

## **Peer Approach in Developing Resistance Skills on Drugs Among Adolescents**

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### **Introduction**

The Philippines is currently experiencing a "youth bulge." In fact, the 2000 Census counted 15.1 million adolescents comprising 19.7% of the total population. It is estimated to reach 30 million in 2030 (Berja & Ojena, as cited in Cruz & Raymundo, 2004).

The population of Filipino adolescents poses a great health concern not only because of their big number but also of their vulnerability to risk-taking behaviors. To prove this, the Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS III) conducted by the University of the Philippines Population Institute in 2002 revealed alarming statistics. It reported that of the 15-24 year-old age group, 21% smoke, 42 % drink, and 2.8% use drugs (Cruz & Raymundo, 2004).

Various research studies have shown the crucial role of peers in adolescent health and development. An example is that a peer group can lead the adolescent down the road of vice (Gastardo-Conaco, Jimenez, & Billedo, 2003). A study which explored the role of peers in drinking behavior reported that the need to fit in the peer group is the primary reason why most young people start drinking alcoholic beverage and try illegal substance (Neuwirth & Frederick, 2004).

Considering the strong influence of peers in the adolescents' life and identifying peer pressure as one of the causes for the risk-taking behaviors among the youth, this study was undertaken to determine how could peers be the source of positive influence and a part of the adolescents' health support system.

Peer approach is a program strategy designed to train select members of any group of equals to effect change among members of that same group. It seeks to utilize the positive aspects of adolescent peer groups by helping them learn from each other (UNESCO,2003).

The peer approach has become a trend in global efforts to respond to adolescent health needs. In fact, as early as the 1970s, models of successful peer programs have been found in the United States, Bangladesh, and Uruguay (UNESCO, 2003). In recent years, more countries have adopted the approach and reported its efficacy.

This study was guided by the Indonesia's community empowerment model which emphasized the crucial role of training the peer educators in the program's success. This model which was carried out in three steps (peer educators' training, monitoring, and networking) was found to offer better sustainability, greater reach, and lower cost of implementation.

In the local setting, the earliest peer approach model was provided by the Philippine Christian University Family Planning for Youth in 1978-1980. It involved 10,000 adolescents who, after a two-week preparation, conducted seminars, lectures, and film shows on school campuses and communities (International Clearinghouse on Adolescent Fertility, 1981). Some features of the program, such as training of participants and the use of the community as a venue, were adopted in the current study.

Other forms of peer approach were subjected to local experimental studies. For example, Mendoza (1995) found out that students taught through peer teaching retain their learning better than students taught in the traditional way, while Navera (1981) concluded that the peer facilitation approach holds promise for enhancing self-concept.

Lastly, Rellama (1999) reported that the peer tutorial sessions organized along the principles of the learner-helping learner set-up brought about enhanced student learning

and sustained interest in Math. The current study is similar to these research works for it also employs peer teaching, but it differs in technique and context.

In general, this research is relevant for school administrators, health educators, guidance counselors, classroom teachers, and community leaders in their efforts to promote adolescent health through interactions with peers.

### **Purposes and Setting**

The study aimed to describe how health education using peer approach operates in a community setting. It sought to find out the following: (1) the development of resistance skills on drugs; (2) the relational strategies utilized by the peer educators and peer students; and (3) the communication patterns observed between peer educators and peer students.

The study was conducted in Timbayog, Casiguran, Sorsogon. As of 2005, Casiguran has a population of 30,376 with the age group 1-19 comprising the biggest chunk (60%). One of its interior barangays is Timbayog with 265 households and a population of 1,333. Of its total population, 61% are 14 years old below, 30% are young people (15-35 years old), and nine percent are elders (36 years old and above). The language spoken is Bicol and the major source of livelihood is farming. Timbayog was selected for this study on these criteria: (1) high incidence of drug abuse among adolescents based on police record, (2) accessibility, (3) support of key community leaders, and (4) willingness of target adolescents to participate.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

In the selection of research participants, this qualitative study used the following criteria: (a) age (between 13-16 years old), (b) availability (at least twice a week), (c) commitment to a three-month program, (d) willingness to attend a five-day training session, and (e) being a role model (based on positive feedback from

Community members, peers and teachers). Four participants were sophomores, and two were in third year high school. Similarly, the 12 peer students were recruited based on their age, commitment, willingness to participate in the three-month program, and availability. Two were not attending school.

