

Engaging guest speakers to deliver drug education sessions

Although common practice in many Australian schools, the decision to engage guest speakers to deliver drug education sessions to students should not be made lightly. Available research shows that student-teacher relationships are vital in all areas of school-based health education, including drug education, and have been proven to be effective in sustaining longer-term effects in targeting health behaviours. Guest speakers, no matter how knowledgeable and/or entertaining, do not necessarily have that all important relationship with the school or students.

If external speakers are used they should enhance and not replace the classroom teacher,

i.e., they should complement existing drug education programs and not be isolated 'one-off' presentations.

Using ex-drug users in drug education sessions is particularly problematic as this can glamorize high-risk behaviour, particularly amongst those students who are more likely to drink to excess or use illicit drugs.

Schools should ensure that any drug education session delivered by anyone apart from the classroom teacher reflects the evidence-based *Principles for School Drug Education*, as well as complementing the school's current drug education program.

Background

It is common practice in schools across Australia for teachers to engage guest speakers to deliver presentations on a wide range of topics. As schools are asked to educate students on a growing number of social issues (e.g., cyber safety, mental health issues, sexuality education and body image), it is not surprising that many school communities draw on local agencies and services, as well as specialist speakers to assist them.

Alcohol and other drugs (AOD) is a complex and controversial issue and effectively educating students in this area can be challenging, particularly within a crowded curriculum where few lessons are available and where some teachers may not feel overly confident nor well-resourced. Ward and Abrams (1973) stated that those providing drug education should be "someone the students like and trust, someone who knows and will present the facts accurately and who feels comfortable and free in open discussion". Unfortunately some teachers do not feel as though they have adequate knowledge in this area and do not necessarily feel at ease discussing such controversial topics with young people, often believing that the students know more about the issue than they do.

Even though it may be tempting to 'outsource' this topic to others, an extensive review of drug education research found that "Drug education in

schools should be conducted by the teacher of the health curriculum, with selected external drug education resources enhancing, not replacing, the teacher" (Ballard, Gillespie & Irwin, 1994). Evidence clearly shows that student-teacher relationships remain of paramount importance in all areas of school-based health education (Van Hout et al, 2012).

There has been very little research conducted on the effectiveness of guest speakers in the area of AOD education, however, available evidence suggests that if guest speakers are to be used it is important that they complement existing drug education programs. Research indicates that isolated 'one-off' presentations to students are likely to have little positive impact as guest speakers do not necessarily have the relationship with the school or students that have been proven to be effective in sustaining longer term effects in targeting health behaviours (Van Hout et al, 2012). For this reason, presentations outside the context of the school's current drug education program (e.g., bringing in the local police officer to speak to a year group in response to a specific drug use incident at school) are not recommended.

A best practice approach to drug education may well include using guest presenters to 'value add' and consolidate the drug education programs being offered by school-based staff. It is important to ensure, however, that whoever is used is able

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to address curricular goals and work interactively with the students, rather than present an isolated session unconnected with the curriculum. When engaging an external presenter to compliment the learning completed in lessons, sessions should be scaffolded and supported through the building of teacher capacity to enhance student understanding and knowledge.

The pros and cons of using guest speakers to deliver drug education sessions

Some of the perceived benefits that teachers often refer to when it comes to engaging guest speakers to deliver drug education sessions include the following:

- They have greater knowledge
- They are able to cover more controversial content than the classroom teacher
- They provide a different perspective and bring the 'real world' into the classroom
- They are 'novel' and have more credibility
- The students enjoy guest speakers
- Parents are more likely to engage with the school when an external 'expert' is used

At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that there are also 'negatives' that need to be considered when using guest speakers:

- There is usually a cost involved
- They do not have a relationship with the students and school
- There is little or no evidence that they are more effective than teachers in changing behaviour
- They are not teachers and have little or no knowledge of the curriculum in this area
- There is often no evaluation conducted, i.e., what messages did the students take away from the session? Nor is their ongoing review of their effectiveness.

Teachers should be particularly wary of engaging guest speakers simply because students 'enjoy' these sessions. It is vital that teachers follow-up any sessions delivered by external speakers to find out what messages the students took away from the experience and to ensure that these complement the ones delivered in existing drug education programs.

It is also important to remember that drug information provision is not drug education. Although guest speakers may be perceived as 'experts' by students and may have greater knowledge in some areas than the classroom teacher, this does not necessarily make them more effective drug educators.

What about getting ex-drug users to speak about their experience?

Although many people believe that having ex-drug users present to students and talk about their personal experiences could potentially prevent future drug use amongst those attending the session, the available evidence suggests otherwise. 'Scare tactics' such as this are based on the assumption that if we show students how risky something is then that will deter them from taking part in that behaviour in the future. In fact, Cahill (2003) reported that inviting ex-drug users to speak to students may actually have the opposite effect, making "certain behaviours more attractive or compelling, especially to those with something to prove, those with an adventurous streak, or to those who are driven to cause themselves harm". In addition, an ex-user's testimonial can inadvertently send the message – "I took all those risks, but look – I survived, and now I warrant special attention" or unwittingly imply that their own drug use represents a 'safe limit' that can be copied.

How do you ensure that a guest speaker is used as effectively as possible?

If a decision is made to use a guest speaker as part of a drug education program, every effort should be made to ensure that they are used as effectively as possible. Although discussing the area of criminal justice and college students, Payne et al's (2003) series of different stages that need to be considered when using guest speakers are still appropriate and are as follows:

- preparing the guest speaker
- preparing the class
- the presentation itself
- showing appreciation to the guest speaker
- tying the guest speaker's ideas into course material

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As well as complementing the school's current drug education program, it is also important that the session reflects the evidence-based *Principles for School Drug Education*. To help assess whether that is the case, the following checklist has been adapted from the NIDE publication, *Drug Education: Do it together: School and agency interaction*.

Checklist for engaging guest speakers

Have the following questions been considered?

- What is the purpose of the presentation?
- What will have occurred in the drug education (or insert topic) program prior to the session?
- Have the learning, as well as syllabus outcomes of the proposed session been clearly outlined?
- Because the teacher is responsible/accountable for the teaching/learning of the students, can the use of a presenter be justified?
- What is the presenter's prior experience with presenting sessions to school-aged children?
- Will the presenter be briefed on the drug education program into which this presentation fits?
- Will the presenter be briefed on the school's values and approach to drug education, as well as relevant policies and procedures around such issues as confidentiality and disclosure?
- How will parents be informed of the presentation?
- Is there an information session available for parents?
- Will the presentation be part of an ongoing drug education program?
- Are the materials and information appropriate to the developmental level of the student?
- Has the material being presented been previewed by school staff before being used with students?
- Does the material presented reflect the philosophy of the school?

- What follow-up will be done with the students and by whom?
- How will the presentation be evaluated and by whom?
- Will school staff be available to be present during the session?

References

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