
Title	The role and function of the teacher with special reference to drug abuse
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The Role and Function of the Teacher with special reference to Drug Abuse

Not so very long ago, I had the privilege of acting as moderator at a students' forum-over-the air. Our discussion centred on the problems of drug abuse. There were three points which our young friends made which I feel are particularly relevant to our workshop theme. They asked us as adults to appreciate root causes and not look merely at symptom of deviant adolescent behaviour of which drug abuse is one of many – gangsterism, truancy, petty thievery, and suicide as an extreme case.

They also suggested that educational factors such as poor teaching and “cram” methods played a part in fostering the wrong attitudes to school. They wondered if proper teacher counsellors could not be appointed to help pupils in school towards being better motivated and to guide and counsel them when they needed advice. One mentioned that as an adolescent he had moments of intense loneliness during which some human understanding about his problems would have been much appreciated.

Finally, they were certain that those like themselves who had experienced problems and come through unscathed, as it were, could get together to devise new status symbols which could draw their peers away from the ones so commonly and indiscriminately accepted by young people. They felt that status symbols were a necessary part of youth culture.

Let me pause for a moment to expand on these suggestions as they provide a suitable backdrop to the understanding of the role and function of the teacher.

First, there are the circumstances which are likely to foster deviant behaviour. These are generally associated with socio-economic factors or with social changes. In the rapidly industrialising, modernising society, the pattern of life in the family has changed. It is usual now for both parents to go to work. Also high-rise living in flats makes it impossible to maintain the extended family system. Thus children no longer receive from adults the consistent and firm discipline which is found in a well-ordered family system and which go with wise loving. The child has to turn elsewhere for the guidance he needs.

Life in densely populated housing estates draws together more children of more families in play during their hours away from school than was possible previously when the population was not so concentrated. Parents then could contain their children within the environment of their own homes or of a small friendly neighbourhood in which accepted mores were more or less homogenous. Now, through a much enlarged circle of playmates, children are presented with a wide spectrum of values and behaviours from which they are unable to select, because too often they are not acquainted with proper criteria for making choices. Hence they easily succumb to whatever influence is strongest.

To-day's adolescents have also a great deal more to cope with, confronted as they are with a bewildering kaleidoscope of man's inhumanity to one another – wars, riots, poverty, pollution, nuclear fallout, crime – all ably portrayed for them by the mass media. "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" seems quite unreal, for neither is there evidence of meekness among those who have nor is there proof that the earth they shall inherit will be worth the wait. It is no wonder that, unable to join in the survival struggle, many young people seek escape. In fact some users of drugs do so to avoid the pain of reality rather more than to seek pleasure through a drug-induced euphoric experience. One writer has pointed out that the great question in education to-day is how to teach "copability" to help young people confront life's problems with confidence. Another has argued that persistent use of an agent which serves to ward off reality during the critical period of adolescent development is likely to compromise severely the future ability of the individual to make an adequate adjustment to a complex society.

It has been noted by a certain Dr. Philip⁽¹⁾ that family conflicts also play a part in cases where youngsters turn to drugs. "I haven't seen any kids getting into drugs who have not had family problems. Young people don't seem to run into trouble with drugs when they have been brought up by parents with firm reasonableness who are honest and who practise what they preach."

(1) Spencer S.M., "Marijuana: How dangerous is it? Readers Digest, Feb. 1970, p. 121.

There is also evidence to show that there are predisposing factors to delinquency proneness in certain unstable personalities which are characteristically immature and carry unresolved emotional problems.

While it may be true that poor social and familial conditions foster delinquent behaviour, young people have also been known to sniff glue or smoke pot on no stronger urge than sheer curiosity and a desire to experiment. Except in cases where a first smoke produces psychotic reactions, no harmful effects remain with a single try. However, the unscrupulous pedlar of dope, through skilful manipulation of peer influence seeks to ensure a continuous dependence on drugs. He does not only use "pushers": he skilfully glorifies the user of pot; he gives the "trip" a spiritual content which it does not possess and invests it with an aura of mystery so that the one who hasn't taken a trip is just not "in" with the group. The subtlety of drug culture can be detected through the organisation of so-called special lectures of "drugs" prophets and the collection of special songs for the "pot" people.

