

Learning Through Living

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This report is dedicated to Bobby

Background

The *Learning Through Living* project looks at three issues in terms of drug education:

- ▶ Drug user's **lifestyle**
- ▶ **Cultural** backgrounds of young people
- ▶ **Interactive** means

Education is about the passing of knowledge. So many young people have fallen, suffered and died because of drugs. If we cannot learn from their life experiences, their legacy will fade. This is the basis of *Learning Through Living*.

Drugs are bad

The prevalence of drug use in today's society among young people is undoubtedly escalating. The plethora of familial, economic, health, legal and general social problems stemming from drug addiction need not be explained. Having grown up to witness the first hand self-destruction of so many close people to me, via addiction, led me to focus on drug education. As a young person, living in an era of rapid development and change, my immediate experiences have been a desensitising agent for me and also my generation. The media, entertainment and even television personalities have trivialised the topic of drugs. The talk of drugs and drug addiction, particularly among celebrities, has become so common, that it seems it is no longer something that warrants grave concern or focus. The line "drugs are bad" used to be used in an educational and solemn context. Now, it is a cue for audiences to laugh hysterically, when the same line is spoken in the hit show *South Park*, by Mr. Garrison: "Drugs are baad, mmmkay"

When young people are growing up in a society that has almost accepted the use of drugs, the need to be educated appropriately is paramount. I believe that though current drug education may aim to inhibit later drug use, it does not illustrate successfully, insight into a drug user's lifestyle. It is this focus on an addict's lifestyle that needs to be communicated, along with healthy and informed decision making. Many purport that providing textbook facts about drugs and their effects establishes ground for an informed decision. I believe that unless one successfully communicates not only the physical but also lifestyle repercussions of drug use and addiction, then an informed decision cannot be legitimised. Education can be the re-sensitising agent.

Coming from a Vietnamese background, I belong to a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) community. As a child of refugee parents, I can be categorised as the second generation. These young people face many issues that revolve around culture, identity, language, communication and family. There is no doubt that cultural conflict exists among many ethnic families. Does drug education need to be tailored to young people of CALD backgrounds and is there a need for policy makers to take account of cultural issues when drafting drug education? Should drug education involve the entire CALD community and not just students?

One of the best ways that young people learn is through action and interaction. With differing endowments, each school has varying access to resources in terms of interactive approaches to drug education. The initial idea was the establishment of an interactive drug and lifestyle resource centre. However in light of limited technological and financial capital, its feasibility was dim. The need to have a common high standard of drug education is still there. Having gone to three different high schools, I found there was a lack of consistency in terms of approach. Wealthier schools could afford guest speakers who made a substantial impact whereas other schools adhered to photocopies of information. Students everywhere should be able to get access to similar effective tools of drug education.

Consultations

Consultations were conducted with young people ranging from 13 to 22 years old.

- ▶ The project was executed by a survey given to students about their thoughts on current drug education and the feasibility of a drug education website. This was formally done in association with Canley Vale High School in southwest Sydney. A number of issues were put forward and then discussed. Over 95% of the participants were from a CALD background.
- ▶ Focus groups were also held with young people from a youth drop in centre, Home Bass Youth Café and informally among other young people, ex-heroin addicts and teachers. The young people, all of whom were from CALD backgrounds, discussed the issues of effective drug education, reasons for drug use and culturally specific needs. They were also shown a video titled Through A Blue Lens developed in Canada, which explicitly showed the lifestyle of an addict.
- ▶ 100 postcards were designed, printed and distributed to a range of young people who briefly answered two questions on the back. This was seen to be an efficient means of canvassing thought about drug education. These cards went to students from Sefton High School, Bankstown Grammar High School, Westfields Sports High School, Holy Spirit College, Bankstown Girls and Canley Vale High School.
- ▶ A pilot drug education forum was held in the Vietnamese Community for parents and concerned people with over 120 attendees. Promotion was done via three radio stations and two newspapers. This was a collaborative effort from a number of people particularly from the

Vietnamese Community with the NSW Premiers Department assisting with funding. The forum had 4 presentations and 6 speakers and explored effects of drugs, why young people use drugs, what to do and culturally specific issues in the community in regards to young people and drugs. I was one of the speakers and also remained on the panel for the forum, which was extremely dynamic, interactive and informative.

