

Activating Learners' Voice in Newbridge College

I always believe we are in a very privileged position to change the paths, journeys and lives of those in our care. For us, activating learners' voice in Newbridge College is one of the purest and most powerful ways this can be done in education. We would like to share a synopsis of our learner's voice story with you and how our Instructional Leadership learning is fundamental in our work.

Instructional Leadership training was the beginning of a powerful journey for us in our school. Our Learners' Voice work was getting underway in the same term. Our participation in Instructional Leadership training in Mount Wolseley, with Barry Bennett was foundational to the facilitation of our Learners' Voice work. For us, both are very much integrated and intertwined. The successful Instructional Leadership training provided for us the understanding of the instructional processes. The increased awareness and understanding of instructional concepts, skills, tactics and strategies for us as teachers was essential before we could get learners' voice work underway.

It enabled us as teachers to develop an improved ability to articulate our educational practice with each other and students. In terms of learners' voice work we could then share this with our students in our classrooms and in Learners' Voice workshops. Over time a shared 'language of learning' has been co-constructed between teachers and students in classrooms, thus enabling students to engage in conversations regarding their learning. They are able to express their needs and thus teachers can make changes in their practice in response to these needs. Overall teachers are enabled to better facilitate differentiation in instruction in order to meet the diverse range of students' needs.

Phase One of Learners Voice work in Newbridge College took place from October 2018 to June 2019. This work involved the co-design of the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Curriculum. This has led to the development of a curriculum which is designed in partnership with students, and is authentic, personalised and tailored to meet the needs of the students in our school.

The Learners' Voice group was established in October 2018 with a view to involving students as active partners in whole school decisions related to teaching and learning. I facilitated this work with a group of 35 students who volunteered to be a part of the Learners' Voice group. Workshops were facilitated and student led, taking place over a period of 4 months. Students shared their ideas as to what they felt should be included in the Wellbeing curriculum. The Learners' Voice groups subsequently prepared and distributed questionnaires, collated their findings and presented them to the staff, Wellbeing Committee and Board of Management.

A range of ideas for modules were put forward by students to address their key concerns. Students showed their strengths and produced intelligent responses to real issues in our school. They produced strong and evidence based arguments to lay the foundations for effective change. For example, students expressed concerns in relation to their 'study skills' and 'time management'. To address this issue the Learners' Voice team proposed a 'Learning to Learn' module for the new Wellbeing Curriculum which would address these areas. Three teachers are now facilitating the teaching of this module to all first years since September 2019. Students have helped us co-design this module and review it regularly also. Students proposed 'Wellbeing Retreats', 'Fitness Classes' etc. also in response to other concerns.

For us there were some powerful and transformational experiences in our school on this journey. Our Learners' Voice team were invited to make a presentation to our Board of Management. This was the first time in the history of our school that students presented to the Board. The fact that this was on a topic related to teaching and learning was quite powerful. It linked stakeholders together, from students to the Board of Management.

Phase Two of this work took place from September 2019 and is ongoing. Here we are focusing on 'Formative Assessment – Learning Intentions and Success Criteria'. This work was initially piloted with 7 teachers and 230 students. We, as teachers in our school, are seeking student engagement and are making changes in our teaching practices as a result. We are having conversations with our students about what they are learning, how they are learning it and what success looks like.

Together over this period of 4 months we shared learning intentions with students. We developed and co-created success criteria with students and we provided feedback to move learning forward. Together we met as a Community of Practice regularly and reflected on our learning in our classrooms and our changes to our practice as a result of incorporating learners' voice. We supported each other in this process.

In January 2020 we facilitated a whole school staff session where we shared our learning, as teachers, both professionally and personally, with our colleagues and senior management based on our pilot work. We also shared the changes to the students learning which we captured via student videos and also via survey analysis. We developed a resource booklet for staff on 'Learning Intentions and Success Criteria' also. Afterwards staff worked in their subject departments planning with their colleagues as to how they could progress Formative Assessment, whilst incorporating learners' voice moving forward. Our pilot group has acted as a support network for other staff members on their journeys.

