Drug education linked to drug use

We recently came across some official research that showed a link between lower drug use and usefulness of drug education. We thought we might be able to show a similar association in our own data, and indeed, we can.

Our new annual report, ‘Young People in 2002’ is now available (details are available on the website; www.sheu.org.uk/pubs/index.htm), and we report here on some further analysis of the most recent data in relation to drug education and drug use.

We ask a question in our secondary questionnaire, about pupil’s recall and assessment of school lessons about a variety of PSHE topics. When looking among the 13,809 Year 10 pupils who answered this question in 2002, we find 32% said they cannot remember any lessons about drug education (including tobacco and alcohol), while 10% thought that they were not at all useful, 20% thought their lessons were of some use, 21% quite useful and 15% very useful. There were marked differences in the drug experience of the pupils depending on how they rated their drug education. If they said they could not remember any drug education, 32% said they had ever taken a drug [other than medications, alcohol and tobacco]. Figures for the not at all useful group was 40%, 27% some use, 23% quite useful and 23% very useful. So, the more useful that they thought their drug education was, the less likely it was that pupils had ever tried drugs.

We can find this association in males and females separately, and in a data set from Hull and East Riding where a much smaller questionnaire was used that focussed only on drugs. So, this association can readily be replicated.

It is tempting to interpret this finding as meaning that good drug education inhibits or retards experimentation with drugs. However, it might also be the case that those young people who are most likely to experiment with drugs are those least likely to respond well to drug education of any quality. Perhaps the best reaction to these data is to ask ourselves how we can offer drug education that will be useful to all young people, whatever their background or likely future habits.