Research

I was fortunate enough to attend the Third International Conference on Drugs and Young People, where my research mainly took place. Many models, projects and findings were presented during the three days and it allowed me to efficiently explore and further research the information I required. Research from the conference and elsewhere included:

- ▶ The Gatehouse Project by the Centre for Adolescent Health
- ▶ Information from the Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre
- ▶ The School Drug Education Information Project by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, specifically the REDI (Resilience Education and Drug Education Information) project
- ▶ The 'Salam' Project : An Illicit Drugs Prevention Project for Arabic Speaking Families
- ▶ The effect of Life Education centres in Hong Kong
- ▶ A report by the Ted Noffs Foundation into drug and alcohol counseling services in government schools
- ▶ NSW Department of Education and Training End of Year Celebration Kit
- ▶ The Peer Led Drug Education project managed by Darebin Community Health
- ▶ A peer education program operated by the Adolescent Forensic Health Service in Victoria that incorporated clients in juvenile justice and custodial centres.
- ▶ The NSW Department of Education Crossroads program
- ▶ www.somazone.com.au
- ▶ www.druginfo.nsw.gov.au
- ▶ moodgym.anu.edu.au

Findings

Key finding 1: Drug education is not enjoyable

Of the participants surveyed, only 30% found drug education to be pretty good in terms of the level of enjoyment that it creates. 70% said that it could be better. It was ascertained that one of the ways in which young people learn is if they enjoy what they are learning. Most often, the many things they remember are associated with something that was interesting and fun.

Key Finding 2: Current drug education is not likely to stop young people from taking drugs in the future.

60% of those surveyed said that it was possible that current drug education would hinder later drug use but that in general the consensus was that it really would not. 27% believed that if approached in the right way, drug education would definitely stop a young person from making a later decision to take drugs; 60% said that it was probable. In discussing the reasons behind these views, many said for some people, despite strenuous efforts to educate them, they will take drugs anyway. Despite this, it was agreed that this represents possibly a small fraction of all young people and that drug education really is vital. This is indicated by the fact that an overwhelming majority of the students below 16 years of age learnt about drugs mostly from school. However, they further indicated that in their age group, the media and other people's experiences are also sources of their drug education.

"From year 7 to year 12, I don't remember much about drug education. I experimented with drugs with my friends"

~ Male 17 years old

Key finding 3: Drug education is not consistent across schools

This is indicated in the wide variety of responses from students from different schools, in regard to drug education. Some state that they believe it is good the way it is (only 10%). Others said that they it is not enough and that they have not learned much about drugs.

"There is practically no education about drugs in the school and I think this is the reason why many kids are doing drugs. These lessons should start in year 7 term 2 and a term each year after that"

~ Year 8

"I think school doesn't teach us enough about drugs they only talk about cigarettes."

~ Year 8

Students from different schools have had different experiences in terms of drug education with some students from the same year, having the chance to speak to ex-addicts and others not having any drug education.

Key finding 4: Drug education does not reflect reality

"I believe that drug education should be more direct. Kids should be confronted with the reality of the negative effects and complications of illegal drug use. I know how kids think and understand and most of them haven't got the slightest clue of how negative illegal drugs really are"

~ Year 10 male

This is possibly one of the most significant findings of *Learning Through Living*. Despite learning about drugs in school, there was a general consensus among participants, that drug education was quite silly in that it did not represent the reality of users' lifestyles. The focus group at Home Bass Youth Café was extremely insightful. Most of the participants were no longer in school and could be termed by youth workers as "at risk". Their range of social and life

experiences as well as exposure to drugs and their consequences was vast. Most had taken licit drugs before and either associate or have associated with users of illicit drugs. It was these participants that specifically indicated the lack of and need for reality in drug education.

I showed them only six minutes of a video titled Through a Blue Lens developed by the National Film Board of Canada. This video documented a number of police going to the most devastating areas of Vancouver and filming the real lifestyles of drug addicts and tracked their daily experiences. This was then used in Canadian schools to educate students.