Based on feedback from students, both quantitative and qualitative, we have noticed a significant improvement in student engagement and enjoyment in learning as a result of our learners' voice work. We have recognised the success of this collaboration in increased student ownership of their own learning and also in the development of student's leadership and confidence, amongst many other benefits. Students have noted that this has led to improved student-teacher relationships and student peer relationships. Without Instructional Leadership and Learners' Voice, none of this would have been possible.

The support of our senior management team has been outstanding from the outset for learners' voice. We believe this support is necessary for the long term success and sustainability of this work. We are supporting each other through change which is quite transformative. We have opened up our classrooms and minds and are growing together as learners. The Instructional Leadership experience has been at the heart of our work and has allowed this opportunity for fostering powerful student voice and powerful learning. We believe this experience has changed the way decision making will be made in our school and our classrooms forever. To all in the Instructional Leadership and Learners' Voice Organising Teams...

"Thank you for this incredible experience".

Deirdre O'Callaghan

Newbridge College

I believe the impact of learners' voice is encapsulated in this article by one of our 6th Year students in Newbridge College: Aoibhín Collins.

My name is Aoibhín Collins. I am a member of the Learners' Voice team and I honestly can tell you that the benefits reaped from this group within school have been phenomenal, both for me personally and for Newbridge College, as a whole.

Initially I decided to get involved in the Learners' Voice group because I wanted to try something new. It grabbed my attention as I sensed this was a space where there was a place for every student. I quickly realised that my input could affect real change in teaching and learning in our school. I saw this as my attempt to leave my positive mark for other students. From the start I could see the Learners' Voice meetings were very different. The meetings were all student led with an emphasis on hearing all voices in the group. There was always great energy and productivity in our meetings.

In our workshops we put forward our ideas and suggestions as to what we felt should be included in the Wellbeing curriculum, to address matters that were real and relevant to us. We collated our information, surveyed peers, designed presentations and PowToon animations. We presented our ideas to the Wellbeing Committee, the Board of Management and staff. We were included in the drafting of the new Wellbeing Curriculum. We designed a visual as we believed it would depict what Learners' Voice meant to us and communicate this to the whole school community. The visual we feel captures the values we aspire to develop in our learners' voice work such as inclusion, partnerships, student-teacher collaboration and living the values of our Dominican ethos.

We were involved in a way we had never been involved before and it felt empowering and it made us feel important and valued. Our feedback means that from this year many new modules will be included in our Junior Cycle Wellbeing Curriculum e.g. a Learning to Learn module in 1st year. It was really important to us that we can see our voice has affected change.

As word filtered in our school of our impact on teaching and learning, more and more students became involved in the learners' voice group. We started out with 35 students and 2 teachers. This increased to 210 students and 7 teachers on board and now we have gone school wide with this since January 2020. I feel incredibly lucky to have the unbiased and listening ears of teachers and senior management, appreciating and acknowledging my unique views as a student. For me I found I have really grown and developed throughout the process. I gained confidence in voicing my own opinions. I developed as a team player and I developed my leadership skills. It was amazing to have such a sense of belonging in a group. These are valuable skills for life that I will hold with me forever.



Learners' Voice Visual

- Peace symbol represents power sharing between staff and students. This promotes an inclusive learning community where students are valued and respected contributors.
- Partnerships are represented by the holding of hands. Here decision making is shared between teachers and students. This allows for authentic student / teacher collaboration thus leading to real, engaging and successful learning.
- The Newbridge College building in the visual represents how we aspire to further embed Learners' Voice into our culture in the College.
- Learners' Voice sees inclusion as a central value in the process. The voices of all races, ethnic groups, ages, gender, etc. are welcome.
- The Newbridge College flag represents our pride in our College and the Dominican ethos which is at its core. Newbridge College is student-centred. The focus of education is holistic, thus also including education for democracy and active citizenship.