

REHUMANISING DRUG AND ALCOHOL EDUCATION: CHOOSE LIFE SCHOOLS EVALUATION PROJECT SUMMARY REPORT

*A Qualitative Evaluation of the Impact of the Choose Life Project
Event On Pupils aged 12-14 years in schools In Wales and England*

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With excerpts from *Changing Hearts and
Minds: The Impact of Choose Life Project
Events in Higher Education – Final Report*
by

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and the volunteers from the Choose
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About the Research and the Summary

This study is part of a comprehensive, inter-related three-fold project. This comprises of an evaluation of the impact of a Choose Life Project (CLP) event on young people in secondary schools. The full report is currently in press (Ogden, in press). Further details of the preliminary report can be accessed here: <https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/19546/1/%20Report%20for%20Schools%20Evaluation%20of%20CLP%20Event.pdf>

The second element of the project is an evaluation of the impact of the CLP event on university students' personal, academic and professional understanding of substance use. The full report by Corteen, Hughes-Stanley and Marriott-Smith can be accessed here: <https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/22106/> and their summary report here: <https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/22096/>

The third element of the three-fold project is an evaluation of the impact of the CLP on volunteers. This evaluation was carried out by Dr Michelle Jolley and Dr Sarah Nixon who are both based in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Winchester. Please see: *Jolley, M. and Nixon, S. (2023) 'I Wouldn't Be Where I Am Now if it Wasn't for Choose Life': An Evaluation of Volunteers' Perspectives on How Choose Life Supports Recovery and Desistance*. University of Winchester. Available at: [10.13140/RG.2.2.29003.57127](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.29003.57127)

This collaborative project allowed an independent evaluation of the impact of the CLP on school pupils, university students and CLP volunteers. The rationale behind the project was to provide an evidence base to evaluate the efficacy of the CLP amongst all stakeholders and to establish what could be improved. It is further hoped that reports can be utilised to establish change at policy and practice level.

The CLP was founded by Steve Duffy, a former prison officer who observed the need for more support for people struggling with addiction and a greater understanding of addiction and substance use by the wider community, including, but not restricted to young people, students and professionals. The CLP supports people recovering from addiction in a number of ways and involves them as volunteers in an educational programme which centralises drama and real-life narratives to help others better understand the complex reality of people who use substances.

For over fifteen years, the CLP has been concerned with addiction education and has provided substance use and addiction education for young people, students and professionals. Since 2008 the CLP has educated over 50,000 young people in schools, Youth Offending Teams, universities and pupil referral units. Further to this, it has educated over 5,000 police recruits in Merseyside, Lancashire, Cheshire, North Wales and Greater Manchester. They have also

trained people from diverse fields including Criminal Justice, Job Centre Plus, Park Wardens, Probation, Psychology, Social Work together with national and regional charities.

This research aims to evaluate the impact of school-level CLP events amongst young people aged 12-14 years across three different schools. 192 qualitative self completed surveys were analysed to examine the extent to which the CLP changed young people's perceptions of people who use substances and improved their understanding of the complexity of addiction and the lives of the people who have experienced drug/alcohol addiction.

The request for an evidenced based evaluation is timely as it coincides with Dame Carol Black's independent review focusing on drugs, drug use, prevention, treatment and recovery (Black, 2021). Black's (2021) review highlights that there are evidence gaps in research, including what works to deter people taking drugs. Black recommends more research into interventions regarding the prevention of and responses to drug use. This report refers to drug use as substance use and this includes alcohol use. The term 'people who use substances' rather than 'substance users'¹ is also preferred. Importantly, the Black (2021) review also highlights the role of education in preventative interventions, and recommends that staff working with people with drug dependence be appropriately trained. In addition, it recognises the importance of bringing researchers and practitioners together. This research project, therefore, addresses some of the issues raised in the Black (2021) review by evaluating the impact of the school's CLP concerned with addiction education, substance use prevention and recovery and desistance from substance use.

This summary report encapsulates some of the key sections of a more comprehensive and detailed report that has been produced as a result of this research (see Ogden, in press). It comprises five sections, the first of which is an executive summary which is followed by three case studies that provide an overview of three school pupils' perceptions of substance use before and after the CLP event. Next, the key findings and recommendations from the research will be presented and finally five recommended readings and a reference list.

¹ In the open-ended survey pupils were asked about 'substance misuse' and 'substance users'. Substance misuse is a term that is commonly used to convey the harmful use of drugs, including alcohol, and it is a term that participants would understand. When discussing pupil's responses, this original terminology will be used. However, in other areas of the report the terms 'substance use' and 'people who use substances' are preferred.

