

DILEMMAS IN YOUTH WORK

DODGY SITUATIONS: SOME QUESTIONS

1. You know (because you have smelt it) that cannabis is being smoked on club premises. Are you, as a youth club leader, liable to prosecution?
2. You have seen some older members sharing out what looks like amphetamines on club premises. Also on several occasions 18-year-olds have brought cans of lager in and sold them to the younger ones on disco night. What is your liability in relation to these transactions?
3. Would you be legally obliged to tell the police if a young person confided in you that they were using heroin?
4. What would your position be if you confiscated an illegal drug from a young person with the intention of handing it as soon as possible to the police or to some other responsible person?

SOME ANSWERS

1. Yes, you are liable to prosecution under the Misuse of Drugs Act if you knowingly allow cannabis or opium to be smoked on premises for which you are responsible. Ironically, you would not be liable under the Act if heroin was being used. (But see points 2 and 3).
2. Knowingly allowing premises you are responsible for to be used for the supply of any controlled drug is an offence under the Misuse of Drugs Act, so even though the amphetamines are not being sold, you are still liable to prosecution. It is illegal to permit the sale of alcohol on unlicensed premises, so you could be prosecuted — but you would be legally in the clear if the alcohol was simply being shared.
3. No, there is no legal compulsion for anyone to pass on information about drug use or dealing to the police (as long as one does not actively abet in the physical concealment of an offender). However, some contracts of employment might be interpreted as laying specific duties upon the worker.
4. If you hand them to the police, you would be in the clear. To be on the safe side, you could ask another adult to witness your action, thus insuring against allegations that the drugs were, in fact, yours. However, it may be illegal to hand them to some other responsible adult not authorised (as police are) to possess controlled drugs.

Drug use by young people is most often encountered outside rather than inside schools, where it is the youth work side of the education service that has to directly confront the difficult legal and control issues involved.

Nicholas Dorn and Christine James

THE YOUTH SERVICE is the poor cousin of schools in the education system in England and Wales, and this is reflected in the case of drug education. Indeed, the very term 'drug education' suggests ideas of classroom practice rarely replicated in youth work. Methods developed in the school system — whether drug education as such or the more modish concern with health and lifestyle education — simply do not translate well into the average club or project, or into detached work.

So, how does youth work address issues around legal and illegal drugs? This question is more easily answered by giving some practical examples than by reference to any theory of youth work. So the panel on this page poses some common questions about a few of the 'dodgy situations' of concern to many youth workers — answers below.

As these examples illustrate, perhaps the most striking thing about the concerns of youth workers around intoxicating substances, is that these have as much to do with legal issues, control, and the practical management of situations, as with health. Youth workers have to get through a day or an evening that may be beset with 'dodgy situations', and try to keep the worker and the kids out of serious trouble.

Whereas the teacher may be worried about what young people get up to out of school or in the future, the youth worker is perforce confronted with a management responsibility in the here and now. Yet, with little opportunity to exercise authority without risking the relationships s/he is trying to build up with young people, the youth worker often negotiates from a position of weakness.

The role of youth worker is not, of course, restricted to considerations of legality and formal control. There are also concerns around health and young people's personal development and social competence. But health issues have proved a minefield for workers in relation to drugs and solvents. Suppose a group of young people are sniffing glue around the club. If you ban them, the immediate situation is controlled and the fear of others becoming involved is reduced, but the sniffers may move on to sniff in more dangerous places where help is harder to get, or start to use more dangerous substances without anyone knowing and being able to warn them.

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Here the worker's control role and health role are in conflict: whatever she decides, she and the young people will run risks.

Another specific aspect of youth work is its confrontation with issues around pleasure. Helping young people find out what they want, what the obstacles are, and how to get around or over them, is a key aspect of social education. However, there are obvious difficulties when intoxication is introduced into this agenda. How can the worker respond to the fact that it is through experiences like intoxication and through sexual experimentation that young people actively explore their wants, needs and self? They cannot simply advise 'moderation in all things', since some of these things are actually forbidden by law and, anyway, part of the pleasure is the sense of overstepping boundaries.

ONE WAY FORWARD is to stop thinking of drugs-related youth work as a specialism based on the examples offered by specialist drugs workers or by teachers, and to look towards the more progressive aspects of youth work for inspiration. Over the last decade, work with girls has developed as a specific practice and, in this context, drugs issues can be seen as gender issues: girls are called 'slags' if they get drunk while boys are not; some boys (and, later, husbands) exaggerate their problems around alcohol, solvents or other drugs in order to get girls' sympathy; male drinking and violence against women.

From the perspective of work with boys, issues around intoxication, risk-taking and drunken display become seen as aspects of the collective creation of a masculine identity. Much work with drug users is, in fact, work with boys (even when they are quite adult in years!). And one could go on to observe that they are mostly white boys (but that is a longer story).

Because youth workers vary much in their perspectives and in their working situations, staff development methods in the Youth Service need to be diverse and adaptable. Take any borough and one will find some workers at the early stages of thinking of the issues, needing awareness training and information. Others will be mostly concerned with the development of ways of working with specific groups — boys, girls, ethnic groups, the unemployed, etc. And others will be involved in inter-agency work or work with parents, with all the opportunities for mutual support and for misunderstandings and conflicts that such work brings. The real need is to find more ways to share the experience that already exists and to extend support structures in the profession. □