

FIVE NATIONS NETWORK



Enabling Student Voice in the Classroom

A Small-Scale Research Initiative between Ireland and Northern Ireland

This information has been taken from the report provided by the project leads:

- Dr Mary Gannon, CDETB Curriculum Development Unit (at time of working on project), Ireland
- Anne-Marie Poynor, Curriculum Advisory & Support Service, Western Education & Library Board, Northern Ireland

Aim

- To find and develop ways of enabling and supporting greater student voice in the classroom

Actions

[Project timeline: January 2011 to April 2015]

The project leads initially recruited four teachers, two from each jurisdiction, to work with them and their students on this project. They met at the 2010 Five Nations Network Conference in Cardiff.

With the additional support of the Education for Reconciliation¹ project, they ran two in-service days on student voice for approximately twenty teachers from the two jurisdictions.

The in-service took Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child along with government policy and strategies as the basis for the work.

The teachers were introduced to two tools or frameworks for analysis and planning.

Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation (1996)² provides teachers with a tool to analyse the extent to which their students participate in decision making in the classroom and to consider how this could be increased.

Laura Lundy from the School of Education in Queen's University Belfast has developed a conceptualisation of Article 12 of the CRC³ which gives teachers and schools a model for effectively developing genuine participation by young people. The model has four key elements:

- ✓ **Space** Young people must be given the opportunity to express a view
- ✓ **Voice** Young people must be facilitated to express their views
- ✓ **Audience** The view must be listened to
- ✓ **Influence** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Around twenty teachers participated in the project, four of whom took a lead role in the development and/or piloting of the module. At least five groups of students (about 120) participated in the pilot. Sixteen of these also participated in the student day. The numbers were divided fairly equally between the two jurisdictions.

'Personally I was shocked to find out how rarely their opinions are sought and how little say they have... how little autonomy is given to students in our school, an issue I have since addressed with management.'

Teacher, Piloting Stage

Out of the two in-service days, ideas emerged for how teachers could work with their students to help them develop greater voice in the classroom. Anne-Marie and Mary began to draft these ideas into activities which could be used with students in a citizenship education module.

After several meetings with two of the original group of four teachers, a draft version of the module was piloted by these two teachers and two additional teachers, one from each jurisdiction.

After several revisions, the module was again piloted with 14 year olds in two schools, one from each jurisdiction, and a group of students and the teachers from these schools were invited to participate in a review day in Enniskillen in May 2014.

Following the students' feedback, final revisions were made to the module, which was then designed and published on-line.

'The students were wholly engaged in the work and provided very honest and valuable feedback on the module.'

Project lead

Outcomes

Principal outcome

- Production of a citizenship education module, now available to teachers throughout the five jurisdictions.

Outcomes during development and piloting stage

- The realisation by teachers of how little say young people had in decisions that affected them. An 'eye-opener' for her and the students was when they realised 'that the only decision some of them get to make is what breakfast cereal to eat!'

Outcomes for the students

- The creation of a safer environment in the classroom and therefore greater freedom to speak out
- Having their opinions listened to and credited with significance
- Greater awareness of how decisions are made and of the importance of their input
- Development of active participation skills in the classroom
- The student review day in Enniskillen provided students from the two jurisdictions with the opportunity to meet and work together and to input into the final shape of the module, an experience which they clearly appreciated.

"...the students were more conservative about what they would like a say in than had been expected. This could be a result of their lack of experience of involvement in decision making leading to low expectations of being consulted on issues of importance, and points to the need for young people to gain meaningful experience and the necessary skills to participate in the decision making process."

Project lead

Dissemination and wider use of module

- The module will continue to be locally disseminated through teacher and professional development networks in both jurisdictions, as well as being hosted on the websites of the WELB, the CDETB Curriculum Development Unit and the Five Nations website.
- Teachers in Northern Ireland, outside of the project, are interested in this work and how it fits with 'Every School a Good School', Citizenship and the CRED policy.
- Project leads have used activities from the module in other teacher training. The Hart's Ladder activity has now been included in a training manual for educators and trainers providing professional development on equality for post-primary teachers.⁴

This project showed that Enabling Student Voice in the classroom is eminently feasible, and students and teachers both benefit from doing this. The value of having students' input into the development of teaching materials was acknowledged.

It showed that student voice in the classroom was considered important by teachers and students. It also showed that students very seldom have any real say in what happens in their classrooms but, when given the opportunity, take it seriously and responsibly.

The enthusiasm and long-term commitment of some of the teachers who got involved, and the interest in the topic, were positive factors. The partnership between project leads worked extremely well, mainly due to the relationship between them prior to the SSRI.

The challenges involved maintaining the commitment of the teachers who got involved at the beginning. Due to changes in circumstances some teachers were unable to stay involved, but other teachers were identified to take their place.

Useful materials and sources used during the project

Project leads used a range of reading materials for the teachers during CPD sessions. In addition to the Hart and Lundy materials already mentioned, those of particular interest were:

- Ruddick, Jean and Donald McIntrye (2007) *Improving Learning through Consulting Pupils*. London: Routledge.
- Mac Beath, John, Helen Demetriou, Jean Ruddick and Kate Myers (2003) *Consulting Pupils. A Toolkit for Teachers*. Cambridge: Pearson Publishing

¹ A cross-border citizenship education project for teachers funded by Peace III and run by the CDETB Curriculum Development Unit

² Hart, Roger A. (1996) *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Innocenti Essays No. 4. UNICEF.

³ Lundy, Laura (2007) 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*. Vol 33, No.6, December 2007, pp.927-942.

⁴ Gannon, Mary and Karen O'Shea (2014) *Equality in Second Level Schools. A Training Manual for Educators and Trainers*. Dublin: The Equality Authority.