The Timbayog peer approach program was implemented in three phases: preparation, implementation and wrap-up phase.

### *Preparation Phase*

The data gathered from the Municipal Police Station were used as a major basis for identification of the target community. After seeking permission from key leaders, an informal interview with some of the target participants was conducted. Salient points were uncovered through this interview, which included the powerful role of media in influencing adolescents' values, the acceptance of peers as a source of information on various issues, and peer learning as facilitated by doing things together. These views were considered in the revision of the peer educators' manual. The main topics covered in the manual was based on the SPARK's (Supportive Peers as Resources for Knowledge) training handbook sent by Kelly Curtis of the Empowering Youth Organization in the United States of America. Ms. Curtis gave her permission to use the handbook as a guide in finalizing the manual which covered these topics: (1) Peer Education Program, (2) Understanding Oneself and Others, (3) Drug Education, (4) Developing Skills in Communication, (5) Decision-making and Problem-solving, (6) Developing Resistance Skills, and (7) Alternatives to Health Risk Behaviors. The first topic provided an intensive orientation on the program's nature and goals, while the second lesson presented ways of enhancing self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships through different activities. The drug education part discussed the commonly abused drugs, and its nature and effects on the body. The succeeding topics discussed life skills development.

There were exercises in communication particularly on active listening and effective speaking, as well as techniques in making decisions and solving problems. The lesson on resistance skills highlighted the guidelines in applying assertive and refusal strategies to cope with problematic pressures from peers. The last topic presented the healthy alternatives to drug abuse. Three experts in the fields of health education, communication arts, and guidance validated the manual. Their suggestions included the following: indicate target population, formulate processing questions, enlarge pictures and make them more attractive, and provide really challenging situations to apply the resistance skills on drug abuse.

After incorporating the suggestions of the panel of experts, the manual was revised and pilot-tested outside the study area with similarly aged young people to assess its suitability and acceptability. The recruitment of peer educators followed. They attended a five-day training on Peer Education Program which covered the lessons in the manual. Varied training techniques were used such as role playing, demonstration, buzz session, and educational games. The trainees were also given a short lecture on classroom management and journal writing. A practical test in the form of micro-teaching was done during the last day. After the training, the six participants were inducted as peer educators in a program attended by community leaders and parents.

The newly-inducted peer educators had the freedom to choose their partner, class schedule, and venue. The first and second pairs opted for a Saturday schedule while the last pair decided to meet on a Sunday. Each class meeting lasted for two hours. After a week, the three pairs recruited a total of 12 students. All parents of both peer educators and students gave their consent to their child's participation in the program.

### *Implementation Phase*

To make it more natural and convenient for the participants, the actual teaching sessions

The peer students reported that they primarily developed resistance skills through these rehearsal techniques.

*"Dahil sa mga pagpraktis mi, mas natan-da-an ko an mga paagi san pagsabi ki habo".* (Because of our practice exercises, I was able to remember better the ways of saying no.)

*"Naaraman nyan nagkaigwa ako ki resistance skills dahil sa mga aktibidad sa klase kapareho san drama-drama."* (I learned and developed resistance skills because of the class activities like role playing.)

Another salient factor in developing resistance skills which was pointed out by the peer students was the peer educator's positive behavior inside and outside the peer classes. The impact of the peer educators' modeling behavior was reported by the students in their journals:

*"Kun mayad sinda na modelo sa laog san peer education class, mas mayad pa sinda sa luwas. Ginpakita talaga ninda an mga gintukdo samo lalo na an mayad sa lawas pa-reho san dai pagsigarilyo nyan pag-inom ki arak. Kaya gusto ko irugon sinda."* (If they are good role models inside the peer class, they are better outside. They really demonstrated what they taught us especially things that are good for the body like abstaining from cigarettes and alcohol. That's why I want to emulate them).

