



Using and reporting on FOCUS GROUPS

Using and reporting on focus groups

This document is designed to assist for teachers in organising, running and reporting on focus groups

Why use a focus group?

In schools, young people's voices can contribute to the development of a school's policies, systems and structures.

Schools or teachers frequently use focus groups as a basis for accessing, interpreting, and analysing the opinions/perspectives of young people.

FOCUS GROUPS CAN BE AS A MEANS OF

- exploring young people's perspective about an issue
- identifying what should be included in a survey designed for a larger number of young people
- unpacking survey findings
- identifying next steps based on survey findings
- stimulating new ideas and participant-led solutions
- testing solutions.

FOCUS GROUPS MAY BE USEFUL

- At the beginning of a process to gain greater understanding of a particular issue. The insights from these conversations could be used to inform the design of a survey to access the voices of a greater number of young people
- Following the completion of a survey to unpack the findings in greater detail
- During a process/project to check on the impact of particular activities or stages
- At end a project/process to support evaluation and further planning.

Designing the focus group session

TIPS FOR ORGANISING A FOCUS GROUP

- Focus groups should be kept small – ideally not more than ten young people in the group.
- Participants may be drawn from a single class, across a single year group or year groups depending on the purpose of the focus group.
- Where a group comprises young people from different ages and stages of their education, care should be taken to build familiarity and trust within the group.

The role of the facilitator is an important one. Their role is

- to ensure that the participants feel safe and understand the purpose of the focus group
- to explain what the feedback will be used for
- to indicate how the students will hear about the next steps.

During the focus group session, the facilitator must endeavour to give each participant opportunities to contribute and encourage each person to voice their opinions ¹.

STEP 1 INITIATING A FOCUS GROUP – CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING;

- Identify the group of colleagues interested in using focus group(s) to inform the issue(s) under consideration.
- Consider using the young people’s insights in co-designing the focus group session, sharing findings and planning for further action.
- Invite more colleagues to hear about this work, e.g. in planning meetings, policy formation forums, and year-group meetings.

STEP 2 FOCUS GROUP DESIGN

- Agree with colleagues how young people will be involved in the question design
- When reviewing the question with colleagues (and young people) share the purpose behind each question.
- Emphasise that the focus group is an opportunity to understand more about young people’s experience of learning and school. It is not an occasion for criticism of teachers or school management.
- Identify the audience for the focus group feedback.
- Ensure that the members of this audience are aware of purpose(s) of the focus group and are committed to responding to the young people’s feedback.
- Identify a co-facilitator who will support you in note taking and collating the feedback
- Provide opportunities for those not directly involved in the design process (teachers, parents, school management) to voice any concerns that they may have.

¹ The resource [A practical guide to including seldom-heard children & young people in decision-making](#) may be useful in planning for and conducting a focus group.

STEP 3 DESIGNING A FOCUS GROUP SESSION

- Agree the purpose(s) of the focus group
- Ensure that the group assembled is representative of different student experiences
- Discuss how young people can be involved in the design of the focus group session. Some of the steps in the design process include
 - Trialling the questions
 - Recording responses
 - Collating the findings
 - Examining findings
 - Prioritising what to share with key stakeholders
 - Recruiting participants
- Design the questions – the questions should be open ended. Plan to use no more than five questions.
- Questions should be trialed to ensure they are clear and accessible. Trialling will also indicate if the questions are likely to promote a productive discussion. Questions should be simple and to the point using words with clear meanings.
- Include an Ice Breaker in the session design
- Identify a colleague who will assist in note taking during the focus group
- Plan for any follow up sessions to share with the young people how and where their feedback has been considered.

PARTICIPATION WITH PURPOSE

Participation with purpose means that when young people are involved in decision-making, their views or needs are listened to, taken seriously and given due weight with the possibility of leading to an outcome or change. It is important not to get stuck in the process of ‘doing’ participation but to ensure that the participation of young people in decision-making has a purpose. The purpose should lead to an outcome, which can be about either young people having an impact on issues that affect them collectively or issues that affect the individual young person.

When planning or reviewing a young people’s voice initiative consider using these prompts to check for consistency with Lundy’s model of participation.

Space

Provide a safe and inclusive space for young people to form and express their views

- Are the young people affected by this issue involved?
- Are steps taken to ensure that the process is inclusive?
- Do the young people feel safe to express themselves freely in the space?
- Are the young people who are interested in the issue involved?
- Are the young people involved from the start?

Voice

Provide appropriate information and facilitate the young people to form and express their views

- Do the young people have the information they need to form a view?
- Are the young people be given a range of options on how to express themselves?
- Do the young people know to whom their views will be communicated?
- Does the process include opportunities for young people to identify issues that they want to discuss?
- Do the young people know they have a choice about their participation?

