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Published in:
Health Education Journal

DOI:
10.1177/00178969241232802

Publication date:
2024

Document version:
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):
Rusiti, B., Kjeld, S. G., Andersen, S., Bast, L. S., & Danielsen, D. (2024). When smoking is the smallest problem: A qualitative study of smoking prevention in Danish vocational schools. *Health Education Journal*, 83(2), 228-238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00178969241232802>

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When smoking is the smallest problem: a qualitative study of smoking prevention in Danish vocational schools

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Abstract

Objective: In Denmark, more students smoke in vocational schools compared with upper secondary schools. Smoking prevention initiatives may reduce the prevalence of smoking but may also introduce unforeseen challenges. This study examined the significance of smoking and dilemmas related to smokefree school hours (SFSH) among established smokers in Danish vocational schools.

Design: Qualitative research design.

Setting: Data collection took place in a vocational education and training (VET) school in Denmark. The subject area was Care, Health and Pedagogy (CHP).

Method: Participant observation and focus groups were conducted with students and teachers. Two classes were observed for two weeks in total. The data analysed consisted of participant observation field notes (n=10 school days), transcripts from student focus groups (n=6; aged 18-56) and transcripts from teacher focus groups (n=11).

Results: Two dilemmas were described by established smokers in relation to the implementation of smoke-free school hours: 1) The school is entitled to make rules versus the right to decide for oneself; 2) Life and schoolwork are challenging and demanding versus school is more important than smoking.

Conclusion: The findings illustrate how smoking, as an ingrained everyday practice for established smokers, represents a means to cope with difficult school demands and everyday challenges, particularly by vulnerable students, and how regulations such as SFSH create dilemmas for those students. Furthermore, that these dilemmas be taken into consideration when designing and implementing smoking prevention initiatives to prevent potential negative side-effects and unintended increase in social inequality in smoking.

Keywords: Smoking prevention, established smokers, vocational school, social inequality, implementation

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Introduction

Years of effort to discourage tobacco use globally have contributed to a decline, yet smoking remains a critical public health issue. In Denmark, approximately 19% of 15–29-year-olds smoke regularly (Petersen et al., 2022). Early smoking debut is associated with increased future use and health risks (Yuan et al., 2015, Green et al., 2016). Moreover, the 15–29 age group has the highest smoking prevalence (Hoffmann et al., 2018). Hence, the youth population especially has been a target group for smoking prevention interventions. Smoking disparities exist between socioeconomic groups, with socially disadvantaged groups being more likely to initiate and continue smoking (Hoffmann et al., 2018). In Denmark, recent research suggests that social inequalities in smoking have either increased or stagnated (Rosenwein, Jørgensen et al. 2019). Students in Danish vocational education and training (VET¹) schools, which attract many students of lower socioeconomic status (SES), have a higher prevalence of daily smoking (29%) (Ringgaard et al., 2020) compared to their peers in general high schools (9%) (Pisinger et al., 2019). Hence, from a public health perspective, initiatives targeting VET students are crucial to reducing (social inequality in) tobacco use.

Preventive actions in youth education settings have the potential to influence students' smoking behaviour (Andersen et al., 2019). Several studies highlight the importance of comprehensive and clear smoking bans, applicable to both students and school staff (Rozema et al., 2016, Rozema et al., 2017, Andersen et al., 2019). A smoke-free environment is also associated with a reduced risk of young people taking up smoking (Egan et al., 2017). Recent research in VET settings reveals similar findings; students attending schools with smokefree policies are less likely to smoke compared to students attending schools without such policies (Andersen et al., 2019). However, other research suggests that several contextual factors may influence adherence to smokefree policies by students. These include a mutual understanding and shared strategy for implementation, while barriers include perceiving the policy as curtailing one's freedom of personal choice and concerns about the potential negative impact of enforcement on student-teacher relationships (Hjort et al., 2021, Schreuders et al., 2019). Despite extensive research on how to prevent smoking uptake and maintenance, knowledge about prevention or reduction among vulnerable groups at high-risk of smoking, such as VET students, is sparse. Moreover, most smoking prevention and cessation are targeted at children and adolescents in primary and lower-secondary school settings (Thomas et al., 2013).

