

Do police have a role in education?

TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION – the question implicitly posed by the preceding article – we firstly need to examine what is meant by ‘drug education’. There is a world of difference between an informed individual providing drug *information* and someone who is trained in educational principles providing drug *education*.

Two decades ago, drug information was defined as “a form of communication which simply imparts factual knowledge”.¹ Drug education on the other hand is “a broad range of concerted activities”. More recently, the use of ‘participative learning’ techniques has been advocated to enable pupils to make healthy and effective life choices.² It is also important to consider how pupils might accept the opinions of those who are not speaking from personal experience, while competence in group dynamics is another key factor.³

This move away from information-based drug education and towards ‘interactive’ drug education has serious implications for whether the police service is adequately equipped to play a role in schools.

The DfE Circular 4/95 and the Curriculum Guidance offered by the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority have both reinforced this concept of drug education. The former clearly states that the essential aim of a drug education programme should be to give young people the knowledge and skills to make informed and responsible choices. The latter states that drug education is best led by classroom teachers – outside speakers should not be used as an excuse by schools to abdicate their responsibilities. Police cannot ignore this edict.

It is questionable whether police officers are sufficiently trained to fulfil an educational role in the classroom. While certain individual officers may have the

ability to do so, it would be folly to expect all police officers to have the requisite skills. This is more than substantiated by the responses I received when researching the police role in schools.

This research highlighted the fact that the police were in no way equipped to satisfy the demand from schools for drug education programmes. Of the 42 forces which provide drug education in schools, only 12 were involved in all the secondary schools in their area. Circular 4/95 is likely to increase the number of schools wanting drug education, but how can police involvement be sustained when the requirement of DARE, for instance, is for 17 hours input per school per year?

A state of chaos prevails at present in the classroom

Thirty one forces said that if all the schools in their area wanted their involvement they would be unable to provide it.

For many forces, such levels of involvement make the adoption of DARE highly unlikely, but even with a commitment to provide resources, they are then faced with the need for proper procedures for the selection and training of police officers. Selection of appropriate officers is crucial and should be based on the officer’s skills and aptitudes as an educator and not just on their knowledge of drugs. Police forces can no longer treat drug education as yet another school input. In 34 forces, the responsibility for the provision of drug education lay with the School Liaison or Community Affairs Officers – this is not good enough.

As for training, nine forces said their drug educators had not been trained and closer inspection of those forces which

said they had trained their officers led me to believe that “a bit of drug awareness” had simply been tagged onto existing School Liaison Officer courses. Twelve forces did not involve any outside agencies in their training programmes.

I also examined coordination of police drug education efforts, and seven forces were found to be working in isolation, not even liaising with the schools in which they worked. Two forces at least had the honesty to say that they did not know if their efforts were coordinated!

When the use of written resource materials in schools is looked at, it appears that 32 forces were using materials produced in-force. Quite apart from the question of how qualified police officers are to prepare resource materials, Circular 4/95 clearly states that *schools* must judge for themselves what materials are appropriate for use in classrooms.

It is my view that police have tried to respond to the explosion of drug misuse by going into schools and offering help. Quite often, their efforts have been badly designed and have paid little, if any, regard to what is good in drug education. The lack of self-evaluation of their efforts is also a glaring omission.

As one who strongly suspected that all was not well with the police role in the classroom, my research has served to prove the state of chaos which prevails at present. Essentially, police forces have been found to deliver drug education in schools making do with community constables with no training who are using materials prepared by untrained police.

The challenge appears to be not only for schools to take the lead in drug education, but for police forces to be sensitive to the many issues surrounding the provision of effective drug education, and to acknowledge that their role is one of support only. Undoubtedly the police service has a role to play in giving our youth a chance to opt out of the drug culture, but that role is not to determine what happens in our schools. ○

by

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1. Goodstadt M. “Impact and roles of drug information in drug education.” *Journal of Drug Education*: 1975, 5(3), p.223-33.

2. Clements J. et al. “Beyond Just Say No.” *Druglink*: 1988, 3(3).

3. Garfield E., Jones D. “Drug education group process: consideration for the classroom.” *Journal of Drug Education*: 1980, 10(2), p.101-10.

Supt. Green is writing in a personal capacity. His comments are based on his own research in British police forces and schools. The research findings are available