1. Executive summary

This Choose Life Schools Evaluation Project (hereafter the evaluation) contains the findings from research into the impact of a CLP event amongst school pupils aged 12-14 years from schools located in urban, rural and semi-rural areas. The CLP has provided substance use and addiction education and awareness for young people through schools, students and professionals in the community for over 15 years. The project voices volunteers' first hand experiences of addiction whilst addressing themes including (but not restricted to) recovery and the desistance process, homelessness, childhood trauma, and incarceration. This research explores the impacts of a CLP event and the extent to which it might help pupils understand that addiction is more than an individual problem.

The timeliness of this report is apparent following Dame Carol Black's independent review of drugs with recommendations that include greater governmental focus on drugs, drug use, prevention, treatment and recovery alongside a recognition that young people (aged 11-15 years) have seen a steep rise in drug-use problems that needs further consideration (Black, 2021). Black (2021) highlights the lack of evidence available to show the most effective way to deter people turning to drugs. Although wider social and structural changes are required to truly change the lives of those most vulnerable to substance use, more research into the role of the education sector in contributing to this change is crucial. This evaluation is therefore key in beginning to build evidence in relation to the impact of substance use and addiction education alongside the related issues of recovery and desistance.

The evidence base for this evaluation comprises a thematic analysis of 192 qualitative, open-ended question surveys completed by pupils (aged 12-14 years) from three secondary schools in England and Wales within the Spring and Summer terms of 2022. Each school represented communities from urban, rural and semi-rural areas and once CLP events were delivered pupils were invited to complete a survey to capture their perspectives on addiction.

A preliminary analysis of the data gathered from the CLP events was conducted and consequently a preliminary report was published in May 2023. The main findings from this report showed that pupils really enjoyed listening to the volunteers' stories first hand, they really liked the role play section of the CLP and the opportunity to ask the volunteers questions. The most important impact of the CLP was that it challenged pupils to rethink their perceptions of substance use and the people that use substances. Pupils who once deemed people with substance dependency as undesirable/unsavoury characters to fear, later recognised and better understood the context of addiction and the often difficult and complex lives of the volunteers. The chemical/biological foundations of addiction as well as the complex structural and cultural issues that might lead to addiction was clearly

understood by some pupils which was often coupled with a position that society needs to commit further to making changes that would help people with addiction. At times prior negative perceptions of people who use substances remained after the CLP event in all three schools, but these represented only a distinct minority of pupils. In such examples pupils felt that the volunteers had made some bad choices that they could have avoided and that due to this they didn't deserve any help. An understanding of the role of the media in unfairly representing people who use substances was also expressed by the majority of pupil participants who believed that media representations could better reflect the multifaceted factors leading to substance dependency.

CLP events provide a powerful opportunity to increase understandings of substance use, addiction, recovery, homelessness and crime and deviance and this report recommends that the CLP school events are rolled out nationally for schools. Those who work with and influence policy in this area (e.g. teachers, support staff, child and adolescent mental health practitioners, MPs, educational ministers etc.) and other change agents should also attend a school's CLP event to better support young people. In consideration of these findings, we recommend that sufficient time be dedicated to these CLP events as an important aspect to addiction education in the curriculum. The CLP event should help formulate one important aspect of the wider education and training that focuses on substance use, addiction education, prevention, early help, harm reduction and recovery throughout the secondary school curriculum (key stages 3 and 4).

2. Three case studies

This section presents three case studies demonstrating the different ways in which pupils responded to and learnt from taking part in a CLP event in their school. They encapsulate the different reactions and degrees of understanding about addiction young people developed. The first case study represents a minority perspective of those surveyed but one that needs to be considered, the second symbolises a less rare response to the CLP and the final case study is reflective of the most common expressions and understandings about addiction following the event. All three case studies offer important insights into the efficacy of the CLP.

Mason: preconceptions remain embedded

Most young people who attend the school CLP come with a set of prior assumptions about addiction and the people who use substances. Mason was no exception, however for this participant (and others like him) the CLP evaluation demonstrated little change to their preconceptions after the event. Although Mason represents a minority viewpoint, his voice is

important when considering the ways that the CLP can help reach out and educate all young people about addiction and the people impacted by it.

