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EDUCATION

How to Hear Their Voices

Practical Ideas for Enabling Student Voice, Especially
Amongst Groups Who Too Often Go Unheard

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Introduction

When we take steps to meaningfully engage children and young people in the work we do each day, we are able to adapt our practice, curriculums, approaches and settings to best meet their needs. Whilst children can't give us all of the answers, taking time to really tune into their voices lets us hear from the expert in our students: the students themselves.

They, more than anyone, can tell us about the changing challenges they're facing, about their likes and dislikes and about the things that promote or inhibit learning or laughter or the fullest living of life.

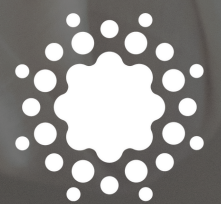
Whilst we've taken increasing steps towards enabling student voice in recent years, there are some voices which it is harder for us to hear, and they will form the focus of this guide because they matter too.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pooky". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr Pooky Knightsmith
Director
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Children who are shy or quiet can go unheard because their voices are literally very quiet and they may refrain from making their opinions known and tend not to volunteer for opportunities which may risk attention being focused on them.



Ideas to Try

-1-

Some children may prefer to write or draw about their experiences rather than have to talk about them

-2-

Give children the chance to share their ideas anonymously via a post box

-3-

Open up one-to-one discussions with shy children whilst engaging in an activity that makes them feel safe or comfortable e.g. colouring

-4-

Ask shy children to identify a buddy or advocate who would feel confident sharing their ideas with or for them



It's hard to hear the voices of children who aren't physically present and children who are often absent from school may not always be at the forefront of adults' minds unless we take specific steps to plant them there.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Make a conscious effort to include children who are not physically present by sending information home, revisiting the conversation when the child returns

-2-

Build a relationship with the child's parents/carers and get them involved in ensuring that their child's voice is not forgotten

-3-

Enable children who are not able to be physically present to join in discussions remotely (some will prefer to have their cameras and microphones off and this should be respected, especially if they feel able to interact by typing)

-4-

Work closely with your family support worker and ask them to support you to hear the voices of absent children and their families

By definition, there will be fewer students within minority groups and so their voices can get lost in the general hubbub.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Positively discriminate for children in minority groups when recruiting for e.g. student council or focus groups

-2-

Try to create inclusive resources, posters and information sheets about any kind of pupil voice exercise you are doing. If children can see 'children like me' on your materials, they'll realise that their voice matters too

-3-

Reach out to minority communities and see if you can meet them in spaces where they feel most comfortable, especially if they are a little uncertain about being on school premises

-4-

Appoint allies and champions amongst your staff and students who make it clear that they are there to support and hear the voices of specific groups. They could be identified on posters or with a specific-coloured badge or lanyard.





Pigeon-Holed

If a pupil is known for a specific label or characteristic, it can be possible for them to become pigeon-holed, or for their opinions to be over-generalised and assumed to represent all children with a similar label or characteristic.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Leave labels at the door, and listen to what the child has to say, not to what you expect them to say

-2-

Engage with a range of voices from any given group and make efforts not to over-generalise

-3-

Ask individuals to step into the shoes of other people with similar characteristics or experiences to them and explore different opinions they may have

-4-

Explore the idea of stereotyping with children; ask them what they think people would expect them to think, say or do and explore what it might surprise people to know about them

We do not struggle to hear our loud or angry children, but we can be guilty of not really listening to what they have to say. Sometimes it's hard to look beyond the noise and challenging behaviour and to focus in on their valuable ideas, opinions and experiences.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Do not attempt to have meaningful conversations when tempers are running high, revisit at a time of calm

-2-

Make it crystal clear that you are interested in the child's opinion and that you are not going to judge them based on any previous challenging behaviour

-3-

Anger needs to be heard, be curious about why a child is angry and make it clear to them that you want to hear what they have to say at a time when they feel able to say it rather than shout it

-4-

Treat children whose behaviour can be challenging with respect and engage them in deep conversation. This may feel unusual for them, so be patient

-5-



Children who are very anxious and/or mute can be hard to hear from, both because they can find it challenging to overcome their anxiety to make their voice heard and because it is difficult for valuable opinions to be shared when we are highly anxious and our thinking/speaking brain is offline.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Allow children to write or draw their answers rather than saying them

-2-

Online meetings using a chat function may feel more accessible for some children

-3-

Ask the child to appoint a buddy or advocate to help have their voice heard

-4-

Keep questions simple and use tools like 1-10 scales to gauge responses rather than expecting expansive answers

When your self-esteem is low, you often feel like you don't matter and that your opinion will be worthless and so you're far less likely to share it.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Make it crystal clear that you really do care what the child has to say

-2-

Share examples of things that have changed as the result of other children sharing their views

-3-

Engage with children via staff members who they get on especially well with as they may be more likely to believe these staff care what they have to say

-4-

Collect anonymous responses and make it clear that they will all be treated equally





Non-Verbal (with learning difficulties)

Children who are both non-verbal and who have difficulties of cognition face many obstacles to having their voices heard. Their voices are valuable and their opinions valid so it's important that we find ways to overcome these obstacles and hear their voices.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Work with support staff who know the child well to find ways to communicate with them

-2-

Have conversations through the medium of play, either role play or with figures

-3-

Simplify language and instructions enough to enable the child to understand but not so much that it feels disrespectful, be especially mindful of 'babyish' resources for older children with cognitive impairment

-4-

Listen to the voices of those who work closely with the child in question or canvas the opinions of parents, they cannot speak for their child but people who know the child well may give a good steer

