

What's so special about drug education anyway?

IT IS ALWAYS GOOD TO READ RADICAL critiques of traditional school-based drug education, such as Colin Cripps' in the last *Druglink*. For it is only with the publication of such clear outlines of a particular approach, like that of YAP, that the debate can be truly engaged. The problem, however, is that such an approach is shot through with a fundamental contradiction, out of touch with recent developments in school programmes, and – ironically – incredibly conservative in its outlook.

First comes the big contradiction. On the one hand, the article bemoans that 'the generation gap is now a gulf'. Very true. There is little open dialogue between most adults and young people when it comes to drugs. But youth culture is not as 'pure' as is often made out. It is riddled with commercialism and often manufactured and controlled by adults for economic gain. On the other hand, the YAP programme which Colin Cripps espouses, actually uses young facilitators in a way that perpetuates the generation gap. You can't have it both ways. On this count, the YAP approach is part of the problem, not the solution.

After all, is it really impossible for adults to understand and empathise with young people today? In my experience many teachers, parents and drug workers make a pretty good job of struggling to understand and support young people.

They are often very anxious about it all and feel ill-informed (partly because people try to mystify the subject and keep telling them they know nothing) but often they know a lot more about drugs than they realise. They have picked up a lot of information and relevant experience over the years through their own – and others' – use of legal and illegal substances.

In the last Druglink, Colin Cripps made an impassioned plea for the clued-up drug education worker.

Here, another of Britain's leading drug educationalists takes issue with the peer-led approach and proposes a middle way, negotiating the tricky pathway between the educator as 'friend' or 'foe'

by

Julian Cohen

Drug education writer, trainer and ex-teacher

SUMMARY

Colin Cripps' 'radical' article on youth-friendly peer-led drug education is, in truth, conservative and contains a fundamental contradiction. What young people actually need in school is teacher-led drug education, integrating the subject into the curriculum and allowing teachers to do what they do best – educate.

Read Colin Cripps' response to this article on the letters page, p.22

The youngest swinger in town

The YAP approach to drug education seems to assume that young people already know a lot about drugs. If they do, why do they need any drug education at all? There is a world of difference between accepting young people's protestations that they know so much already, and recognising that while they may talk the talk, they don't necessarily walk the walk. In other words, they often know less than they think.

As for the educator, the assumption of the YAP approach seems to be that they have to be a young ex-user (though the article does admit that "not any ex-drug user will do"). But *do* you need to have been a user to teach drug education? Drug use is a very individual experience. In my book, we are all drug users and all have a drug career – but do we really need to have used every drug under the sun to be able to talk about them? And what level of use qualifies? A few tokes on a joint? Recreational, heavy, problematic or chaotic use? Do you get extra points for having overdosed or been busted? Ultimately, what must you have done to be a 'near peer' educator?

Teachers doing it for themselves

I prefer to take the position that teachers should lead drug education in school – not police officers, drug workers, ex-addicts, evangelical crusaders, YAP workers or me. Why? Because:

- You do not need to be a drugs encyclopaedia to successfully teach drug education. Many current drug education resources contain most of the information a drug educator needs. If they do not know something, they and the class can research it and find out.

- Drug education is not just about information. In the past too many programmes have overly focused on information to the detriment of attitude exploration and skill development. In many ways understanding drug use is much more about people than drugs, about the search for pleasure and meaning in life and the attempt to deal with stresses and problems.

- An effective drug educator needs really good teaching and facilitation skills. These take time and experience to develop but are the bread and butter of many teachers. In this day and age, we should really be moving towards cherishing our teachers, not bashing them.

- Teachers know their pupils, develop relationships with them and see them on an ongoing basis so they can follow up issues as they arise. No other professional can possibly hope to find themselves in such a privileged position.

- School-based drug education should be just that – education. It is *not* about therapy nor classroom disclosure about an individual's drug use. Problems and disclosures should be managed within school pastoral systems with individual teachers and school nurses and through links with outside agencies – and yes, here YAP and similar peer-led projects could, and possibly already do, play a useful role.