In the light of the evidence provided by what is happening daily about us, is it sufficient to leave the onus of dealing with an increasingly growing social menace in the hands of the Central Narcotics Bureau which can only deal with the symptoms of social deviance by eradicating them through deterrent or curative measures? Would it not be better that more people in different sectors of society collaborate in a concerted effort to prevent this social disease of drug addiction from taking root or spreading among the young? This, I believe is the purpose of this series of workshops. This is why so many of us – doctors, social workers, psychiatrists, administrators, lawkeepers and teachers – are together to discuss the many associated problems of drug abuse.

What then is the teacher's role and contribution? We can look at them from the two standpoints of the teacher's relationship with his pupil and with his community. To his pupil he often stands in the place of parent; is guide and counsellor as well as instructor. As the influence of the family diminishes so the role of the teacher as mentor is enhanced. However, he will not find it easy to draw confidence in what he says unless he is both acceptable to his pupils and skilled in communicating facts and feelings about important issues, such as drug abuse, in such a way as will persuade them that they would do well to think twice before precipitating themselves into acceptance of the wrong values.

Many teachers lose out with their pupils because they have bored them to tears with trivia in the classroom. Bad teaching, "cram" methods

cause alienation. The teacher who is a bore tells the pupil what he does not need or want to know: to be bored is to anticipate ahead of time the humdrum flow of meaningless chatter and to erect all one's defense mechanisms to shut it out from mind and body. Where there is nothing to attract, school is perceived as unnecessarily restrictive, and the feeling of delight in being able to beat the rules is inevitably encouraged. Disenchantment with school work can therefore be a factor in promoting truancy. Once this becomes a habit, the chances of regaining the truant's positive responses to school programmes and activities become very slight.

Where there is good teaching, living and learning happen together. Eyes light up; there are freshness and spontaneity; responsiveness takes creative forms; passion and commitment characterise the work output. It is important therefore that the teacher gives attention to the improvement of the classroom lesson and its associated activities. He must try his utmost to ensure that the needs of individual pupils are met and that they are helped, through a rich school environment, to develop their individual potential to optimum capacity. More than these, he must be sensitive and observant, continually concerned about the progress of his pupils. He may well ask himself questions when a promising pupil suddenly ceases to achieve or when another becomes disinterested in his work. The reasons may not be school-based necessarily, but he should look for them when he observes negative changes in behaviour or a sustained unresponsiveness to positive encouragement to cultivate socially acceptable mores and attitudes.

Plunging into talks on drug abuse alone will carry no weight. It would be like teaching a person how to travel to the moon by a mere book of rules and examples. However interesting these may be, they cannot produce the astronaut or the cosmonaut. Likewise, it is important to distinguish between telling and teaching. Our problem is essentially one of teaching – teaching why certain behaviours in general and drug abuse in particular should be avoided.

I quote from Scheffler:

"Learning is, however, not involved unless some general 'pattern of action' under repeatable circumstances is understood to be in question".⁽²⁾

"A teacher wants his pupil to acquire 'patterns of action' that will outlast the teaching-interval, that, in their stability, will render specific and continuous series of commands superfluous, even if conceivable."⁽³⁾

I would suggest that the 'patterns of action' are more particularly acquired through having been perceived. They will not form in the "do as I say but not do as I do" situation. In some way, the vaccine against undesirable values and norms must take and it would seem to me that this is only ensured where the teacher himself is not only well-informed but has thought through all the important and connected questions and answers. Whether it be drug abuse, cigarette smoking, disrespect of public property, or other undesirable habit-forming behaviours, the teacher may do well first to show interest in his pupils, learn to listen to his pupils and reflect over their problems. Then he will have points on which to discourse with them.

There are the common questions to which he may be required to give answers. I list a few in connection with drugs:

What's all the fuss about ganja and marijuana when people of some countries such as India and Turkey have smoked them for centuries without the scare stories promoted by so-called contemporary medical evidence on their harmful effects?

You've never taken a 'trip' yourself: so how do you know what you are talking about?

It's a sad and cruel world - a messy world. So what's so wrong in dropping out of it now and then?