This paper reports on findings from a qualitative process evaluation of a smoking prevention and reduction intervention, Focus, in Danish vocational schools (Andersen et al., 2023). While the primary aim of the intervention was to prevent younger students from starting smoking, a Smokefree School Hours (SFSH) policy applied to the whole student population, including older and established smokers. This paper focuses on one out of four main subject areas in vocational education and training in Denmark: Care, Health and Pedagogy (CHP). CHP students are a heterogeneous group from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Andersen et al., 2023, Aarkrog, 2020). Their age range is wide, with the youngest being 16 and the oldest in their 50s. Many students have been away from the education system for several years, face academic challenges such as dyslexia, or have

¹ In Denmark, vocational education and training is an umbrella term which encompasses different strands of secondary education preparing young people for work in a variety of professions (Ministry of Children and Education, 2023).

trouble speaking or reading Danish fluently due to their ethnic background. Many have families, including small children, and/or jobs to secure their income. Little is known about how more mature students perceive and make sense of school smoking regulations, which is relevant in terms of the potential unintended consequences of anti-smoking interventions in a VET setting.

The aim of this study was to examine the significance of smoking among established smokers and how implementation of an SFSH policy might affect those students for whom smoking was an established everyday practice.

Methods

The Focus intervention

The Focus intervention, a multi-component smoking prevention programme, aimed to reduce the prevalence of smoking among vocational students and took place from spring 2018 until the end of 2019 (see Andersen et al., 2023) for a full description). The intervention components included the introduction of an SFSH policy, prohibiting smoking for students, guests and all employees within and outside the school's premises during school hours (8 am – 4 pm). This was accompanied by teaching material on sociocultural perspectives on smoking (such as group pressure and misconceptions of high smoking prevalence) and teaching activities focusing on the social environment in class, brain breaks and ways to promote non-smoking activities during breaks. Furthermore, an edutainment lecture on the content of cigarettes and nicotine's effect on the human body, a carbon monoxide measurement competition, the provision of smoking cessation support through the Danish Quitline, and teacher competency development to engage in dialogue with students when discussing the SFSH policy. The programme lasted approximately one year from the decision to participate, through the introduction of the SFSH policy, to implementation and evaluation. While the teaching material, edutainment lecture, and carbon monoxide measurement competition were designed to primarily engage the youngest students (16-18 years), this paper focuses on experiences of the programme by a group of Care, Health and Pedagogy (CHP) adult students which included many established smokers.

Data collection

Data were collected as part of a qualitative process evaluation of the programme. A mixed methods design was adopted which included participant observation and focus groups with students and teachers.

Participant observation

Participant observation were conducted over a two-week period in two CHP classes with a focus on the perspectives of students. An observation guide was developed to maintain focus throughout the fieldwork (Hastrup, 2010, Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2005). This included a specific focus on the rhythms of daily life, school atmosphere, relationships between the students and between students and teachers, the use of physical space, activities during lessons and breaks, and how smoking practices were part of this. The

observer [BR] participated in the same activities as the students, sat with them in the classroom, and followed them around the school grounds, observing what they did and where they spent their time. Observations and conversations were handwritten in a notebook on site. At the end of the school day, fieldnotes were transcribed into coherent text in an electronic file, including methodological and analytic reflections (Andersen, 2005, Jørgensen and Kampmann, 2000, Warming, 2005).

Focus groups

The focus groups, which took place after the participant observation. Their purpose was to validate what had been observed and to clarify our understanding of the field, with a focus on interactions and norms related to smoking and the SFSH policy among students and teachers (Halkier, 2010, Sparkes and Smith, 2014).

The interview guide was structured according to analytic themes evident in the field notes as well as predefined research questions (Tinggaard and Brinkmann, 2010), such as perceptions and attitudes towards smoking and smoking regulations, reactions to the SFSH policy, and the enforcement thereof. A total of three focus groups were carried out including two focus groups with six students (aged 18-56) and including smokers and non-smokers and one focus group with 11 teachers, including both former smokers and non-smokers.

To initiate reflection and dialogue on smoking, health and attitudes towards smoking and smoking prevention, participants were asked to read five cards with different statements on them about smoking, health and smoking policies which they could either agree or disagree with. The statements proved useful in initiating discussion and eliciting perceptions and attitudes. Each focus group lasted about one hour. Discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Ethics

This study adhered to the requirements of the Danish Data Protection Agency (Reference: 17/12006) and was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that participation was voluntary; they were told they had the right to withdraw at any time; and data would be recorded, anonymised and treated confidentially. Participants provided written consent. Participants' names and the names of geographical locations have been given pseudonyms. Finally, since the fieldwork intruded into students' and teachers' everyday lives, during the fieldwork we always remained mindful and considerate.