The peer educators' direct modeling of health-promoting activities provided a strong influence on peer students' behavior choices. This is consistent with the findings of Leachman & Victor (in Santos, 2005) that peer-led activities provide the biggest opportunity for arousing empathy and responsibility.

#### *Relational Strategies in the Peer Classes*

The peer educators and peer students learned to be open as they became comfortable with each other's role in the program. In general, their relationship progressed from what can be termed as "role orientation" to "role commitment," and "relational stability." Role orientation was characterized by anxiety and discomfort on the part of both peer educators and students, as reflected in their journals:

*"Naisip ko na basi dai ninda ako irespeto o basi tawa-tawahan lang ako."* (I thought they would not respect me, or they would just laugh at me).  
—Sir Jay-R

*"In-nerbyos ako pag may peer class ta baga man lang an nasa eskwelahan ka na may mga tunay na maestro."* (I feel nervous everytime there is a peer class because it is like going to school where there are real teachers).  
— Maristhel

After going through this awkward stage, the relationship developed into a period of role commitment. Peer educators treated their students with utmost sensitivity while peer students treated their teachers with courtesy and trust. This was particularly evident in the way they used the "ma'am/sir" title. This supportive social climate enhanced the relationship's sustainability and stability. Peer educators and students became more involved in each other's lives. They monitored each other's behavior inside and outside the peer classes. For instance, Angel disclosed that she always reminded Jandex to practice the resistance skills learned in the program. Sir Jay-R confirmed that there was indeed a positive change in Jandex's behavior.

Friendship was also established and became a basis for peer educator-peer student relationship. Casual friendships at the start evolved into a much deeper and closer bond.

Were conducted in a venue where they usually spend their free time. During the first meeting, the peer educators oriented the students about the program. The researcher also asked permission to observe during the sessions. A total of 36 peer class meetings or 72 hours, covering a three-month period were observed and documented. Debriefing sessions were conducted every Sunday in order to process the peer educators' experiences and recommend ways on how to handle various issues they face such as absenteeism, conflict with family members, and feeling of inefficiency as peer educators.

### *Wrap-up Phase*

After the 12 peer sessions which ran for three months, the program was assessed based on the qualitative data and feedback from the participants. The peer educators and students participated in the data validation. They analyzed the conclusions derived from various data source. Respondent validation or member checks is an interpretive approach to developing conclusions as it considers participant's perceptions about the emerging conclusions (Willis, 2007). Comments such as "*eksakto, iyo gayod, totoo iyan!*" (exactly, yes, that's true) were used to express their agreement or "*kaya kami irog kaiyan ta pan-o...*" (we are like that because...) to further explain their behaviors which have multiple meanings. The conclusions underwent revisions to incorporate the insights of the program participants. The findings were then presented to the community leaders for possible adoption in their future programs.

The study used participant observation based on the principle that in qualitative research, the self can be considered a primary instrument (Eisner, 1991). In this method, the researcher interacts with the participants continually. There is a sharing of the responsibilities for the conclusions as the researcher seeks verification from the participants (Willis, 2007).

This qualitative study conducted data collection and analysis simultaneously. Specifically, the tape recorded class sessions were transcribed verbatim, and along with the raw field notes, were transformed into processed write-ups and transcriptions. These descriptions were then translated to general patterns, categories, and themes.

Specific steps for analysis were carried out. Following the work of Miles and Huberman (1994), the study adopted the following specific steps for analysis:

- (1) Data reduction. Relevant data were "read" and indexed based on themes.
- (2) Data display. A conceptually clustered matrix was utilized to clarify the main answer provided to the research questions. Data entries included a mixture of direct quotes, summary phrases, and inferential remarks. Participants' consent to fully disclose their identities were solicited so real names were used in all data extracts. Reported quotes were both typical and illustrative of participants' comments.
- (3) Conclusion drawing. Patterns and regularities were explained to present a holistic picture of the peer process.

To organize data, a conceptually clustered matrix was built to display information that provided answers to the research questions. Data entries included a mixture of direct quotes and inferential remarks and were based on the following decision rules: take the modal response, include written feedback, enter UK (unknown) for unobserved aspect, and accept direct reports and observation.