Upon viewing this, the participants' attitudes changed dramatically. They agreed that it was explicitly real and showed issues that were usually just limited to the understanding of addicts. They were all taken back and overwhelmed.

"Even I would think twice about taking drugs and I've used before" ~ Male 17

"This needs to be shown in schools. Why don't they have it? The schools are too simple."

~ Male 16

"If my friends watched this, I swear it would prevent them from taking drugs."

~Male 18

Even two hours after the forum finished, the images still stayed with the participants and they wanted to discuss drugs and their effects further. Those that witnessed the video were re-sensitised and believed that this is how drug education should be approached.

In discussing whether such an approach would spur some young people to take drugs because of the extreme danger being shown, they denied it was an issue. They stated that when young people take drugs to be tough, even though they know it is bad, most don't realise how bad and about the specific details of a users' lifestyle. They further indicated that for those that would take drugs anyway, school education would probably ineffective. However it is the vast majority that is borderline cases and this is where a reality approach will work.

Key finding 5: The media can be a dangerous weapon

Speaking to those young people who have used drugs before, they identify that image is a huge issue. They pinpoint that the need to act and look tough is further augmented through modeling people like 2 PAC (An African American hip hop artist who was entrenched in gang culture and was violently killed) and listening to his songs which explicitly describe drug using and the culture of gang violence. Young people only perceive the glory of being tough but do not see the painful lifestyle behind addiction. Once they do, then it is too late. Drug education therefore needs to demystify this glory and the need to look tough by making it "real".

Key finding 6: Interactive education is effective

"..not by textbooks or worksheets 'cos they are boring"

~ Female 15

In identifying the best ways that young people learn, students put forward ideas such as group work, extensive use of video material, role-plays, excursions, active exercises and interaction with real addicts or ex-addicts. It was not surprising the number of young people that really believed in the efficacy of a talk by an ex-addict. This view was purported by a majority of junior, middle and senior high school students as well as those young people who were at risk.

The idea of an interactive drug education website created and designed for young people was tested. The website would be incorporated into the drug education course at school. 77% of the students surveyed said that they would definitely want such a website to be incorporated into the course.

Though there exists web sites delivering drug information, most are not appealing to young nor are they well marketed. 100% had never visited the National School Drug Education website or a number of others. This is mainly because they had not heard of their existence. Only 11% had ever visited any drug and alcohol website. This was because they wanted to do an online test on addiction to cigarettes or they were told by the school to do a search. However, they concluded that the sites were very boring and did not maintain interest for too long.

Key finding 7: Cultural conflict within CALD families does exist and there is a need for drug education to involve the whole CALD community.

The dynamics of family is vital to the development of the individual. At many times, without positive family dynamic, understanding and support, the path to drug addiction is more viable.

Many CALD families have extreme difficulties in rearing their children in a new environment. They feel excluded from mainstream Australia and so are confined to interaction with their own community. They live in the dark in terms of many issues and continue to believe myths about drugs, for example that only uneducated young people take drugs. CALD communities need to be brought out from the dark so that the dynamics of their families are apt to their new society.

Over 95% of those surveyed were from a CALD background. The children of migrants or refugees, having grown up in Australia, identify that within their families, there exists cultural differences and maybe conflict. Many see themselves as more “Australian” with Western values that seem to be too liberal according to the parents. Most of the time, the parents are concretely traditional with traditional values; often clashing with the children’s wants and desires. Participants agreed that many CALD parents are not involved in the mainstream Australian community, due to language barriers and the struggle just to make a living in a different country. This has led them to not understand what is “out there” so there exists a fear that everything is negative for their children, simply because they do not know.

In terms of drug education, many CALD parents do not know the facts. In canvassing the idea of a drug education forum for Vietnamese parents, the

desire to have one was apparent. During the forum, speakers were psychologists, doctors, youth workers, people from the Department of Education, health workers, ex addicts and young people. The response was overwhelming with over 120 attending. The feedback from the evaluation forms and informal discussion, was extremely positive with most attendees stating that they had learnt so much about drugs, services available, how to react if their child was on drugs and methods of parenting the children of migrants in Australia. The forum was broadcast on Vietnamese radio stations and SBS to over 30 countries across the world.