Analytical strategy and theoretical framework

Subsequent to the transcription of focus group data, a systematic analysis took place involving systematic text condensation (Malterud, 2012). This consisted of four steps: 1) organising the empirical data into relevant themes; 2) decontextualising the themes by identifying and sorting the meaning units from themes to codes; 3) condensing the meaning units and transforming codes back into meanings; and 4) recontextualising by synthesising the data, moving from condensation to descriptions and concepts. We remained loyal to the

informants' own descriptions by using the students' own language and phraseology (Malterud, 2012).

To understand and interpret the significance of smoking for established smokers in terms of helping them get through the school day, we drew on Schutz's (2005) work on everyday life. According to Schutz, everyday life is characterised by a largely unconscious state of mind in which people undertake tasks and projects in a largely instinctive, non-acted upon, and non-reflective way, (Schutz, 2005). Everyday life theory therefore aimed to raise awareness of the trivial activities and rhythms of school life that were most relevant to CHP students, and the significance of smoking within these. Of particular interest was how the routines of smoking were connected to other educational and social practices in the VET school. Focusing on the significance of smoking in students' everyday lives at school, three dilemmas became apparent in both the fieldnotes and the focus group analysis. These are detailed below.

Findings

The school is entitled to make rules versus the right to decide for oneself

In general, the students expressed support for smoking legislation. They described how they were used to having to adapt to new smoking regulations since policies, in general, were constantly being tightened. Students also believed that the school they attended was entitled to make rules relating to behaviour on its property. Furthermore, they acknowledged that the school imposed smoking rules to prepare them for work in contexts where smokefree work hours were common:

'If you drop out of school because you're not allowed to smoke during school, then you can't keep a job either. In many workplaces, or almost all workplaces today, smoking and drinking are not tolerated' (Student, focus group 1).

Students supported the introduction of smoking laws and regulations in Danish society. They had become accustomed to the new rules, and many found it difficult to imagine how, previously, smoking in public places had been tolerated. They found this change a positive development.

'And even though I smoke, I think it's bloody great to be in places with no smoking and you can enjoy your food' (Student, focus group 1).

One student even described how stricter smoking policies had brought about some positive habits in her own home:

'(...) And after all these smoking policies were introduced, I definitely don't smoke at my own place. I used to do that but then I suddenly discovered how pleasant a non-smoking environment is.' (Student, focus group 2).

However, attitudes towards the introduction of the VET school's SFSH policy were less positive. Although students acknowledged the school's right to impose rules on its property, in their opinion, the school did not have the right to determine what students did during

breaks and outside the school premises. The view that smoking regulations in society were made for the common good did seemingly not apply when it came to smoking rules at their own school. Some of the dissatisfaction stemmed from a feeling of being robbed of their right to self-determination:

'I feel like, I don't want it [smokefree school hours] to continue. Rather, one should take personal responsibility for cutting down. Because it's like if you're caught smoking during school hours several times, then you get a summons to the principal's office and may be kicked out, and I think that's stupid, because it should be our own responsibility.' (Student, focus group 1).

The belief that smoking was one's own personal responsibility was common among students. While they felt some smoking rules were appropriate, they found the SFSH policy was too strict. Several of the non-smokers also expressed similar opinions:

'I'm not a smoker, but I cannot understand why they are being pursued, because when you are out of school, it should be their own business. That's the way I feel, you don't have to pursue them anymore.' (Student, focus group 1).

Although teachers emphasised that a stricter smoking policy was meant to help prepare students for future jobs, they too had noted the ambivalence among students.

'I've heard many times "When I'm at work, of course I do not smoke, but it's different when I'm at school". They use this expression a lot: 'it's different when I'm at school'. But the municipalities want you [the students] to work with it now, because you are going to be working there [in the municipalities]. And most of the students understand that and respect it. But many are like, 'I will decide that for myself!'" (Teacher focus group).

In this respect, a dilemma was apparent among the students. They did acknowledge the changes taking place in society and wanted to respect the anti-smoking legislation, but also questioned the smoking policies enacted in and around the school, because they felt their personal freedoms were being curbed.

Life and schoolwork is challenging and demanding versus school is more important than smoking

Completing their CHP training was important to the students. For many of them, especially the older students, it was perceived as a new beginning and an opportunity to complete their education, which could contribute to a better and more meaningful life. However, schoolwork was also felt to be demanding, and smoking was perceived as a tool to cope with these everyday challenges. They felt that smoking provided them with a break when dealing with difficult school tasks:

' (...) but I think it's something completely different when we come out [to work in the municipality after completing a CHP education], because the citizens are there all the time, you can talk to them, or you have a colleague you can talk to, so you

don't think so much about smoking as you do here. But here, we have breaks, and smoking also helps us unwind' (student, focus group 2).