## **Results and Discussion**

The study revealed interesting modalities of developing resistance skills and the salient role of communication patterns and relational strategies in the process.

*Forms of Resistance Skills Developed through the Peer Approach*

Resistance skills are the competencies enabling a person to use any of the different ways of saying "No" to drug abuse and other unhealthy behaviors. The peer program was able to develop the following ways of resisting unhealthy behavior: (1) cold shoulder (nonverbal signal); (2) broken record (saying "no" as many times needed); (3) changing the subject (suggesting other topics to talk to); and (4) refusing without second thought (using direct eye contact and firmly saying "no").

As expressed by the peer students:

*"Naaraman ko na an pagsabi ki habo, may iba-iba na klase. Sa mga naaraman ko, an nagamit ko an pagdedma. San saro kabes, may nag-agda sako magmarijuana, dai ko lang pinansin. (I learned that there are many ways of saying no. Of the things I learned, I already used cold shoulder. Last time, someone asked me to use marijuana, I paid no attention to him.)"*

*"Ako an na-apply ko sa mga technique, an broken record. Paulit-ulit ako nagsabi ki habo san gin-agda ako magsigarilyo san kaklase ko." (What I applied from the techniques is the broken record. I said no repeatedly when my classmate asked me to smoke.)"*

*"San binakalan ako ki sigarilyo san kabarkada ko, naisip ko an technique na pagsabi ki habo na dai nagduduwa-duwa. Ginamit ko an direct eye contact nyan sinabi ko "habo ko." (When a friend bought me a cigarette, I remembered the "refusing without second thought" technique. I used direct eye contact and said no.)"*

*"Sa mga tinukdo na techniques, an natory ko na an pag-bag-o san gi-iristoryahan. Saro kabeses, may kaklase ako na nag-agda magsigarilyo. Binag-o ko an topic. Sabi ko ma-kita kita ki pelikula" (Of the techniques taught, I already tried changing the subject. One time, my classmate asked me to smoke. I changed the topic. I suggested watching a movie.)"*

*Peer Teaching Strategies which Facilitated Resistance Skills Development*

The peer educators' modeling behavior and their utilization of varied instructional strategies facilitated the learning and development of resistance skills among the peer students. In particular, active learning was ensured by providing participatory exercises. For example, the students rehearsed saying "no" through role plays:

Jandex: *Masirigarilyo kita.* (Let's smoke.)  
 Melvin: *Habo ko. Ano an makukuwa mi kaiyan?* (No. What can we get from it?)  
 Jandex: *Masiram na pamati* (Good feeling)  
 Melvin: *Habo ko. Para aso lang man iyan. Dai ako matry ta maraot iyan sa lawas* (No. It's just smoke. I won't try because it's bad for the body).  
 Angel: *Habo ko. Masusulo kaiyan an baga ko.* (No. It will burn my lungs).  
 Jandex: *Sige na baya!* (C'mon!)  
 Melvin and Angel: *Habo mi!* (No!)

Peer educators also provided situations to help students master the ways of managing negative peer pressure. As illustrated in the following:

Ma'am Kathleen: *Habang naglalakwatsa kamo, nagbakal an barkada mo ki sigarilyo tapos gintagan ka. Ano an gigiboon no?* (While you were strolling, your friend bought and offered you a cigarette, what will you do?)  
 Leslie: *Dai ko lang papansinon* (I will ignore)  
 Marietoni: *Babag-ohon ko na lang an topic* (I will change the topic).

Also evident among the peer students was their awareness of how they were expected to behave inside the peer classes despite the fact that they have their friends as teachers. Melvin expressed it clearly, "*Maski magka-bararkada kami, pag nasa peer class maestro sinda na dapat igalang.*" (Although we are friends, in the peer class, they are teachers who need to be respected). Exploring friendship in the context of the peer class was important because the school is considered to be a friendship-based society. Cusick (1973) found that the most important value for students is being accepted by peers, not necessarily learning. Students would do whatever is necessary to nurture their friendships.

Furthermore, kinship relations also affected the quality of relationship in the peer classes. One or both of the peer educators have blood relations with their peer students. Majority of them were first degree cousins. This is relevant because it served as the strongest variable that ensured the students' regular attendance and commitment to the peer program. This is consistent with Javier's study (1995) which reported that kinship relations really exert an influence in the school system as a major basis of commitment and loyalty.

