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Preventing young people's involvement in drug dealing

The value of mutual learning in groups of professionals

There are now many groups involved in professional practice analysis ; they differ in their theoretical frameworks, methodologies, the object of their analyses and their aims. Since they involve several institutions and professions, some of them encourage participants to develop cross-cutting skills and knowledge and to cooperate in a common sphere of intervention. Those that have been established in order to combat young people's involvement in drug dealing clearly illustrate this latter dynamic.

horizontal cooperation
upskilling young people
experimentation
cross-cutting skills
and knowledge
work prevention

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Groups involved in reflection on their professional practice have proliferated and the fields in which they are active have diversified (social work and the medico-social sector, as well as social integration, careers advice and guidance, professional advice, education etc.). Some of them bring together workers from different institutions and occupational cultures faced with a specific, often complex problem (developing partnerships for inclusive education, management of the public space, reduction of health and social risks, etc.). There is an important issue at stake here, since these groups are likely, under certain circumstances, to advocate the development of cross-cutting skills and competences and horizontal cooperation, as is the case with those seeking to prevent young people from becoming involved in drug dealing.

Members of these groups include teachers and head teachers, youth workers specialising in prevention, careers advisers or psychologists working for a local young persons' employment information and advice service, workers at a drop-in centre for young people or in social services, local development officers, social centre directors or workers, cultural workers, social development officers, social mediators or tutors working for the Judicial Youth Protection Directorate. What all these professionals have in common is that they deal with young people involved in the

underground economy, and in particular drug dealing. For most of them, the emergence of such trafficking has a profoundly destabilising effect on their practices.

How can teachers and other educators instil a culture of hard work into pupils whose main role model is 'the dealer who makes easy money'? How can drug prevention workers obtain and retain the trust of young people who adopt the omertà of the drug dealer and maintain the code of silence, not simply refusing to speak but also concealing their feelings and disquiet? It takes nothing more than a piece of false information, a misunderstood action or a wrongly interpreted word for suspicion to take hold.

Finally, how can professionals, regardless of their area of operation and institutional affiliation, go and meet these young people when they may fall victim to the violence associated with drug dealing? How can professionals not put up their guards or become fascinated with such a shady world?

Some have resolved to reject any form of denial. However, a commitment of this sort cannot be taken lightly. Despite their training, experience, skills and ability to deal with situations characterised by complexity and uncertainty, such a

●●● commitment creates considerable anxiety and raises many questions about the meaning of their work and their mission in general, about the effectiveness of their actions or even the legitimacy of their position. How can they approach these young people without putting themselves on the wrong side of the law? How should they talk to them? How can they maintain links with them without supporting an illegal activity? How should they react to any revelations they may make about their criminal activities? These professionals are now asking for a way out of their isolation. They no longer wish to rely solely on their subjectivity to guide their practice and decision-making; rather they would like to be able to benefit from the thinking of other practitioners.

Creating spaces for the development of cross-cutting skills and knowledge

Their request has been heard in various places, notably in Marseille, Paris and the Seine-Saint-Denis district. In these areas, certain institutions, supported by Céreq, are establishing workshops on the prevention of young people's involvement in drug dealing, with the aim of constructing a shared ethical framework for intervention. All the participants in these workshops permit themselves to speak of what cannot ordinarily be discussed because of the guards they normally put up. They are aware, after all, that the other participants are experiencing difficulties similar to their own and, like them, have a strong desire to overcome them. They are also aware of everything they can discover and learn by entering into dialogue with them. They are able to investigate what young people's involvement in drug dealing signifies and inform the others of their professional responses. They are able to explain a difficult decision they had to take, sometimes on their own and in a critical situation, following a period of deliberation in which they attempted to reconcile various constraints and

contradictory demands. They can break the silence surrounding their work and its difficulties and start up a discussion about everything standing in the way of their desire to exert control, putting them in a no-win situation and sometimes causing them real distress. However, they can also show how they went about solving problems which, on the face of it, might appear insoluble. Thus as each participant takes it in turn to speak and their words, finding an echo, strike a chord with the others, meaning gradually emerges. Then gradually, as the other participants reflect critically on these words and apply them to their own experience, shared knowledge begins to emerge (see box below).

These workshops then become spaces in which existing skills can be sharpened, cross-cutting skills developed and new forms of rationality constructed. At the end of this process the professionals involved are able to draw on a more sophisticated interpretation of the social and subjective issues raised by these drug dealing networks in order to construct professional positions that are more helpful in their daily work, develop more effective horizontal cooperation and identify new avenues for experimentation.

