underscoring the importance of fostering resilience during formative years to prevent drug abuse. A study by Aschengrau et al (2023), highlighted that resilience has been found to play a protective role in preventing drug abuse by reducing the influence of risk factors, such as peer pressure and social media influence. This is supported by Sumter et al. (2009), who found that resilient adolescents are more confident in their ability to make healthy choices and are less likely to be influenced by negative peer pressure.

Furthermore, resilience has been found to buffer against the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences, reducing the risk of substance use disorders (Kunzler et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019). Moreover, the results of this study highlight the importance of promoting resilience in adolescents as a preventative measure against drug abuse. This can be achieved through interventions that focus on building resilience, such as skills training, family therapy, and mentoring programs (Mathibela & Skhosana, 2020). By promoting resilience, adolescents can be empowered to make healthy choices and develop positive relationships, ultimately reducing the risk of drug abuse and other negative outcomes.

Coping strategies refer to the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals employ to manage stressful or challenging situations, showing significant potential in preventing drug abuse. Scholars emphasize the importance of promoting adaptive coping strategies among adolescents to reduce the risk of drug abuse and other negative outcomes (Kurniawati et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2001; Botvin, 2000; Hawkins et al., 1991). Studies by Rawas et al. (2020) and Wong et al. (2013) indicate that adolescents who develop effective coping strategies are better equipped to navigate the complexities of adolescence, thus reducing their reliance on drugs as a coping mechanism. These strategies include problem-focused coping, emotional regulation, and seeking social support, all contributing to a decreased likelihood of engaging in drug use.

Further research by Zafar (2022), Rodríguez et al. (2021), and Jurado et al. (2019), underscores the critical role of social and emotional competencies in preventing drug use. Ismayilova and Terlikbayeva (2018) argue that providing adolescents with the skills and competencies needed to navigate challenging situations can reduce the likelihood of drug use. This argument is supported by studies showing that adolescents with strong coping strategies, such as problem-focused coping and emotional regulation, are less likely to engage in drug use (Fakaruddin & Nor, 2020; Simpson et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2013). Similarly, the study by Herd and Kim (2021) emphasises that effective emotional regulation is crucial for adolescents as it helps them navigate developmental challenges like peer pressure, academic stress, and emotional turmoil. Moreover, social support from family, friends, or mentors provides adolescents with a sense of belonging and security, reducing the need for drug use as a coping mechanism (Moore et al., 2018).

Overall, the evidence suggests that coping strategies play a critical role in preventing drug abuse among adolescents. Promoting adaptive coping strategies should be a key

component of drug prevention programs, fostering resilience and equipping young people with the skills necessary to manage stress and challenges without resorting to substance use.

Limitation and Suggestions

The study was limited to just five specific schools in Kuala Lumpur, as determined by the Department of Education. While these schools provided valuable insights, the findings are somewhat constrained by the limited sample size and geographical scope. To achieve more robust and generalizable results, it is essential to expand the program to include a broader range of schools across diverse regions.

Additionally, the study employed a simple pre-and post-intervention design, which, while informative, lacks the rigour of more complex experimental methodologies. Future research should consider using a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) to yield more accurate and reliable findings. An RCT would allow for a clearer understanding of the program's effectiveness by reducing potential biases and providing a stronger basis for causal inferences.

Moreover, the study's focus on immediate outcomes does not capture the potential long-term effects of the program. To fully understand the impact of the RESPEK program, follow-up studies should be conducted to assess its sustainability and long-term benefits. These studies would help determine whether the positive changes observed in participants are maintained over time, providing critical insights into the program's enduring effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights for academics, government agencies, and community leaders, offering a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of the RESPEK program in enhancing resilience and strengthening coping strategies against the harmful effects of drug abuse. The research underscores the pivotal role of prevention education, emphasizing that early intervention is key to mitigating the risks associated with substance abuse among adolescents.

The findings of this study highlight the critical importance of fostering resilience and developing robust coping mechanisms as central components of effective prevention strategies. By demonstrating the positive impact of the RESPEK program on adolescents' ability to resist drug-related pressures, this research contributes significantly to the scientific understanding of what works in substance abuse prevention.

Moreover, the study's implications extend beyond the immediate context, offering a framework that can be adapted and applied in various educational and community settings. By providing evidence-based insights, this research supports the development of more targeted and effective prevention programs, ultimately helping to safeguard the well-being of young people and reducing the prevalence of substance abuse in the broader society.

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