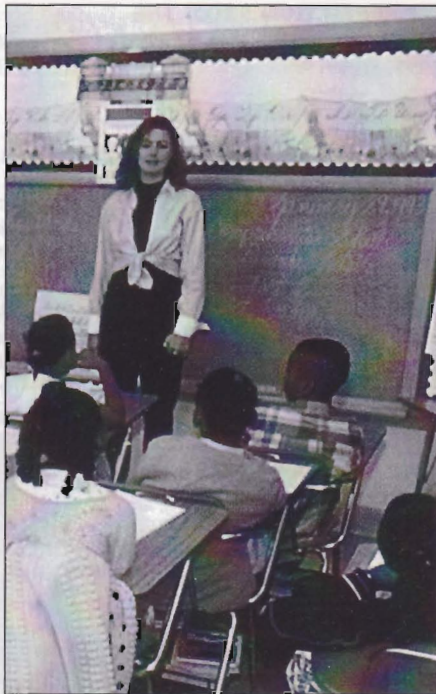
What level of drug use qualifies you to be a peer educator?

- It costs a lot of money to use outsiders. Once teachers are effective at teaching drug education they can ensure programmes will be in place for years to come, rather than rely on outsiders.

Above all I believe in trying to make drugs a normal, everyday thing to talk about rather than sensationalising it by using specialist outsiders.

Credibility gap

Colin Cripps suggests that teachers will not be credible, listened to or believed by young people when they talk about drugs. The fact that they are believed when they talk about other things doesn't seem to count. The implication of this line is that drug education is something that is 'done to' young people and that it is mainly based on information giving.



They have the skills, so let teachers use them

By contrast, I see drug education as broader and developmental (rather than as a 'one-off' series of lessons) based on two-way dialogue, debate, exploration and sound *educational* principles. I cannot stress the last point enough. Without the three basic educational principles – increasing knowledge and understanding, exploring attitudes and opinions, and developing skills – we might as well pack up our good intentions and go home. In my experience young people couldn't care how old drug educators are as long as they are genuine, respectful, facilitate learning and debate, listen to their pupils and have access to accurate information as and when needed.

Which brings me to practical alternatives. Not all drug education programmes go in for propaganda, victimising and stereotyping drug users, peer pressure myths, distortion and downright lies (although too many still do). In the last few years I have worked with *Healthwise* to develop drug education programmes in primary and secondary schools based on the provision of harm reduction teaching resources (such as *Taking Drugs Seriously*, *Dealing with Drugs* and the *Primary School Drug Pack*), the training of teachers and above all building the skills and confidence of teachers to deliver effective drug education.

We have now worked with over 500 secondary schools and 900 primary schools in the North West of England. Our evaluation work shows that many teachers are turning away from propaganda and preaching and are

integrating drug education into the normal school curriculum. It is education about drugs (rather than against them) and it is based on the same educational principles that are used to teach other subject areas.

It seems curious that the YAP approach adopts what can almost be called a 'dependency model', whereby teachers are told they will be no good at drug education and that only 'the yooof team' can do it. We choose to work with schools on what can be described as an 'empowerment model', building the skills and confidence of teachers to facilitate effective drug education for young people. Some of the schools we work with use outside agencies in a limited way – under their control – to deliver small elements of programmes.

Let's make drugs an everyday matter like history or physics, sex education or religious education

But, after the effort has been made, after the time and ongoing commitment has been invested, many of these teachers no longer need much support either from us or from anyone else. And that's the key: provide the initial impetus, the information, the understanding, training and teaching resources – and then let the teachers get on with it. They are the educators and I know where I'd put my money if pressed.

So let's make drugs a normal, everyday matter to talk about like history or physics, sex education or religious education. Let's remove its special status and make it bog-standard education. Let's support teachers rather than undermine them. And let's work to close the generation gap rather than artificially encourage it. ○



Back copies of the *Druglink* Education Special and the issue with Colin Cripps' original piece are still available from ISDD, priced £5 and £6 respectively. Call David on 0171 803 4712