The students considered breaks important. Some rushed to put on their jackets and spend their breaks outside, while others stayed in the classroom. The shorter breaks were mainly used for smoking breaks, to get a drink of water or to buy a cup of coffee. For the smokers, having a cigarette during a break was a matter of routine and deemed necessary to calm down.

' (...) Because there we have our break, and it is also greatly helps us reduce stress that we can step outside and have a smoke and just think of something else' (Student, focus group 2).

Older students in particular saw smoking as a legitimate way to cope with the stress of an otherwise busy and troublesome everyday life.

The teachers also witnessed an increase in students' smoking during stressful periods when additional schoolwork was required.

' (...) we do have some students who, especially during exam periods, or periods where we demand a little more from them, [that's when] we meet this attitude and violation of these [smoking] rules (...) ' (teacher focus group).

Students often spoke about the many challenges they faced, and how smoking helped them to unwind. The teachers were aware that many of the students came from a background with limited resources and 'smoking was viewed as the least of their problems':

"Sometimes we also have students who are dealing with some very difficult stuff. I had a student who was a former drug addict on methadone and was about to phase out and was beginning this course and struggled like crazy to get through it. And then we confront her with a smoking ban. To her, honestly, I said – 'you can smoke'. I'm going to close my eyes, go ahead and smoke. That's where I think it's difficult, because in her case, the alternative was far worse.' (Teacher focus group).

During participant observation, students would often openly share their worries and troubles:

'She tells me that she would like to quit [smoking] at some point, because her dad died in 2015 from lung cancer and her mother-in-law has breast cancer, even though she quit years ago, and for the sake of her kids. She wants to quit for them but also for economic reasons because it does cost a lot of money. But because there's so much other stuff going on in her life, she doesn't have the energy right now.' (Fieldnote excerpt).

On the other hand, all of the students agreed that they would resist smoking during school hours if the SFSH policy was enforced and the possibility of completing their education was on the line. Since many CHP-students had recently been involuntarily unemployed for

several years, it felt crucial for them to complete their education, more so than the possibility to smoke:

‘I also feel that my education is the most important thing to me right now, so that I can move on in life and earn money.’ (Focus group interview 1).

Teachers also found that, since the SFSH policy had been introduced, students had become more conscious of their own smoking and that SFSH might support them in coping with their everyday challenges if they succeeded in not smoking during school hours.

“So, [the students seem to be developing] a greater awareness of, why [they are] in this situation, right now, and how come [they] stay in it? (Teacher focus group).

In this respect, the dilemma lay in the fact that the students were questioning their own smoking or even wanted to quit but found the challenges in their personal lives too large to cope with without cigarettes.

Discussion

The dilemmas described in this paper, which result from the impact of a SFSH policy on a group of students in a Danish VET school, mirror more general dilemmas arising through public health interventions. Lifestyle and risk choices generally frame how people think about themselves as well as the decisions they make in everyday social life. Health and lifestyle practices, such as smoking, represent subjective mediations of social position and life experience (Lehn-Christiansen et al., 2016). For many experienced smokers, smoking is a regular part of their everyday life and habitual practice (Schutz, 2005) and for some it provides a sense of personal freedom. From a public health perspective, smoking is a risk behaviour that includes both ‘hazards’ and ‘threats’ to one’s health. But it also ‘provide[s] the opportunities, imaginaries and gateways for change and movement’ (Jones and Raisborough, 2007:2-3) in the vocational school context, especially for students who may otherwise have struggled to get an education or find employment. These dilemmas may also explain why smoking cessation, even if it is only during school hours, represents a real struggle for some of the most socially vulnerable students.

