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Mary Jones
It pays to use peer leaders!

At a recent presentation to teachers I discovered that the majority of the people in the room were interested in Peer Education, even though very few were actually involved in it.

I asked the participants on the course to get into small groups and have a quick think about the reasons why they thought it was a good thing, and the reasons that they gave were all the self-ailable, above-the-board thing that you would expect. Key elements were that it is more relevant, that young people would speak the language of their peers, that as a whole business of empowerment, the arts does exist anyway so why not make art the positive use of it... and so on and so forth.

I agreed with them that all these motives were pretty low even if not always sound, but had to admit that my own motives were not entirely as honourable — a main reason which spurred me to this way of acting was the financial one.

Limited impact

Kent Education Authority has one Advisory Teacher for Health Education, who works for the Professional Development Unit. This Unit has little actual budget and has to finance itself by INSET time from schools. Therefore, in order to run a training event one has to be very, very careful. I have 35 secondary schools and 6 independent schools in my district, and if you are talking about £100 a day to release a member of staff you can start to add up just how much it would cost to run a two-day meaningful training course. So basically it all comes down to the Health Authority being required to fund virtually all activities in this area.

In my first year in the post I did run such a training event for teachers — with a written guarantee that within a year I could see what they were doing, if it had had any advantage, and so on, I tried very hard to make sure that the teachers I got were the ones worth working with, and by and large a lot of progress was made — but it really was determined by the structure within the school. If that person had a co-ordinating role the impact could be greater, and often led to development days on sex education (and specifically HIV), or on what one might call ‘controversial issues’, so there was a little bit of mileage in that. If they were Deputy Heads or had an equivalent role, it really depended on how many other things were being heaped upon them. There were some good examples of what could be done, but again impact was limited.

Then of course there were the teachers who were promoted internally or moved away out of the area, as well as those who felt that really the impact was restricted to their own classroom.

So having done that once, using nearly half of my entire budget for HIV prevention, it was...
I spoke at length to various people who had fallen during recruitment.

When you sell an idea there is always a lot of immediate interest, so I wanted them to think about it properly.
I became the continuity person, making sure people had enough biscuits.

What they produced on the second weekend was amazing.

A Level Drama student at a local school two years previously, and the director had approached me to see if it was worth expanding it into a 45-minute self-standing play. I felt that it was, and two of the cast of five had actually been at my first training weekend, so that was the HIV link into the cast. I happened to know all the other cast members as well, because I hate to admit it but they were all ex-pupils!

Although the play was developed well, we felt that the cabaret could support it as an evening’s entertainment for school audiences. So six of the group started meeting and put together the safer-sex cabaret show, using a lot of the ideas they had gained in the weekend but with some original materials.

Back at school some of them were holding workshops within their PSE groups, and The Times Educational Supplement used this as an example in their article (1). However, this led to a lot of people writing to ask “Can I have the lesson plans that these sixth-formers used?” or “Can you send me your itinerary for the training weekend?” I had to write a very polite letter back, saying the sixth-form lesson plans were not my property — they had based them on ideas that they had gained. Likewise I was reluctant to send through the training weekend details because the philosophy was that peer education really was what they made of it, and the plan was organic with the group.

We invited schools to attend our show and they usually brought 9th or 10th year groups. We also took it to special-needs schools — the Royal School for the Deaf, where we did a signed version, and Home Baywood Park Institute for disabled young adults, where the cast spent a lot of time chatting with the residents afterwards. We also took it to King’s School and played to the lower sixth there. In total 605 people saw the play over seven performances in November.

Confident

Kent Radio were put in touch by Jo Bum of Artrizwe and we had a half-hour drama/art show on World AIDS Day. The group feeling confident enough to host the magazine programme themselves. In an evening they scripted it, interviewed one another, interviewed me, and chose what sequences they felt would actually work best, and the producer had just the right approach, not dictating what should be done and what shouldn’t be done. I became very aware that there was a lot of interest in what we had been doing, and our other workloads meant that we needed someone to take over and expand it. The only person we could think of was who went to this one and who knew enough about this was Lisa, one of the young women who became involved herself in December 1990 and who had also been one of the cast members of Ring of Roses. She was currently doing her A Levels, so we asked her if she would consider taking a year out before going on to do her H.E. studies, and she agreed. The main part of her job will be supporting the sessional workers.