More helpful professional positioning

Broadening the scope of individuals' understanding through the development of cross-cutting skills and knowledge gives them access to new means of action. Having become more knowledgeable about the economic dimension of drug dealing, legal and social work professionals are able to help young people deconstruct certain illusions, such as that of easy money, which dealers are constantly reinforcing through certain ostentatious practices, such as brandishing wads of banknotes while neglecting to say that most of the money has to be handed over to their 'boss'. In some cases, they can address these issues more directly with them. This applies to the Judicial Youth Protection Directorate, for example, where young people benefit from compulsory educational measures stipulated by the courts precisely because of their involvement in drug dealing. Calculating their hourly earnings as dealers with them and then comparing them with the risks incurred is one way of making them aware of the highly exploitative nature of the trade in which they were involved. Tutors are careful not to humiliate them and try not to be too brutal in destroying the illusions that nourish their self-esteem.

By constantly updating their knowledge of local issues as well as of individual and subjective concerns, these professionals are able to be more receptive and more likely to identify those elements of a young person's sometimes confused attitudes, gestures and words that may be signals and therefore merit attention and, in some cases, a response. They are also able to take account of some very concrete issues and, for example, avoid putting on education

Institutional context and methodology

A number of institutions decided in 2005 to start organising workshops that would bring together professionals engaged in preventing young people from becoming involved in drug dealing. Among these institutions, particular mention should be made of the AIDS, Drug Addiction and Prevention of Risky Behaviour Task Force and Crime Prevention Department in Marseille, the Association for the Development of Preventive Action in the département of Bouches du Rhône (Addap 13), the Drug Addition Prevention task force of the City of Paris, the Prevention of Risky Behaviour task force established by the departmental council of Seine-Saint-Denis, the departments of social cohesion in Paris and Seine-Saint-Denis, the French Forum for Urban Safety (FFSU) and the inter-ministerial task force Fight against Drugs and Drug Addiction (MILDT).

These workshops are run with support from Céreq as part of a package of measures specific to clinical sociology. Repeated group discussions with feedback are the favoured tool of these workshops. The groups are made up of professionals who have a problem in common and, above all, share a desire to tackle it. The repeated meetings encourage the building of trust between participants and create the conditions under which all participants feel free to speak. However, feedback is the cornerstone of these workshops. What is said is recorded, transcribed and fed back to the group between two meetings. Gradually, with the help of the group, it is thematised, put into perspective, developed, reworked and conceptualised, in a word transformed into knowledge.

or training sessions at times when drug dealing is taking place. Finally, they are better able to appreciate the importance of alternative passions, particularly those linked to urban culture, such as music, dance or even theatre, which offer means of re-appropriating personal histories and working through the distress and suffering which, in many cases, triggered their involvement in drug dealing.

With an enhanced understanding of the community-focused approach, in which questions are constantly being asked about what individuals are standing up for when they get together, practitioners do not necessarily decry all group behaviour and tailor their actions to the situation. They can help young people develop as individuals capable of choosing for themselves and resisting the pressure their group may put on them to adopt its values, norms and attitudes. However, they may also use these groups as levers to free young people from involvement in illegal activity. To this end, some professionals take advantage of pre-existing affinity networks in order to establish groups engaged in alternative projects which gradually attract young people involved in drug dealing. Others opt to put them in contact with other networks of young people.

By paying very particular attention to the timing of young people's drift into drug dealing, professionals are able to identify critical or sensitive moments at which they are more likely than at others to become involved in drug dealing. One such moment is starting secondary school, since younger pupils sometimes feel threatened by older ones and may be tempted to offer their services as lookouts. The same applies when a pupil drops out of school altogether, whether because they are excluded once and for all by a disciplinary committee or simply because they are not allocated a place at the beginning of the school year in September. The risk of drifting into drug dealing is high at these points, since the young people concerned are now members of the 'school of the street' whose codes, norms and values they can very quickly adopt. Aware that they are now caught up in a race against time, front-line professionals try to react quickly in order to get them back into the education system or find satisfactory solutions, whether in education or employment. These moments can be directly linked to particular age brackets. Thus 16-18 year olds who are no longer in education are hardly likely to benefit from any proposals requiring reintegration into the education/training system. The 'over 26s' are no longer part of the 'young clientele', either for the local young persons' employment information and advice services, for social centres or for drug prevention clubs.

Professionals can also focus their attention on the moments that might be favourable to withdrawal from drug dealing. This applies particularly to the period following release from prison. Young people generally find the strength to resist getting involved in drug dealing again, particularly when they have

felt abandoned during their detention and have had scarcely any help from the group to which they used to belong. However, they will not be able to resist for long if they find themselves without any money to live on and feel that they have suffered an almost unbearable loss of status. Here too, the professionals know that they must act within a short space of time if they are to bring about a change of course and lead the young people away from drug dealing.