Lastly, it was evident that peer relations were influenced by secular institutions such as the school and mass media. The school provided a venue for enhancing interpersonal skills and developing social competencies, while mass media played a very important role in shaping adolescents' values and mode of conduct particularly in dealing with their peers.

#### *Communication Patterns in the Peer Class*

The communication culture in the peer class refers to the verbal and nonverbal exchanges between the peer educators and students. There was a supportive social climate in the peer classes as participants share interests and almost similar lifestyles.

Most of them were neighbors and classmates so they have many opportunities for interaction even outside the peer classes.

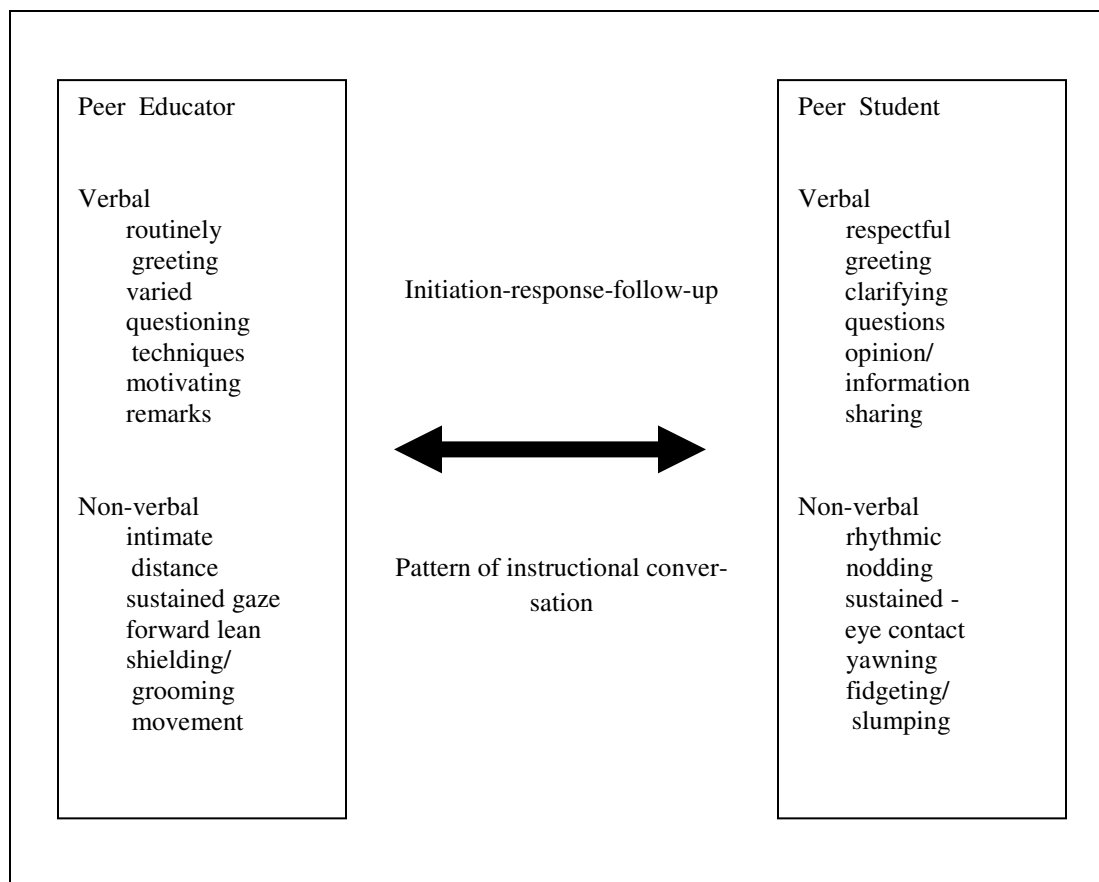
Generally, communication in the peer classes followed an initiation-response-follow-up pattern. For example, to set the emotional climate, peer educators initiated greeting their students with "*Dios marhay na hapon saindo gabos*" (Good afternoon to all of you) which was usually answered by the peer students with "*Dios marhay na hapon, Ma'am/Sir*" (Good afternoon, Ma'am/Sir). As a follow-up, the peer educators would ask "*Kumusta an adlaw nindo?*" (How was your day?) This warm exchange set a comfortable mood for learning.

