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# Colour by numbers: peer education from scratch

**The case for and against peer-led education has rumbled on and off in the pages of *Druglink* for some time now – and perhaps the biggest question has been *what's the point?* In answering that question, a Berkshire team set out to create an education programme that would ultimately develop its own momentum, through in-depth training, the acquisition of skills and knowledge and an unheard of but vital international aspect**

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In March 1997, all five schools in a Berkshire district joined forces to introduce peer education in the classroom. Central to this was a 'fast-track' training programme for Year 11 pupils (15-16 year olds) so that they could act as 'peer educators' for other Years, as well as an innovative educational trip to Amsterdam.

The local Drug Action Team (DAT) and Drug Reference Group came on board early on, and funding was raised from local sources. A steering group consisting of the project leader, the teachers involved and a local senior youth worker was also set up, and it was this group which initially identified likely candidates for the training. At all stages, the school managements (a teacher from each school received the training too), parents and the DAT were kept informed of progress.

### Speaking with one voice

The same month that the training programme began, Berkshire Youth and Community Services also hosted

a 'speakeasy' conference, giving young people the chance to speak openly about a number of subjects. In relation to drugs, it became clear that local young people still did not know the full implications of seeking out information or accessing support. In many instances, they were crying out for balanced and non-judgemental information. Confidentiality was a key issue, and there was a high level of insecurity in approaching any of the sources of help. The lack of coherence and strategy in secondary school-based drug education was also highlighted and it became clear that if action is only precipitated by a crisis, then drug education is failing the county's schools.

Obviously, we had high hopes that the peer education project would address all these issues – providing a consistent programme of drug education throughout the area that would respect confidentiality through the provision of objective information and advice. Ultimately, it was anticipated that the peer education sessions would be incorporated into the schools' drug education programmes.

### Obstacle course

A residential training weekend for the 'peer educators' was held at the Thames Valley Police Training Centre and was facilitated by YAP project workers. The aim was to give the pupils a broad drug awareness as well as to train them in presentation and workshop skills. It was agreed that to be effective, the peer educators would eventually need to work in a class

without a member of staff present and that all the training which they received should ensure that they were competent to do so.

Clearly, the YAP approach – streetwise and knowledgeable – differs from the 'Just Say No' directive style of drug education. That said, the impression which most of the pupils and adults were left with at the end of each training session was that the negative aspects of each substance far outweighed the perceived positive effects.

The YAP presenters set out to provide a high level of knowledge about drug misuse to enable the peer educators to work confidently with other young people. They also provided two workshop approaches for the peer educators to use in their own schools – a role play workshop and a structured question and answer session. Both highlighted the impact of interactive teaching on this sort of issue, an approach which the new national strategy favours.

By the end of the weekend and a series of 'refresher' evening sessions, the young people involved had built a sound knowledge base, enabling them to run a question and answer session on drugs themselves. They also had the skills and confidence to run an interactive role play workshop, based on the notion that we don't always know what we're getting into when we start something.

### Tripping on alternative culture

The five day visit to Amsterdam in July was carefully designed to allow the group to see a different approach to



drugs than that seen in the UK. As one of the authors has previously pointed out:

"When we are working with a group of young people and talking about drugs, someone will always say 'Yeah, but they're legal in Amsterdam'. By going there and talking to the people involved we will find out the particular problems they have to deal with. When the pupils go back to school they will be able to answer any questions from their peers with the experience of having been to the city."<sup>1</sup>

The trip also gave the group a chance to witness the coffeeshop culture at first hand, and visits were made to the Central Police Station, the Health Authority, the Jellinek Research Institute and the Street Corner Project.

The group certainly had reservations about the policy of tolerating an illegal activity and the evidence of their own eyes confirmed that the policy had not separated so-called 'soft' and 'hard' drugs on the streets. Every member of the group without exception was offered a range of drugs, from cannabis and ecstasy to heroin and cocaine.

The effects of the visit on the pupils were profound and it is difficult to summarise their feelings in a limited space. However, these extracts from letters of thanks written to a regular heroin user in custody who they had met go some way to summing it up:

"I wish that the people I know who use drugs could speak to you for just a few minutes to see the reality of the dream world that they live in"

"After having spoken to you, it changed my whole outlook. When I think of friends at home who take drugs, it makes me want to shout at them . . . As you and I know, drugs cannot solve any problems"

### Out of the frying pan . . .

In September, five of the peer educators were thrown in at the deep end, making their first presentations and leading a question and answer session at a training day for staff at Langtree school in south Oxford. The day was a resounding success, reflected in some of the comments made at staff evaluation:

"The discussion with the youngsters

1. Smith S. "Reality of drug haven." *Reading Evening Post*: 21/3/97.

## Peer pressure

When asked retrospectively what they thought of the peer-led approach to role play, Year 9 pupils commented:

Good because it's true

Makes you realise how much trouble you can get in with drugs

They stopped and discussed it with us

Then we discussed what we'd do in the boy's situation

It was hard to make decisions without more about his background

They were a bit more critical about the question and answer sessions:

Should have talked about more types of drugs

Should have told us more stories about drugs and slag off drugs a bit more

Always asked us the questions

It was good the teacher was not in the room and we felt as if they understood what we were talking about

Realistic language

We believed them more than police/teachers/parents

was excellent. They were well informed and displayed confidence and humour in delivering a very serious topic. I think it would be a very good idea to have youngsters like this involved in the PSE programme."

"The youth team deserve high commendation for taking part - very informative, very appealing, very brave."

"The input from the five young people was superb. Further discussion with them on a small group basis would be highly beneficial."



The Langtree school has now planned its own pilot peer-led drug education project in the 1997-8 academic year, using our model as an example of good practice, and our peer educators have also run a training weekend for Langtree pupils.

As for our own schools, the peer educators (now in Year 12) have been busy delivering sessions. An early concern was that this extra pressure may impact adversely on their school work, but that does not appear to have been the case. The peer education sessions are no more and no less a source of 'stress' than any other extra-curricular activity.

In each school, the peer educators fit into the school's existing drug education programme, which is aimed at Years 7 to 9 (11 to 14 year olds). By the end of this academic year, about 900 pupils should have received two sessions each from the peer educators, and so far, they seem to have really appreciated them (see box).

### Future perfect?

An independent evaluation has now been completed and reports the perceived benefits to those involved as being:

- the Police Schools Liaison Officer has broadened his understanding of drugs and drug education
- the teachers have a broader understanding of drug education, which is of use in their own teaching and in supporting other teachers
- the schools have an added

dimension to the drug education, both on a formal and informal basis

- the peer educators have increased knowledge, understanding and confidence in this area
- strong links have been formed between the teachers and students in the five schools and with the police
- the receivers of the peer-led drug education appreciated the information, the confidentiality and realistic language of this approach

The impression most pupils and adults were left with was that the negative aspects of each substance far outweighed the perceived positive effects

As for the reasons for success, the evaluation found that:

- the project leader had researched peer-led drug education thoroughly and produced a thorough and meticulous long-term plan
- all the people involved are local and the wider community has been included
- the schools have volunteered for the project and supported it fully
- parents of the peer educators and of their audience have been involved
- the peer educators were selected for their ability to take on the role alongside their normal school life
- nationally recognised peer drug education tutors were used for the training

The training has not stopped. In February, there was a further training weekend for the existing peer educators to enhance their skills and develop new ones in the light of their experience. In April, there was another training weekend for a whole new tranche of Year 11 educators, run by the current educators, which will be followed shortly by their own trip to Amsterdam. In short, the programme has been bedded in and the future looks bright ■