Children who are non-verbal but who do not have challenges with cognition, such as some autistic children, are often forgotten because they do not speak up and cannot always readily join in spoken discussions so we need to find alternative methods for them to fully join the conversation.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Be respectful! Just because they don't speak doesn't mean they don't understand and the quickest route to disengagement is forgetting this

-2-

Make use of sign, writing or other communication tools the child is used to

-3-

Do not hurry, children who do not speak are often very thoughtful and given some space, time and the means to share their views will often share brilliant insights. If you hurry, you might miss them

-4-

Have a support staff member who knows the child well support the discussion, they are likely to have many shorthand ways of communicating with the child which may help conversations to flow



When children can speak but their cognition is at a different stage to their same-age peers, we need think carefully about how to communicate in ways that enable them both to understand and respond.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Do not hurry, there will be brilliant conversations to be had here if you can allow them the time they need to unfold

-2-

Develop age-appropriate materials that look and feel fitting for a child of this age and which use accessible language and concepts

-3-

Do not shy away from the tough stuff, it is crucial to find stage-appropriate ways to tackle topics that affect children of this age, especially as they may be less able to explore topics independently

-4-

Have fun! Make use of play or the creative arts to explore topics, make it enjoyable for both the children and adults involved, this can really help the communications to flow as people relax

Children whose first language is not English can often have the frustration of having a huge amount to say and not having the command of the English language to communicate it easily.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Don't make assumptions about a child's level of understanding, many children can understand more than they can say so, with help, they may be able to engage with a wide range of topics

-2-

Children will often willingly act as interpreters for each other, e.g. if there is an older child who speaks the same language they will often happily get involved

-3-

Look within your staff for someone who speaks the language in question (I am often amazed by the range of languages collectively spoken by schools' support staff). They may be happy to help translate materials

-4-

Use mediums that do not rely on language to explore and share ideas e.g. music, art or play



Deaf or Hearing Impaired

Like their peers whose second language is English, children who are deaf or have a hearing impairment can often face the frustration of having plenty to say but not being able to easily communicate it with those around them.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Provide written materials to accompany any discussions/workshops and use visual cues wherever you can

-2-

Find out how you can adapt your communications to meet the needs of the child, this often has a positive impact on how you communicate for the whole group as it tends to make you slow down, be more succinct and speak very clearly

-3-

Provide an interpreter, or ask if a family member or friend is able to fulfil this role

-4-

Don't give up! Work hard to enable the child to feel included and never fob them off with 'I'll tell you later' instead, improvise and keep trying new things, pen and paper, texting or a whiteboard might help

Little people's opinions matter too! With a little imagination, there are a whole host of ways we can learn about the opinions, ideas and experiences of even very young children.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Have fun and explore ideas through play or puppets or consider things from the point of view of characters in a storybook

-2-

Use everyday activities as opportunities for rich conversational talk e.g. circle time, snack time, storytime, and outdoor play

-3-

Design spaces that encourage children to talk together and share ideas e.g. role play areas, working in circles, collaborative outdoor play

-4-

Ask open-ended questions to challenge children to go deeper as they express ideas e.g., Ask, "Why do you think that happened?"



Transient

(e.g. traveller children, hospital schools, alternative provision)

Children who not be with your community for a very long time often don't get the chance to be heard either because they're not present at the right times, or because we don't realise the value of their opinions. Children who are new to the setting or who have experience of many settings can often bring some incredibly interesting insights and observations.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Positively discriminate for these children and make it very clear that their voice is valid and valued

-2-

Engage with hearing their voices as soon as you can after they've arrived, this will help with their sense of belonging and what you learn may aid their transition

-3-

Specifically, explore what is the same and what is different between your setting and others they've been to; help them understand that you have a lot to learn from them

-4-

If you struggle to engage with them, reach out to their past settings to find out what worked well for them or if there are any strengths or special interests you may be able to build bridges via

There are a whole range of reasons why looked after children may go unheard including the fact that they may face similar issues as other children who are transient, anxious, have low self-esteem or are disengaged.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Piggyback any LAC interventions or groups that are happening to engage with student voice in a setting that feels familiar and safe to the group

-2-

Take special care to ensure these children feel safe within the conversational setting and take care to make it clear that they will not be judged or punished for any information they share

-3-

If your setting has staff who have been trained to support looked after children or who are trauma or attachment trained, involve them in the process

-4-

Be prepared to hear some difficult messages from this group. Consider carefully your ground rules and safeguarding measures whilst trying to make it possible not to censor children's experiences.



Disengaged or Disinterested

This is a group it's really worth persevering with because if we can create opportunities to learn about why their experiences of school feel so negative or worthless, we can learn a lot of lessons that can both help the individual and be more widely applied too.

Ideas to Try

-1-

Write to them outlining exactly why their voice matters, what you value about them and what you'll do as a result of hearing their voice. Kind, respectful communications are not often the norm for these students and can bridge the divide

-2-

Consider what might encourage them to get involved, e.g. would an urban art or rap workshop act as a medium that might appeal?

-3-

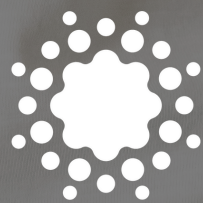
Incentivise attendance either using your school's usual rewards system or good old-fashioned money

-4-

If there is one student in this group who you think might be a little more likely to cooperate, work with them first to develop the messaging and approach to reach out to other students

Helpful?

**Tweet us @CreativeEdu with what
was helpful & what you would add**



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