The pattern was also evident during lecture-discussion. The peer educators used a variety of questioning techniques to check student's understanding such as combining both "canned" and open-ended questions.

The general classroom atmosphere was pleasant and non-threatening. Participants had fun sharing information and they freely talked about sensitive topics. Peer educators exhibited socio-affective behaviors such as praising, smiling, and using polite expressions. They were generous in giving motivating remarks such as "*Naruruyag ako sa sinabi mo*" (I am happy with what you have said) and "*Tama ta inapply nindo an dati na inadalar!*" (Right because you were able to apply the past lesson). Peer students reciprocated the peer educators' positive approach by sharing sensitive information. Melvin disclosed, "*Saro kabeses, may nag-agda sako magmarijuana*" (One time, someone asked me to smoke marijuana).

Figure 1 summarizes the dynamic communication pattern between peer educators and peer students.

**Figure 1. Communication Patterns in the Peer Classes**



In terms of the nonverbal aspect, both positive and negative signals were observed. In the case of the peer educators, positive behavior was communicated through intimate distance, sustained gaze and forward lean. Since physical closeness conveys intimacy and warmth, the students became more involved in the activity. As Neill (1991) explains, "increased closeness places one in a better position for a variety of activities...it increases the emotional temperature of the interaction." However, at times, anxiety and lack of confidence were communicated by peer educators through their grooming movement and shielding gestures. On the other hand, interest was expressed by the peer students through rhythmic nodding, or sustained eye contact; and boredom, through slumping, fidgeting, or yawning.

### Conclusion

Based on the qualitative data, three themes had emerged: (1) peer approach as a dynamic process; (2) multiple modalities of resistance skills; and (3) peer approach as revitalization of local culture.

#### *Peer approach as a dynamic process*

In developing resistance skills, peer approach was influenced by factors such as the peer educators' modeling behavior and their use of varied participatory learning strategies. Distinct communication and relational strategies also shaped the general nature of the peer program.