Mason recognised the danger of drugs before the CLP *'Drugs are bad and you should not take them because it makes you a bad example to other people.'* In discussing his thoughts on the people who take substances he further added *'The people are very stupid and they think about it.'* Mason's understanding of drugs as harmful goes beyond the physical consequences of addiction and into moral arguments involving the people who use substances. Mason's reasoning appears to follow the argument that people who take drugs have the option to make the *right choice* and by making the *wrong choice* to take drugs makes them, by default 'stupid' and implies that this makes them in some way morally degenerate (by becoming a 'bad example' to others).

After the CLP Mason's moral judgements about people who use substances are still apparent: *'they need to get a life and stop taking other people's stuff'* and *'I still think it's a very bad thing to do... you should not do drugs and other stuff.. It's not healthy and you are paying to kill yourself'*. Whilst the understanding of substance use being damaging is an important one, the nuances of the lives of people impacted by addiction are not important to this young person, as they are ultimately individuals who made bad decisions. He adds: *'No I don't think they should have help because they have been the idiot taking drugs...It is the person's problem and not the good people's problem'*. Such a position renders people impacted by addiction as undeserving of support despite evidence showing how reintegration into communities is integral to help aid positive identity change that can lead to addiction recovery (Best, Irving and Albertson, 2016).

The CLP event for Mason (and a minority of people whom he represents) serves to confirm, as opposed to challenge, his prior assumptions. Mason for example felt the volunteers' stories were good because *'you can see how stupid people are doing it'*. At the end of the survey he offers some advice to the volunteers: *'get GTA on Xbox or PlayStation so you don't have to do this stuff in real life'*. This final statement refers to a game (Grand Theft Auto (GTA)) that is well known to feature characters that buy, sell and produce drugs (from horticulture to laboratories) with the player having the option to use alcohol and some of these substances throughout the game. GTA further simulates getting drunk or high or blacking out as a consequence of substance use. Therefore Mason alludes again to having little sympathy for people who choose to take substances instead of alternatives such as simulating substance use on various video games. Mason's case study demonstrates that the CLP informs young people about some of the dangers involved in substance use but nevertheless also shows how some young people might select aspects of volunteers' life stories (e.g. examples of their criminal past) to further consolidate individualised and negative stereotypes of people impacted by addiction.

Mason's case study is a helpful reminder that young people will enter the CLP with a wealth of different experiences with and exposures to addiction which might result in differing and sometimes emotional responses to the topics raised in the event. Offering a safe space to respectfully share some of the young people's concerns and ask volunteers questions, goes some way in addressing their preconceptions.

Gethin: an informed individualist

Gethin shared some of the sentiments of Mason when asked to describe people who use substances and substance use before the event. He wrote the following: *hard, crack heads, addicted, money-wasting* which shows a bias and stereotypical assumptions about people who use substances. Gethin acknowledged that he had a better understanding of the issues involved in addiction after the event but still reasoned that ultimately the fault lies with individuals making bad decisions *'it's stupid, but I understand it gets addictive'*.

The volunteers who tell their stories within the school events are honest about mistakes they have made in their lives and how addiction has led them to make a series of bad decisions. Gethin concluded that such life choices made by people who use substances makes them unworthy of help. *'I get that it's addicting but if people know it's bad for you, why do they still use it? I am not really bothered about it if it was a stranger but if it was a close friend or family member I would try and help them because I know how addicting it can be.'* This quote demonstrates some understanding of the chemical reaction to drug use but does not fully extend to an understanding of the social and personal contexts that lead to using substances in the first instance. This results in Gethin's limited expression of empathy only towards family and others that might experience addiction but not to strangers.

Gethin feels that media communications such as newspapers and TV programmes can sometimes be quite biased which results in *'one sided stories because it never tells you what the actual person is thinking'* and that the media *'need to do research before showing it everywhere'*. This suggests an understanding of the difference between the reality of addiction and the representations that many media outlets convey.

In terms of considering the role of society in helping prevent/resolve addiction Gethin does not deviate from his prior held individualistic explanations. *'I personally believe that it's the person's business unless they want help or need help urgently. If they know the consequences and don't want help then it's all their fault if they have health issues etc.'* Gethin expressed later in his survey how enlightening he found the volunteers' stories in the school event and there is a sense in this quotation that people with addictions should have help if they want it. However, ultimately the *'undeserving'* narrative still reigns strong in his perspective and a

tendency to under-estimate the need for wider support to aid the path to recovery as exemplified in the following quote '*Substance use won't always be as hard to quit if they try hard enough*' .

