

Grainne - 20 yrs Old

Good afternoon everybody. My name is Gráinne and today I want to highlight with you the importance of education within the National Drug Strategy, in the context of both schools and youth services.

BeLonG To understand the importance of intervention when a young person has a problem regarding drugs or alcohol that they wish to discuss. In order for these issues to be dealt with effectively, young people must know that they can confide in someone in a confidential, non-judgemental manner where issues are dealt with on their terms.

However for many secondary schools, they have a blunt policy of zero tolerance for drugs. Simply put, if a student is found to be using, selling, or in possession of illegal substances, the school's role is to immediately involve the Gardaí. Right from the start, a school is a space where drugs cannot be spoken about, and concerns cannot be addressed. A culture of silence and taboo is created immediately.

This stigma prevents any effective education from happening within the school setting.

Whatever little education is offered generally comes in the form of SPHE classes. From my own experience only a few years ago, the usual class programmes teach illegal drugs as a single group. No opiates, depressants, stimulants, hallucinogens. All illegal substances are grouped together, separate from alcohol and tobacco, which we've decided are "okay" to talk about in detail.

This division of substances comes down to the legality that has been decided by someone else's morals. This bias creates barriers to proper education right from the start.

Take, for example, that cannabis is talked about as being the gateway drug, when in fact the most common starting point for substance misuse is alcohol. In fact, Irish people as a whole regularly obtain alcohol for personal use and we happily accept this, whereas it is morally unacceptable for people to use any other substances for themselves.

Many Irish people, including the adults who are now our teachers, have used some form of illegal drugs in their lives, so why, in our schools are all drug users instead painted as "rule breakers"?

We know that there is an undeniable link between substance abuse, and the likes of mental illness, social exclusion and poverty. And yet these are never mentioned in school, and I want to ask why? Why are those suffering from addiction deemed to be nothing more than reckless criminals?

It all feeds in to the problematic moral approach to drugs education. The aim seems to be to paint drug users as bad people, to try and keep young people away from drugs and users. What we're left with is further isolation of addicts, and further stigma around the discussion of illegal drugs.

And believe it or not, this is a discussion that young students are capable of having. I can remember it, being only a few years out of secondary school myself. During those SPHE classes, the class nodded in silence, and not because they were in agreement, but because there is no opportunity for disagreement.

But as soon as an alternative point of view was put to them, they jumped in with questions and arguments, applying what they hear to their own lives. And it is through these real life conversations that progress is made.

It is utter ignorance to believe that a "just say no" approach is effective.

It is nonsense to say that drug education leads to automatic drug use. We've tried not teaching children about sex, and it still happened. We can try not teaching them about alcohol and watch as they still drink.

The best thing that we can do when it comes to education is give clear, honest information about various substances. We can never stop young people from experimenting with drugs.

But taking something for the first time is a lot more dangerous when a young person does not know the effects, the time it takes to feel those effects, the aftermath, warning signs that something is wrong, or possibly not even the name of what they are taking.

When schools have failed in their role to aid young people in favour of promoting fear and stigma, the role of youth services becomes crucial when it comes to education.

BeLonG To's approach to drugs and alcohol differs greatly from Irish schools. To me it seems as if, every time I speak with Ger, our drugs and alcohol youth worker, I learn something new, every single time.

But BeLonG To have a unique approach to education that I greatly admire; that young people and youth workers are on equal footing with one another, we learn together, and nobody claims to have all the answers. For me, this is what sets BeLonG To apart as an educational organisation, as I have no time to be told what to think. What I need is enough information to be able to ask the right questions.

With the current approach to drugs in Irish schools, there is no hope of an open and decent conversation. Students are passive listeners, and not empowered speakers. This needs to end, and we need exchange our culture of taboo for one of honesty, and factual, unbiased information.

I'm not aiming to promote drug use. In fact, I would sleep happily if there was not one more person using substances for any reason.

But I know from common sense that, be it out of curiosity, enjoyment, desperation, or any other reason, young people will find themselves using drugs, AND, I want to make this absolutely clear, there is nothing you nor I can ever do to stop that. The dream of a drug-free utopia is long dead.

All I want is that when those young people indulge their curiosities, the same way many of their parents, teachers and politicians did before them, they know exactly what it is that they are doing. That is all I want, honest, unbiased, accurate information.