*Multiple modalities of resistance skills*

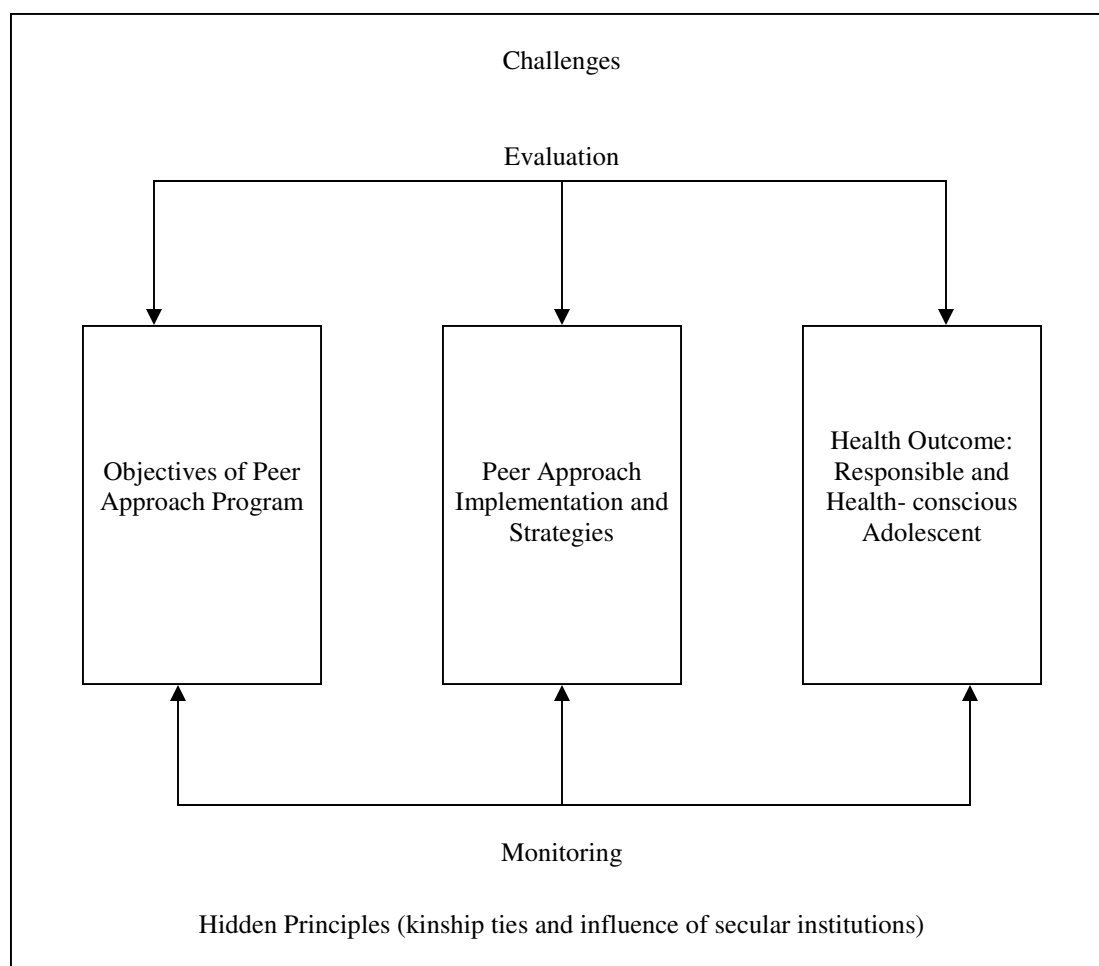
Resistance skills have different modalities both in its verbal and nonverbal forms. The peer students learned to say no verbally using the techniques of broken record, changing the subject, and saying “no” without second thought while cold shoulder was the nonverbal refusal technique learned through the program.

*Peer approach as revitalization of local culture*

The development of resistance skills through the peer approach revitalizes local culture, as it builds on the pervasive local practices and resources. This strengthened kinship ties, and deepened appreciation of the local language as a medium of learning. Lastly, training young people to be catalysts of change is an important step in empowering the community.

On the whole, there are different factors which shaped the dynamics of peer approach, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Dynamics of Peer Approach in Developing Resistance Skills**



Qualitative research creates a framework to explain the processes involved in the study. Along this line, the framework of the current research illustrates that values, behavior and attitude of adolescents are determined in part by hidden principles and challenges in the community interacting with the peer approach. The hidden principles refer to the cultural "superstructures" such as kinship ties, and influence of secular institutions which affect the implementation of the program. Kinship ties determine the participants' commitment to the program. Meanwhile, the impact of secular institutions such as the school, and mass media was evident in the adolescents' attitude towards drug-related issues. On the other hand, challenges refer to those issues and concerns encountered in the implementation of the peer approach program such as the difficulty in recruiting, training and ensuring participants' commitment to the program.

The peer program's objective is the promotion of a healthy lifestyle among adolescents through the development of resistance skills. In essence, the peer approach utilized the rich potential of peers to be catalyst of behavior change among adolescents. Monitoring and evaluation were incorporated in the different phases of the program to identify its strengths and weaknesses and to make the necessary adjustments. The effective interplay of these elements led to the development of a responsible and health-conscious adolescent.

### Implications

The study focused on the underlying processes of the peer approach and did not explore the immediate outcome and impact of the peer program. However, it is equally interesting to find out the answer to questions such as: Was the program successful in reducing adolescents' risk-taking behavior in general? Were the resistance skills developed by the participants applied in the long term? On the whole, the school administrators, classroom teachers, guidance counselors, and community organizers may consider the peer approach process in designing school and community-based adolescent programs.

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended: (a) Conduct peer-based programs in the context of kinship relations; (b) Coordinate with institutions such as the school and the local government in planning and developing the peer program; (c) Integrate cultural elements such as local health practices in the instructional component of the program; and (d) Conduct further qualitative studies on peer approach focusing not only on its processes, but on its intermediate outcome and impact as well.

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