However, these moments cannot always be foreseen and may arise suddenly in the course of a young person's life. This is why it is crucially important for professionals to be constantly on the lookout, to maintain a state of alertness in order to be able to seize the opportunities before they vanish.

More effective cooperation

The establishment of these workshops encourages the construction of local, community-based alliances and the development of horizontal cooperation between professionals. They make it easier to take advantage of complementary roles, functions, missions, occupational cultures and positions. All those involved are better able to identify their partners and sphere of intervention as well as their constraints and limitations. The workshops also make it easier to resolve conflicts caused by differences in occupational culture. The cooperation may involve local residents and parents. Approaches that draw on partnerships for remedial and inclusive education occupy an important position here, since they are likely to make education meaningful again for young people and prevent them getting involved in these drug dealing networks. They involve parents, school staff and the pupils themselves, as well as social workers, non-traditional educators and actors in the world of work.

These alliances may be established on the initiative of local residents, particularly when their aim is to prise young people from the grip of the drug dealing networks. The professionals support and extend these efforts while at the same time scrupulously avoiding encroaching on their autonomy. Such an approach does not diminish their importance but does radically change the nature of their intervention. The main aim of their involvement is to provide resources their partners in these alliances need in order to act. This decision transforms the action itself. Far from being conceived as the mere implementation of a previously formalised plan, it can take shape only through a process based on trial and error and experimentation.

New avenues for experimentation

Experimentation, by virtue of its programmatic and formalised nature (shared diagnosis, hypothesis and aim, expected results, evaluation and discussion) ●●●

●●● of the results obtained), is a procedure well suited to supporting the development of cross-cutting skills and knowledge and producing professional innovation. From the point of view of preventing young people from getting involved in drug dealing, there are two avenues that should be explored through experimentation: reappropriation of the risk reduction model and transfer of the skills acquired through dealing into the legitimate sphere.

Young people involved in drug dealing run risks and cause others to run risks as well, largely because of the illegal nature of their activity and the violence associated with drug dealing networks: they risk falling foul of the criminal justice system (questioning, prosecution, trial, incarceration), physical harm (physical injury or even death by murder) and damage to their mental health (culpability, fear, feeling of subjugation) as well as incurring risks of a social nature (dropping out of education, deterioration in family relationships, material damage, climate of insecurity, etc.). What might be necessary here is to adopt the risk reduction model, deployed hitherto mainly in the area of drug addiction, when approaching young drug dealers, on the basis that 'there is always something that can be done', even if, at any given moment, the young people concerned remain involved in drug dealing.

An ethical code of intervention of this kind is in fact consistent with a depiction, widespread among professionals, of a trajectory for young people that is divided into stages. From this point of view, professionals encourage young people not to spend their whole time drug dealing but to engage in another activity for at least some of their time. Their aim is to move drug dealing out of the institution and to persuade young people not to deal in the substances most damaging to health. They pass themselves off as outsiders in order to reduce the violence associated with drug dealing. They accept the drug dealing as a fact but seek to establish a consensus on a few broad humanitarian principles. Thus in some cases they are able to get an agreement that 'kids' should not be used as lookouts. Finally, they can reduce the risks incurred in getting out of drug dealing by helping young people who leave high-pressure environments not to collapse suddenly. To this end, they offer them

legal alternatives that give them adrenaline rushes and strong sensations, such as sporting activities for example.

However, in the course of their involvement in the underground economy, young people also acquire skills and competences, particularly in areas such as accounting, negotiation, sales and public relations. Those in the most advantageous positions sometimes manage to get out in time and to apply these skills to legal activities. It is not difficult to understand, therefore, why professionals see the provision of support for such transfers of skills as an innovative new direction for their work. They know it is not so much the skills as the need to deploy them in a different context that causes problems. Although the young people have sometimes acquired in the underground economy what is required in the legitimate world, they are very seldom acquainted with the codes of the formal economy and are not always minded to respect its rules and norms. The professionals also know that they have to intervene actively not only among the youngest of those at risk, who might interpret this 'validation of learning through experience as an encouragement to get involved in the underground economy, but also among employers, who may be reluctant to trust them.

How can such workshops be useful to those who have to - or will have to at some point in the future - face these problems in their areas of intervention on a daily basis? The knowledge created can be accumulated in the form of training modules; priority here should undoubtedly be given to front-line professionals (specialist prevention workers, youth leaders, mediators, social workers, etc.) and students at social work training institutions. Lessons can also be drawn from their methodology for the design of modes of learning and knowledge appropriation in both initial and continuing education and training. Finally, how can such workshops be promoted and how can the social and institutional conditions be created for their establishment in other areas in which the emergence of critical, multidimensional situations calls for new alliances between professionals as the only means of offering responses that match their complexity? These questions will have to be tackled in future research and interventions. ■

Further reading

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