Findings from this study offer important insights into the implementation challenges and potentially unintended consequences related to a SFSH policy in secondary school education. In-depth qualitative understanding of why smokefree school policies may be resisted by certain student groups – as well as how they can be addressed – is sparse. However, this study highlights similar processes and tensions to those identified in other secondary school research (e.g. Schreuders et al., 2019, Hewer et al., 2022), especially the first dilemma described above. For instance, a recent study conducted in 17 secondary schools across Europe similarly found that students’ personal freedom and right to choose were important factors influencing smoking during school hours despite the existence of anti-smoking regulations (Hewer et al., 2022). In line with findings from other studies (Hewer et al., 2022, Kjeld et al., 2023, Glenstrup et al., 2021), in this study the introduction of SFSH policy *displaced* rather than *diminished* smoking. While a different study in the Netherlands suggested that smoking was not perceived as a pressing issue for schools to

deal with (Schreuders et al., 2019), in this study, teachers and students both saw merit in smoking regulations because the students' future workplaces were also generally smokefree. Thus, implementing SFSH helped prepare students for the job market.

Methodological reflections

It is appropriate to end with some reflections on the methodological approach taken in this study, since it has implications for future work. Participant observation was not always easy. Since the students had to sneak out and away from the school premises to smoke, it sometimes felt like crossing a line following the students around campus. While effort was devoted to participating with students as much as possible during the school day, it was not possible to participate in their smoking practices. A closer examination of these practices could have provided a better understanding of the 'smoking community' and its practices. A longer period of fieldwork would also have enabled a deeper understanding of the everyday life of different groups of students. In addition, since the period of observation coincided with stressful exam teaching, this may have created a greater need to smoke for some of the students, resulting in a somewhat skewed image of the smoking practices.

A larger number of focus groups with students and teachers would also have strengthened the study. However, resource scarcity and time pressure on school management and staff made this difficult to achieve and, ethically, it seemed inappropriate to make any additional requests on the school. Statement cards were used to initiate focus group discussion and helped elicit the attitudes of students and teachers towards smoking. As the interview included both smokers and non-smokers, these questions created lively discussions, but probably also gave those with the strongest views the most time to speak. In addition, through their choice of content, the statement cards tended to lead the conversation in a certain direction. This may also have impacted the findings. The production of knowledge from focus groups interviews depends on participants' social interaction with each other (Halkier, 2010). Groups of people who know each other well beforehand and groups of people who do not can create diverse social interactions and group dynamics. In this study, it proved an advantage that students came from the same broad social network, as they were more comfortable with each other. In addition, the students were able to deepen each other's perspectives due to shared experiences (Halkier, 2010). We interpreted the social interactions that took place in the focus groups as akin to the social dynamics recognisable in other aspects of the fieldwork (e.g. in the participant observation) enhancing the validity of the study and the claims made.

Implications for practice and future research

Our findings highlight the importance of tailoring school tobacco policies to accommodate the significance of smoking for the students concerned, who may need different degrees of support to get through a smokefree school day. If school staff is conscious of these variations, smoking policies may be implemented in ways that offer differentiated forms of support to students who smoke, allowing them to better navigate a smokefree school day. To address the challenges of tobacco use, countries all over the world, including Denmark, have initiated a range of tobacco control policies (Jarlstrup et al. 2018). The WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) obliges nations to implement diverse tobacco control measures. Denmark has enacted a law prohibiting the sale of tobacco and

nicotine products to individuals under 18, with concerns persisting regarding enforcement (Jarlstrup et al. 2018). In 2007, indoor smoking in public places and workplaces was prohibited. Afterwards, a rise in favourable attitudes towards a public smoking ban was observed (Lykke et al., 2014). Recently, Denmark introduced a national action plan against smoking, which involves banning the display of tobacco products in shops, the use of standardised packaging to diminish advertising impact, price increases, and, in July 2021, national legislation concerning 'smokefree school hours' (SFSH). SFSH applies to the use of all tobacco-related and nicotine products by students, while school staff may use these products outside school premises during school hours. At the time of the Focus study, the legislation was neither planned nor activated. Nevertheless, despite the enactment of the new legislation, Danish data indicate that it is generally not being enforced; most users of tobacco products still smoke cigarettes (88-92%) or use smokeless tobacco (96-98%) during school hours (Kjeld et al., 2021), aligning with trends in other European countries (Mélard et al., 2020). Additionally, a report evaluating SFSH in youth education sites in Southern Denmark reveals implementation challenges like those identified in the above-mentioned dilemmas (Kjeld et al., 2022). Although no study has formally evaluated the effects of the new SFSH-legislation, our findings, which indicate high levels of support for anti-smoking policies among students and teachers, suggest the potential for both reducing experienced smokers' smoking and preventing new or non-smokers from initiating smoking.

Funding

This work was supported by Trygfonden [Tryg Foundation] and Kræftens Bekæmpelse [Danish Cancer Society] (Proposal Number R163-A10653).

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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