Participation Prompts; Planning and Review

Influence

Ensure that young people's views are taken seriously and acted upon, where appropriate

- Are the young people clear about the scope of their influence, (opportunities and limitations)?
- Will young people be given feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken?
- Will the young people be given an easily accessible summary of their views?
- Do the young people know who the key decision makers involved are?

Audience

Ensure that young people's views are communicated to someone with the responsibility to listen

- Are the right decision-makers involved, i.e. those responsible for decision making on this issue?
- Have these decision makers committed to taking the young people's feedback seriously?
- Is there a process in place to ensure that the young people's voices are given due weight and consideration?
- Are there plans to have the young people involved in presenting their views

Facilitating the session

STEP 4 FACILITATING THE FOCUS GROUP SESSION

- Choose a quiet, warm and comfortable venue
- Explain to all participants
 - the purpose of the session
 - the importance of their full and honest participation
 - that they have the option of remaining silent
 - that the note taker will be recording their feedback throughout the session
 - how feedback from the session will be given to them and acted upon.
- Consider using some small group work in response to the open-ended questions before hearing from the whole group. This will allow an opportunity for the young people to gather their thoughts.
- Agree the important outcomes with the group before concluding the session
- Invite feedback on the session design including suggestions for how it might be improved
- Agree with the young people when you will meet with them to convey how and where their feedback has been considered.
- Discuss how young people can have a role in reporting to the 'audience' about the feedback gathered.

Processing, interpreting, presenting

STEP 5 PROCESSING AND INTERPRETING, FINDINGS

- a. Summarize the key points of feedback from participants.
- b. If possible, check back with the focus group to ensure that the key messages have been accurately recorded.

STEP 5 PREPARING AND MAKING THE PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

- Prepare a sharp, short focused presentation. Formats might include use of testimonies, slide presentations, graphics, visuals, handouts, posters sessions, video.
- Agree who will make the presentation – teacher, student, combination?
- Keep the presentation short (5– 7 min).
- Highlight the most significant finding from your group's perspective.
- Design the presentation to encourage dialogue, the following questions might be posed
 - What surprised you?
 - What pleased you?
 - What unsettled you?

- What further opportunities does this feedback provide? Is the use of a student survey being considered?
- Are there challenges arising from the feedback?
- What might be the next steps?

Present the findings to all participant groups and relevant groups, e.g.

- student assemblies
- class group(s)
- staff meeting
- Board of Management
- Parents' Council

Getting buy in

STEP 6 GETTING SCHOOL-WIDE BUY IN

- Share your experiences with other colleagues, school management – what worked, the challenges and where to next.
- Ensure that all staff understand the importance of focus groups being used based on the principle of *participation with purpose*.
- Share focus group tools that you may have found useful and invite other staff to trial them.

TEACHERS USING FOCUS GROUP OUTCOMES

Some teachers can find the idea of focus groups intimidating. Confidence can be built by considering findings that are gathered from focus groups composed of young people from across a number of classes as opposed to one specific class. As confidence and commitment builds teachers can engage with the focus group findings in different ways:

- Taking on board the findings of the focus group privately, considering the implications for one's own teaching practice
- Teasing out the findings with colleagues in their subject and/or across subject departments
- Unpacking the findings with one's classes and planning next steps to support learning
- Using the findings to design a survey of emerging themes with the wider student cohort.

Reflection

REFLECTION ON STUDENT VOICE PROCESS

Promoting student voice in your school aims to provide an opportunity for young people to have a say in matters that affect them in their everyday lives in schools. The tools that you, your colleagues, and young people design are key to this process.

Following the consultation/ conversation with young people there is an opportunity to reflect on the tools used with your colleagues and with the young people.

Possible questions to consider in supporting this reflection:

FOR YOUNG PEOPLE:

- How do you know that your voice has been heard and acted upon in this initiative?
- Which activities worked well in supporting you to have your voice heard?
- What would have made the experience better and more worthwhile?
- If the school/teacher wanted to repeat a similar consultation, what advice would you give - What to keep, what to change, what to reject?
- Show the gaps - Are there particular areas where young people could have a greater 'say' but currently do not?
- What advice would you give to teachers involved in Student Voice in our school?

FOR TEACHERS:

- What impact has this initiative had on your understanding of Student Voice in our school?
- What impact has this initiative had on your
 - teaching practice?
 - relationship with young people?
 - relationship with colleagues?
- What worked well and what would you do differently if you were to be involved in a similar process in the future?
- What piece of advice would you give to a fellow teacher about to embark on a similar process?

FOR TEACHERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE:

- a. How could young people be encouraged to take greater leadership roles in similar initiatives?
- b. Spotlight equity issues - In this consultation, were there some young people who get fewer opportunities than others? If so, how might the shortcomings in this area have been addressed?