Desistance stories such as those shared by volunteers at CLP events are useful aids in improving addiction education and can help young people negotiate their increasing independence and discovery of the realities of the wider world. However, if not fully critically explored, stories of desistance can also create the impression that anyone can recover from addiction if they just try harder. Gethin's perspectives on recovery from addiction mirrors a neoliberal individualism which emphasises the responsibility of citizens to make *the right decisions* whilst overlooking the wider socio-cultural and structural forces that impact upon people's lives. Gethin's understanding of addiction has clearly developed through taking part in the CLP event but the influence of his preconceived assumptions that surround addiction are also evident. The recommendations to further emphasise the points in volunteers stories where they were able to *start* making better choices (and what connections allowed them to do this) could be one way of further encouraging critical thinking around key moments in volunteer's lives and their journey towards desistance. Most pupils are able to feel empathy for the volunteers who tell their stories but there is an assumption across some of the young people that the volunteers are exceptional people who have got themselves out of addiction whilst overlooking the support needed to help them do this.

Carly: a transformed empathetic understanding of addiction

The CLP for Carly (and the majority of pupils who attended the events) changed her understanding of addiction and her perceptions of those that use substances. Prior to the event she expressed how damaging and wasteful substances were and used words to describe people who use substances as: *selfish, addicts and junkies* After the event Carly's words to describe substance misuse were; *an industry, harmful and an escape*; and the people who use substances as *alone, struggling and broken* which reflects a re-humanisation of the people suffering from addiction as well as a fuller understanding of the wider structure of drug selling, exploitation and its consequences.

In her survey it was clear that Carly was impacted by the CLP as she reflected on her views on addiction before and after the event; '*Before the session I didn't really look beyond the surface of things. I knew it [substance use] wrecks people's lives when they do it and it effects the people around them.*' And continued; '*Before the event I thought that people misuse substance don't care about people who love them and that they don't care about what it does to their own health. I think now that substance abuse happens to vulnerable people and they*

can be targeted. They get roped into it because of the environment around them and it starts off as a way for them to fit in or just because it's what they've always known.'

There was a clear recognition from Carly that the media representation of drug/alcohol use was less than accurate and would often sensationalise stories about people impacted by addiction (specifically celebrities) in a way that either glamorised or shamed their behaviours. *'You often see celebrities in the media being exposed as druggies and there are lots of TV shows that often show people doing alcohol and drugs in a glamorised way and neither are accurate representations of substance misuse.'*

Following the CLP event Carly reflected further on her views with regards to the support that people using substances should receive. *'I think there should be more support groups for people so they don't see a need in using drugs or alcohol too much. I definitely think rehab should remain and improve for recovering addicts as well as community groups like AA as I think having a good support system is what they need. It is not the addict's fault and they are usually vulnerable people'*. This perspective was further emphasised in other participant's survey responses who also highlighted the responsibility of the government in general and health care services to provide support for people suffering from addictions.

For this participant the volunteers' stories were the part that really helped them understand the impact of addiction on the lives of others as she commented on how insightful these were. Carly's testimony begins with a somewhat closed and static perception of substance use and ends with a deeper more multifaceted understanding of addiction.

3. Key Findings and recommendations

The data collected through this project was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2022). Word clouds were also used to present the words/phrases participants used to describe substance use or those who use substances. The key findings and recommendations are laid out below but for more detailed discussion please see Ogden (2024, in press).

Finding 1 Fear and judgement of addiction:

Pupils mainly discussed substance use and those who used substances in a negative manner before participating in the Choose Life event. Coupled with a fear of substances and their users, it was clear in the emotive and sometimes moralistic language used by pupils, that a one-dimensional and individualistic understanding of substance use was common with many being informed by inaccurate stereotypes.

Finding 2 Broadening understandings through CLP:

CLP events led to school pupils adopting a wider, multifaceted understanding of substance use and the lives of those impacted by it. The CLP event allowed for the de-stigmatisation of people who use substances, as participants were able to humanise their experiences.

Finding 3 Empathetic reasoning and connections:

There was an emotional connection to the volunteers' stories within the CLP event which helped participants of the event develop an empathetic understanding with volunteers' experiences and the reality of addiction.

Finding 4 Role of media in simplifying and stigmatising addiction:

Following the CLP event, the majority of participants felt that the media has a tendency to represent people who use substances in a bias or over simplified/derogatory manner. The media was recognised by the majority as sensationalising, stigmatising or over-simplifying the issue of substance dependency.