Such a seminar helps to dispel myths associated with drugs and allows the CALD community to have an idea about what their children are exposed to and the level of control that they have or do not have over their children's decision to take drugs. The range of issues that came from the floor stemmed from policy to psychology of young people to changing the methods of parenting.

There is a need for CALD communities to be involved in drug education. Children of CALD families already face many surplus difficulties growing up, including language barriers in their families and differences in cultural values. By delivering information to CALD communities about drugs and the plethora of issues surrounding drugs, CALD families may foster a greater level of understanding about Australian society and the dynamics of young people. In addition, CALD parents in light of the acquired knowledge, they are able, to apply it in their families with their children.

Suggested Strategies

- ▶ The visits by ex-addicts to schools, is an old strategy, yet many schools do not incorporate this into their agenda. I suggest developing a compulsory state education program, which involves staff outside of school, such as ex-addicts and youth workers. Such a program would travel to each school so children from all schools have the same basic access to what was identified by them to be essential and effective.
 - If possible these ex-addicts would be young because young people learn best from other young people. Their experiences seem closer and more relevant to their lives.
- ▶ The video, *Through a Blue Lens*, was based on the Police Department working on the streets to document the lives of real addicts. Those that watched it were ostensibly changed in terms of their views to drug lifestyle. A similar project should be piloted between NSW Police and the Department of Education.
- ▶ *Through a Blue Lens* should be reviewed by the Commonwealth Department of Education Training and Science as an excellent drug education resource for senior high school students.
- ▶ Drug education can be made more interactive. Although a web site for young people made by young people does exist (www.somazone.com.au developed by the Australian Drug Foundation) in terms of drug education, those that were asked to go on it said that it was "lame". However, initially 100% of those surveyed did not know of its existence.

- I suggest that a drug education and healthy lifestyle site be developed, which is incorporated into drug education at school. There would be online assignments to do, quizzes and games. It would be a mechanism of research as well as a social website. Teachers can introduce the students to the site by having a compulsory assignment based on the information on the site. Then students would be aware of it.
- ▶ It would be linked to all schools and students can communicate with each other and share stories. Each school can enter online competitions, for example a race to do online quizzes about drugs and healthy choices, with the quickest and most correct results scoring points for your school. Each school will be able to view their progress online. This will entice students to re-visit the site.
 - Students suggested the site be really cool and fun:
 - Have interactive pictures, games, surveys and quizzes
 - Interviews with celebrities maybe about drug and healthy choices
 - Music and band information
 - Competitions like designing a t-shirt promoting the website, writing competitions about healthy lifestyles and inter-school competitions and making the award ceremonies very prestigious but “cool”
 - Have giveaways
 - Online group work and collaborations with students from other schools, overseen by teachers from each school
 - Have chat sessions in class with students from different schools
 - Downloadable screen savers of the website
 - Writing of music or band competitions that are anti-drugs
 - Chats with ex-drug addicts and opportunities for the class to ask him/her questions online
 - Addicts’ stories and their pictures
 - Weekly gossip section and tips appealing to teenagers such as fashion. These items help to maintain the interest of the site outside of school
 - The trouble with existing sites is the content and lack of promotion. The significant aspect of this site is its incorporation into drug education in middle school and the idea of a network of all schools and students in each state, discussing and interacting with each other to learn about healthy choices and drugs.
- ▶ Drug information centres can be created and targeted at young people to make it interesting and approachable. This can easily be a section of a youth drop in centre, with interactive touch screens and internet access.
- ▶ CALD communities need to have drug information forums, tackling issues such as physical and mental aspects, psychology of drug using in young people etc. The government should encourage each community to hold at least one seminar per year and this should be written into their budgets. The existence of a government department such as DAMEC should be a

point of referral. The communities must be able to construct and develop forums themselves so that ownership belongs to them and not government departments. However, following these forums, reports should be forwarded to a government department for review and suggestions.

- Funding should be given each year to CALD communities to run these forums. Request for additional funding should be an option also, accompanied by a proposal and detailed budget.
- Marketing is extremely important to CALD communities with ethnic radio and newspapers. A large proportion of funding should be directed here.

