



A revolutionary in the field of drug education, Noreen Wetton reasoned that understanding children's perceptions of drugs was vital.

Jenny McWhirter talks to an octogenarian who has inspired thousands of teachers and steered schools away from using shock tactics

Drawing inspiration

IN the world of drugs we are used to stories about celebrities – mainly those who have lived glamorous lifestyles and whose lives have been messed up by drugs. This article celebrates the life of a celebrity in the world of drug education, Noreen Wetton.

Noreen is recognised nationally and internationally as a researcher who has helped us to understand how children and young people perceive and explain the world of drugs – a vital first element in drug education. Most importantly she has shown thousands of teachers and practitioners how to turn this understanding into practical classroom activities.

Noreen's major contribution to drug education was the development of 'Jugs and Herrings', a research method that was first tried out in a Hampshire school in 1988. It revolutionised the way teachers work with children in drug education.

FICTION TO FACT

"We asked the children to illustrate a story about a child who found a bag of drugs," remembers Wetton, who celebrated her 80th birthday in March 2004. "We did not explain what drugs meant and so the children told us about medicines, alcohol, tobacco and of course illegal drugs. They didn't just tell us about the drugs themselves, they told us about the paraphernalia that goes with them – mirrors, razor blades and needles. Some children misheard or misunderstood the word drugs and drew pictures of jugs, bugs and even rugs. But by the age of seven, they knew that some drugs were packets of white powder, and some of these packets were labelled 'herring'." Although the formal title of the research tool is *The World of Drugs*, it has always been known affectionately as 'Jugs and Herrings'.

The research showed that in general children's perception of the world of drugs narrowed as they got older. By the age of 11 mentions of medicines, alcohol and tobacco were rare and drugs were perceived simply as 'bad things, done by bad people for bad purposes'. Since 1989 this perception has gradually come down the age range, and recent research in Essex has shown that children also increasingly associate the world of drugs with violence – now the bag of drugs may contain knives and guns.

Adults were stunned by the children's knowledge and mystified about the source of their understanding

– it was the same across the country, from inner city to rural areas. Television seemed to be the common factor, rather than first-hand experience. But whatever the source of their understanding, much of it was misunderstanding.

"Some of what the children wrote was non-sense, but it was never nonsense," Noreen explains. "At every step you could see how the children had used what they knew and understood about the everyday world to make sense of the world of drugs. So we had pictures and writing about drug *stealers*, rather than drugs *dealers*."

It was this non-sense which provided the starting point for helping teachers to recognise the children's views and reinforce and extend their understanding, challenging misunderstanding, addressing stereotypes and looking at how all substances, including medicines, alcohol and tobacco change how people feel and behave.

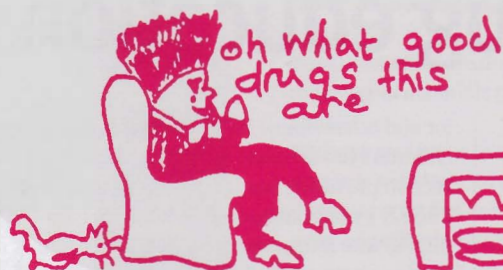
TRUE PICTURES

Noreen first became involved in health education in the early 1980s when she was working at the University of Southampton. She had already had a successful career as a teacher, head teacher and as a teacher educator. She had developed an interest in children's language of emotions and was an established contributor to children's reading schemes.

Noreen describes an encounter with a colleague, Trefor Williams, over the photocopier: "He told me he had a new project to research and develop a health education curriculum programme for primary school children and that he had a sample of 22,600 children, of whom around 8,000 were under the age of eight. He wanted to know how he could find out what health meant to children of this age. So I said 'ask the children to draw a picture of a healthy person, and what the person needs to be healthy and stay healthy.'" This became known as a *Picture of Health*.

From this conversation emerged one of the most frequently used research methods in health education today and known simply as 'draw and write'. It seems obvious now, with so much research focussed on the needs and views expressed by young people themselves, but back in the 1980s there was considerable doubt amongst researchers about consulting directly with the youngest children in school. Some thought that children as young as four or five

he was going to eat them every day and
night and he will get weaker and weaker
and he will go in 2 years time unless
he gives up



boy 9

years would not have much to tell a researcher, and some thought research with this age group simply could not be done in a reliable and systematic way. The only other methods were observation and interviews, which could not be attempted with such a large sample.

Once *Picture of Health* had been turned into *Health for Life* (still perhaps the best-known health education material for primary schools) there was a demand for a greater focus on the so-called 'sensitive' issues, especially illegal drugs. Educationalists were waking up to the idea that shock horror approaches to drug prevention were not working, and something far more sophisticated was needed.

OPEN-ENDED

However, resistance to doing research with children aged four to eleven about illegal drugs came from many quarters. Some schools asked to take part in the research were reluctant for all sorts of reasons. "Some said their children did not know anything about drugs while others were afraid we would be putting ideas into their heads, that parents would object or that it would suggest that the school had a drugs problem. We put their minds at rest by showing them how open ended 'draw and write' is."

"It was successful because it was underpinned by the authentic voice of the child," says Noreen. Now in its second edition, *Health for Life* has enabled primary school drug education to go way beyond shock horror and the 'just say no' approach.

In fact Noreen does not like the term drug education at all, but prefers, "education for growing up in a drug using world". "We all live in a world in which drugs, including medicines, alcohol and illegal drugs, are in every day use. We need to educate children to grow up confidently, competently and safely in that world."

The influence of Jugs and Herrings has not only been felt in the classroom, but in national policy. Health Education became a cross curricular theme when the national curriculum was introduced in 1991. This and subsequent documents have made it clear that drug education should begin when children first come into school, and this was also enshrined in the first national drug strategy in 1998. Jugs and Herrings and its grown-up sister *In a class of its own* were used as part of the research which informed the Blueprint project.

ENTHUSIASM

Many researchers would have stopped there, but Noreen's enthusiasm for learning from children and young people is unquenched. Even at 80 Noreen is not considering retiring – she happily describes herself as a "failed retired person". She spent the two days before her birthday at the annual conference of the National Health Education Group, where she delivered two workshops.

"I am an addict" she confesses. Since the very first 'draw and write', she has gone on to develop more than 30 more illuminative research strategies looking at topics as varied as children's perceptions of the effect of the sun on skin and what makes a school a healthy school. One of her most recent research projects, explores what children think could make a stay in hospital better for children. In this and many other projects she has collaborated with a wide range of other researchers in the UK and across the world, who respect and treasure the opportunity to work with her.

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No doubt Noreen received many tributes and accolades on her 80th birthday, but there are few she will welcome more than those from people whose work has been influenced by her research with children, stretching back over 20 years.

"As a person Noreen has inspired many of us to do better quality work in health education," says Ruth Joyce OBE, Home Office Blueprint drug education research manager. "But as an academic, her contribution has been astonishing – opening horizons and bringing validity and credibility to this exciting area of work." ■