Finding 5 Supporting people who use substances:

The majority of participants in the study expressed how society could do more in terms of helping with the problems of substance use. Many of the suggested interventions placed responsibility on the government in terms of helping to prevent/alleviate the problems associated with substance use (including reducing poverty, greater access to emotional support and wider structural support). Some participants focused on more punitive measures such as a greater focus on the policing of drugs and expressed that help should be available only to those that want help.

Finding 6 The key role of volunteer life stories in the CLP:

The volunteer life stories and the role play were especially impactful for the participants in the school events. The experience of a CLP event goes beyond educating about substance use, it extends to participant self-reflection and self-identification with the work of the CLP and its volunteers.

Finding 7 Potential improvements to the CLP:

The majority of participants across the three schools were unable to cite any part of the CLP event that they did not like. There were some pupils however who were a little confused about the role play and some cited the initial section of the event (the PowerPoint slides with the information about addiction) as being too long.

Finding 8 Key outcomes of the CLP for pupils:

Pupils learnt a lot from the CLP event which was expressed in the following four ways; *self-reflection, the tragedy of drug use, the re-humanising of people who use substances and the*

social responsibility in addressing substance use. There was both an emotional connection with the life stories and overwhelmingly positive feedback from the events.

The student participants were asked to provide three to five key words that describe their thoughts about substance misuse *before* and *after* the CLP event. The impact of the event can be seen in the words provided by the students:

Before

After



Recommendations

Recommendation 1 Recognising and addressing harmful stereotypes:

The CLP event provides an important opportunity to breakdown some of the stereotypes and myths often levied at people who use substances through the stories of the volunteers. The potential for the Choose Life event to develop ideas for pupils to understand social issues in the wider context should be emphasised to schools as this helps contribute to developing a socially aware citizenship agenda.

Recommendation 2 Harnessing empathetic understandings:

A key strength in the CLP events are the volunteers' stories which provides an emotional connection between the participant and the issues related to substance use and users. Real-life accounts break down harmful stereotypes and highlight the complexities and pressures experienced by the volunteers. Such an approach to young people's education on addiction has the potential to allow for greater cognitive connections with others.

Recommendation 3 Investment in the CLP as an important part of wider curriculum:

The CLP events could be an important addition to any child's Personal, Social, Health and Economic education agenda. Further funding and growth of the CLP events should allow for a wider commitment to developing young adults into 'ethically informed citizens of the world' (see Department of Education and Skills, 2020) and the CLP schools event can be part of a wider curriculum to achieve this.

Recommendation 4: Inclusion of debrief in the CLP event:

CLP organisers should consider the inclusion of a debrief session at the end of the event to ensure that pupils have the opportunity to question, consider, reflect and feedback on what can often be an emotional and information-loaded few hours. This would help highlight any misunderstandings, confusion or even potential triggering to pupils to ensure the safeguarding of pupils. It could also offer an important space to highlight the main learning outcomes and take home messages of the event. A scheduled debrief with school pupils at the end of an event will help participants realise how the volunteers' stories share similar elements with other people who use substances they might encounter throughout their lives.

Recommendation 5 Critical discussion of media representation of addiction:

As the media in all its forms (e.g. news reporting, television, soap operas, dramas social media, etc.) has such a huge influence on the lives of young people, a section in the school CLP event addressing the inaccurate stereotypes of drug/alcohol use through different representations might be a useful addition to the event. This could help pupils recognise the ways many media channels construct the 'problem' of substance use inaccurately and unfairly.

Recommendation 6 Clarification of the role-play component in the CLP event:

Further clarity concerning the purpose of the role play and the 'acting' role of the volunteer as a drug dealer is needed. Many pupils who attended the event expressed confusion as they couldn't work out if the volunteer really had dealt drugs or not. Although a debrief section could be utilised, a clearer explanation is needed immediately after the 'reveal' to ensure that pupils fully understand the authenticity of the volunteers' stories that follow this.

4. Conclusion

This report has provided an executive summary, three case studies and key findings and recommendations from the schools evaluation of CLP project. As the evaluation project draws to a close it is clear that the CLP has much potential to make a significant impact on educating young people in secondary schools on substance use and the lives of those who are impacted by addiction. By reflecting on the recommendations and with further support for the CLP, schools' drugs and substance education policies could be truly reformed and help transform young people's understandings of addiction which in turn has the potential to reduce young people's substance use issues.

5. Five recommended readings

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