

Teachers' awareness of gambling risks among students with special educational needs

What this research is about

Adolescent gambling is emerging as a public health concern. As adolescents' executive functioning is not fully developed, they are more prone to act impulsively, take risks, and seek thrills, including gambling. Gambling may be 'a hidden addiction' due to the lack of obvious physical signs often seen in other risk-taking behaviours.

Adolescents with special educational needs (SEN) are young people whose learning difficulties or disabilities requires additional or different educational support beyond what is typically available to their peers. Their learning difficulties may make them more vulnerable to erroneous gambling-related thinking and beliefs, increasing their risks for harm from gambling.

This study explored mainstream secondary school teachers' awareness of gambling-related risks in students with SEN, and whether teachers perceive these risks differently for students with SEN relative to their typically developing (TD) peers.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited participants through existing networks. Participants had to be current teachers in mainstream secondary schools in the United Kingdom. Teachers who were retired, on a career break, or had personal experiences with gambling or were negatively affected by a loved one's gambling behaviour were excluded.

A total of 15 teachers aged 23 to 57 years participated in the study. Their teaching experience ranged from 1

What you need to know

The aim of this study was to explore secondary school teachers' awareness of gambling-related risks in students with special educational needs (SEN), and whether teachers perceive these risks differently for students with SEN relative to their typically developing (TD) peers. The researchers interviewed 15 current teachers in mainstream secondary schools in the United Kingdom. Participants were between 23 and 57 years old, and their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 27 years.

Three main themes were identified: (1) understanding of gambling-related risks, (2) vulnerability of students with SEN, and (3) gambling as a secondary concern. Teachers recognized gambling as a risk for both TD students and those with SEN. But they perceived students with SEN as more vulnerable due to challenges related to impulse control, processing, and understanding consequences. At the same time, gambling was often seen as less serious than other risky behaviours like alcohol and drug use. Teachers identified limited gambling-specific training as a barrier to recognizing and responding to gambling-related risks among their students.

to 27 years, and they taught a variety of subjects (e.g., English, Geography, Mathematics, Science, Music).

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. The questions focused on teachers' views and experiences of

gambling behaviours among TD students and students with SEN.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified three main themes from the interview responses.

Understanding of gambling-related risks: Teachers expressed concerns about adolescents' exposure to gambling, and they were aware of gambling-related risks among both TD students and those with SEN. They discussed how students are exposed to gambling materials, with technology increasing the risk. In particular, teachers identified smartphones as the main medium through which students accessed gambling content. Gambling adverts were described as widespread on social media and in sports.

Teachers discussed potential signs of gambling-related risks in students. This included behavioural changes, such as students acting more 'arrogant,' 'secretive,' 'anxious,' 'quiet', or 'cocky' than usual. They also mentioned increased gambling knowledge and discussion, and purchasing expensive items.

Teachers also discussed how gambling may affect students in the future. The main consequence mentioned was addiction in later life. Many teachers noted students' lack of understanding about money and debt issues. Others discussed more immediate consequences, such as poor school performance.

SEN students' vulnerability: Teachers perceived students with SEN as being more vulnerable to gambling-related risks than TD students. They suggested that challenges related to executive functioning and processing may contribute to vulnerability among students with SEN. For example, some teachers discussed that it may be harder for students with SEN to tap into their knowledge of risks and consequences associated with gambling. Teachers also thought that students with autism and ADHD may be more likely to fixate on gambling.

Gambling as a secondary concern: Although teachers acknowledged gambling-related risks among students, they saw these risks as a secondary concern compared to other behaviours, such as drugs and alcohol use.

Teachers' limited concerns around gambling-related risks may be in part due to their lack of gambling-specific training. Some teachers believed that training would help them better support and guide students. Teachers also contrasted this lack of gambling-specific training with training they received on other risky behaviours, which included a focus on how these behaviours may look different among students with SEN.

How you can use this research

This study can inform practitioners and educators on gambling-related risks among adolescents. Policy makers and schools can use these findings to develop teacher training programs and inclusive prevention strategies.

About the researchers

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