The idea of the sessional workers project is to encourage and support people who have been trained in school to carry on with the good work afterwards. The group who had gone on to college have become quite instrumental in setting up open days or safer-sex focus days and getting involved in the health side of things through the student unions. They also worked for us on World AIDS Day, approaching their contemporaries in the streets. They have also been involved in a couple of professional seminars, enabling them to become the trainers at other events run in schools where there is an interest in peer education. Lisa will become their first point of contact, assessing what further training needs they will require and so on.
Don’t allow schools to use the weekend as some sort of carrot or stick.

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To sum up...

The philosophy that we have used from the beginning is that the outcome of a peer education programme cannot be determined in advance. Formal education is one part of the process but there may be all sorts of other alternative media that need to be explored.

With respect to recruitment, don’t allow schools to decide who is going to go on the weekend. Don’t allow them to use the weekend as some sort of carrot or stick — get a contract with the young people themselves, so that they are the ones who feel committed.

Alternative messages can easily be overlooked by the tutor. Therefore we tried to provide a large number of varieties of ways of working in order to find something that wouldspark off the imagination of the participants.

In terms of the peer-leaders’ own measure of success or failure, the most important factor was their sponsor in the school. From my own point of view, the weekend would have had some value even if all they did was speak to ten other people about it. But clearly, from their viewpoint, if they went back with ideas and all sorts of schemes and they fell at the first hurdle because the sponsor was not supporting them, it was very demoralising.

Lisa is now in post. She is recruiting for three further training weekends — for deaf pupils, years 10/11 and year 12 + E.D. She will be using the peer sessional workers, and also organising all those direct-contact events with young adults.

My own involvement this year will have to take a back seat, although I have one more session with the HEA project to train HIV/AIDS trainers, run by Stephen Cliff and David Steers at Canterbury, and I shall be assisting the Big Trust in promoting peer-led methods in HIV education.

Reference


A grass-roots, non-directed movement makes its mark

Théodore H. MacDonald

Seeking a non-smoking lifestyle in an East London youth club

Starting in September 1989 the author (a college lecturer in human physiology at the time) joined the voluntary staff of the Plaistow Youth Club of Newham, an East London borough.

From time to time the young people — almost exclusively male but not by requirement — were given the opportunity to discuss such health issues as ‘safer’ sex and drug abuse. At such gatherings in mid-1990, the author was regaled by a group of eight or nine boys with tales of the difficulties they had caused a recent speaker at their school who had come to teach them about the dangers of smoking.

To my query: ‘Why did you send him up? Didn’t you believe him?’ the general reply was along the lines that they had become blasé about seeing such things as photographs of tobacco-blackened lungs excised from victims of cancer, emphysema, etc.

This reaction interested me, especially the comment that such talks tended to evoke exaggerated bravado from the boys and calculated innuendo about death and dying, designed to upset the speaker but tending also to lead some boys to experiment more carelessly than they otherwise might have done. I mentioned to them that a number of research studies had suggested that their reaction was not unusual and that it had been established that the best way to bring about a change in people’s behaviour was to demonstrate positive reasons for doing a particular thing rather than to provide commentary on the negative effects of not doing so. Not unnaturally they did not seem particularly fascinated by the intricacies of behaviourism, so I left the topic at that point. However, some weeks later two of the older lads (both eighteen years of age and both smokers) suggested to me that it might be a good idea to see if “kids who don’t smoke get more out of life than we do”. It must be emphasised that this idea came from them, not from me.

A self-generated initiative

It was a splendid idea and I immediately set about thinking about how best to set it up so as to have maximum empirical impact and validity. At the same time, I did not want to take over from the boys what could become essentially a self-generated health promotion initiative. As comments which I made about sampling, statistical problems and the like seemed greatly to decrease the initial enthusiasm for the project, I encouraged the boys to see what they could do to set the thing in motion, indicating that I would co-operate as required.

Again a long interval of time elapsed before the issue was raised, by which time one of the original instigators had left the club. In October 1990 his colleague told me that he knew of four boys in the club who had decided to give up smoking as it was interfering with their football performance. Indeed, one of these four claimed that cigarettes “gave him asthma” and that he had not had it prior to smoking. The four concerned had given up (successfully) during the previous year and — three of them in particular — had attracted considerable attention to themselves in the club by ostentatiously complaining about smoking by both staff and fellow club members in the billiards room and in various other parts of the club premises.