I'll hand you over to Vivien now as they are going to speak more about the issue. I'm grateful to have this opportunity to speak today, thank you very much.

Vivien - 24 yrs old

Though many of us here today have different opinions on the nature of illicit substances, it is generally accepted that recreational drugs are disinhibiting. Drugs allow users to feel limitless... unbound and unafraid. A chemical tells a thousand words, so I'll try my best to be brief.

Opioid, such as heroine, are dopaminergic compounds, which reduce sensation, giving a user a sense of security, and gives a deep feeling of satisfaction.

MDMA causes the release of oxytocin, which is a hormone that causes feelings of belonging and intimacy.

Psychedelics, such as cannabis; have been used for decades by Rastafarians, as part of their Bible studies, just as a minority of Brazilian Christians, drink a beverage called Ayahuasca, which is made of DMT to reflect on how they live. These cultures prove that psychedelics help ordinary people find meaning in their lives.

What is it to desire; security, satisfaction, belonging, intimacy and meaning in one's life.

Are these criminal intentions?

No.

Each of these desires are inescapable parts of the human condition. So to assist recovery from drug addiction, we can give suffers safe places to live, work opportunities that empower them to attain satisfaction through success, outreach programs to help them reintegrate into society, counselling to help them reconnect with estranged family and partners, and options to return to education so they can know how meaningful and precious life can be

Kit – 19 yrs old

Hi everyone, my name is Kit, I'm here today to talk about the current drugs strategy and how it harms young people.

First of all, Even though these substances are illegal, they are not hard to find. Most of my friends have done illegal drugs at some point and many of my friends do them semi-regularly. Every young person knows at least a couple of people who are able to get them illegal substances. Personally, I don't use any illegal substances, but this hasn't stopped people from offering me Cannabis, LSD, Ecstasy and even Cocaine countless times. This is just the world we live in. Clearly, these substances are everywhere, whether they're legal, people are going to find ways to get them.

Under the current system, if people possess even a very small amount of an illegal substance, they are automatically liable to be arrested. If someone needs medical treatment for taking an illegal substance, or even just needs to talk about an experience they had with drugs, they may decide not to seek help, for fear of arrest. For many young people school is the only place they have to learn about illegal substances and the supports around them. However many schools don't bother teaching young people about the supports and treatments available to them. As a result, many people who need help for drugs-related problems are unaware that any resources exist, so they are forced to suffer in silence. On top of that, many youth groups and GP's are obligated to tell the young person's parents if they are under 18. So if someone is afraid of their parents finding out that they have taken an illegal substance, they only have more reason not to talk about it. In BeLonG To, young people can talk openly about any problems they may have with drugs in a safe environment and they are directed to whatever resources can help them best. If drugs were decriminalised, more youth groups and schools would feel safe talking about drugs related issues and young people would feel a lot safer asking about them.

We all know that drugs can cause harm, but it's never made clear exactly how much harm every drug causes. Most sources and reports on the effects of drugs are very biased. I'm 19 and I still have trouble discerning which sources are accurate and which ones are not, I'm not sure how we expect 12 or 14 year olds to discern what not to believe. Some young people may be able to ask their parents or their schools but again, many young people are too afraid. If drugs were decriminalised, young people would feel much more comfortable

asking about the effects of drug use. It will always be regular for young people to experiment with drugs but if they have the honest facts, they may be deterred from frequently using them. A report by the EMCDDA found that the Netherlands were among the lowest users of cannabis in Europe, 5.4% of adults in the Netherlands use cannabis as opposed to the European average 6.8%, so this just goes to show.

People are arrested for possession of drugs every day. If a young person is arrested for possession of drugs, this stays with them for the rest of their lives. Many of these people end up selling illegal substances or performing other illegal activity as they have a hard time being employed and this is the only option left open to them. There's also the massive stigma towards people who have a criminal record, this can cause people to become depressed and continue taking drugs, becoming addicts. It's a vicious cycle with no end.

If illegal substances are decriminalised then people will be able to talk honestly about drug misuse, people will be able to receive help for any problems caused by drug use. As it stands now, young people can have the rest of their lives ruined for using drugs. Young people are treated like criminals because they are never given the chance to learn, all I want is for us to be treated with a bit of honesty and compassion. Thank you.