Conclusion

It is always an issue of funding. During the past few months, I have tried to get insight into effective ways to improve drug education. Having been exposed already to the lives of users growing up and seeing so many loved people close to me, become trapped and lost, I share the burning desire to stop other young people from making the same choice.

I befriended a few ex-addicts during the course of this project and their stories touched me deeply. One particular young man returned to heroin after two years of being clean and holding down a steady job. Once you enter the circle, it is so hard to get out forever. Below is an email my friend sent me and he has graciously allowed me to attach it:

"I'll keep it short 'n' sweet. Since you're on the Roundtable, see what you can do about this . . . I'd really like to see more government funding go into services such as Lifeline, the Domestic Violence Hotline and the Rape Crisis Centre. I wasn't well the other night and I rang Lifeline – it was engaged. Apparently Lifeline is nowhere near as bad as the other two services. Often, I think it takes people a lot of effort to muster up the courage to reach out for help. Hearing a recorded telephone message is only going to reinforce the perceived helplessness and hopelessness of the situation. Sydney (and in particular the Sutherland Shire) has one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world."

I have learnt a lot during this project and concluded many things, hopefully our governors will hear the youthful echoes of change.

For further information on *Learning Through Living*, contact Thao Nguyen

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- ▶ Student Representative Council of Canley Vale High School
- ▶ Home Bass Youth Café Bankstown
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- ▶ Anne Pham: Holy Spirit College
- ▶ Leigh Trinh: Victorian Juvenile Justice
- ▶ Bankstown Sports Club
- ▶ Centre for Youth Drug Studies

Appendix 1: Questions for Focus Groups

- ▶ Does current drug education in your school really help you to understand what taking drugs involve
- ▶ In light of what you have learned, will it stop you from taking drugs if you had the chance to?
- ▶ Do you think drug education should be tailored to young people from different groups like from non-English speaking backgrounds?
- ▶ Do you remember much about the information that you learnt about drugs?
- ▶ Is drug education boring?
- ▶ From the drug education at your school, do you know what a drug addict's lifestyle involves?

Appendix 2: Postcards – “In Your Hands”



IN YOUR HANDS

LEARNING THROUGH LIVING: A NATIONAL YOUTH ROUNDTABLE PROJECT
BY THAO NGUYEN

WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE ABOUT DRUG EDUCATION IF IT WERE IN YOUR HANDS

 National Youth Roundtable 2002 LEARNING THROUGH LIVING: A NATIONAL YOUTH ROUNDTABLE PROJECT

WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE ABOUT DRUG EDUCATION IF IT WERE IN YOUR HANDS

Appendix 3: Questionnaire

Age : _____
Year: _____
Gender: _____
School: _____
Name: (optional) _____
Cultural background: _____

1. Do you enjoy drug education?

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Not at all Could be better No opinion It's pretty good For sure!

2. Do you think drug education as it is would stop young people from taking drugs?

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
No way Possibly Not sure Probably Yes, for sure

3. Do you believe drug education, if it were approached correctly, could stop young people taking illicit (e.g. heroin and cocaine) drugs?

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
No way Possibly Not sure Probably Yes, for sure

4. Can you say that you have learnt about drugs mostly from school?

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
No way Possibly Not sure Probably Yes, for sure

5. If not, what are the main ways in which young people in your age group learn about drugs?

6. What do you remember most about drug education so far?

7. In your opinion, what is the best way in which young people learn? E.g. in group work, excursions, active exercises, interaction etc

8. Have you ever visited any of the below web sites:
<http://moodgym.anu.edu.au> <http://www.druginfo.nsw.gov.au>
or the National School Drug Education Web Site for NSW?

Yes No Not sure

9. Have you ever visited a website that provided information about drugs or alcohol?

Yes No

Why/Why not?

10. Do you think an online interactive website that teaches drug education and healthy choices should be incorporated into the drug education course?
This website will be targeted at young people and can run competitions with other schools, have online tests, entertainment etc.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
No way Possibly Not sure Probably Yes, for sure

11. If you were to design such a website that promoted drug education and healthy lifestyles aimed at your age group, what things would you include to make it appealing and popular?

12. How effective do you think this site would be to young people of your age group?

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Not at all Not sure Very effective