Isn't addiction to drugs the same as addiction to anything – alcohol, opium, tea, T.V., etc. Why tell us to quit?

What one would advocate is a carefully-planned programme involving first, all teachers in a school in a more concerted effort to enter into the interests of their pupils. In respect of drug abuse there should not be a random selection of persons to attend talks. Information must be disseminated to every member of staff in school whether primary, secondary or tertiary to enable everyone to become more sensitive to the symptoms.

(2) Scheffler I., The Language of Education, Charles G. Thomas Pub., Illinois, U.S.A., p. 91.

(3) Ibid, p. 92.

For each school, the teacher can then be selected to look after aspects of the programmes more specifically. For example, someone needs to be responsible for the collection of materials on the subject, for assembling aids which may make the approach to it more illuminating and meaningfully vivid. I refer here specifically to films on the harmful effects of drugs – films to do with true episodes in the lives of young people. This teacher should also be the instructor on this subject and be the counsellor to whom pupil problem may be referred.

The other teachers should jointly engage upon a strategy and method of approach whereby issues such as drug abuse may remain topically alive and a continuous exposure of pupils to exhortation towards positive behaviours may be maintained. Means should also be sought to make activities in school so interesting that out-of-school peer culture and influence are diminished. There are many ways of engaging young people on creative projects. Where the self-image is low, tasks assigned should be commensurate with the capacity of the individual.

In countering the influence of the wrong peer group, it may be useful to heed the suggestion made by the young members of the forum mentioned above. It is possible to enlist the help of good leaders from among the pupil group for the organisation of activities with which status symbols can also be associated. "Living for health", for example, may be a slogan for one such group.

Pari passu, it should be pointed out that the moral issues about drug abuse are based in common with other similar problems of living on principles which affect all areas of the individual's life – the principle of tolerance, the agreed criteria of nationally and socially acceptable behaviour, the objectives which govern quality output, the principle of logical consequence in terms of human action, and so on – these cannot be isolated and brought to bear only on the drug issue. It is better to teach these in the context of living in general. Likewise, observing the pupil's needs does not necessarily limit the teacher to spotting the drug syndrome. There are other areas of growing and living which contribute to the health of the whole person.

Let me tune for a while to dwell on the teacher's role and function in community. I have made the point that this series of workshops reflects our society concern over a common menace. In the service of community, the teacher must maintain a proper relationship with the parents of the child, with the leaders of his community and with his co-workers.

In the case of many children in housing estates, the ethos of life as taught and imbibed at home differs considerably from that approved in school. Ideas about discipline and individual responsibility may vary quite significantly from those advocated by teachers. Here there is need for teachers to meet parents not merely on formal P.T.A. dates but on a more personal level. The person designated as counsellor may have to include among his responsibilities the counselling of the parent together with the child. Social workers may assist here by following up this effort into the home, but, in the first instance, the two parties most involved with the welfare of the child – the parent and the teacher – must learn to communicate with one another and to collaborate in a joint effort to help the child.

What of the parents who do not care? I would suggest that the care from other sources – teacher, community worker, social worker must become an even more important consideration to prevent the child from developing a sense of abandonment.

With respect to his co-workers in other sectors of the community, the teacher must now cultivate a closer relationship. He can no longer keep aloof. He must know to whom he may turn for help where his own resources are inadequate. The days of the teacher-in-the-classroom role are past. It may even be envisaged that group counselling sessions for youth will include sometimes not just one counsellor, the teacher, but multiple counsellors – social worker and psychologist – so that as a team they present a fuller rationale for healthful, zestful and meaningful living. One important outcome of counselling must be ensured – the ability on the part of clients to develop the proper skills in decision-making. There is need also for them to understand individual responsibility and restraint.

Conclusion:

It is obvious that though the role and responsibility of the teacher in the school has been discussed, the teacher cannot do it alone. In an increasingly complex society it is desirable for adults who have not forgotten the days of youth and vision to come together to promote the welfare of the youth of to-day so that they may be neither disillusioned or unillusioned; the latter, I feel, is a more dangerous state because it implies lack of any experience whatsoever in an engagement with the challenges of life.