



Planning FOCUS GROUPS

Planning focus groups

Do you want to change or improve something in your school? Keen to put a new initiative in place? As part of your initiative, why not consider using a focus group?

The term **focus group** refers to a group whose members are focused on a particular discussion topic. Focus groups can provide you with information about other young people's opinions and feelings concerning the topic. In some instances, you might be in a position to use a focus group with other stakeholders in your school.

Typically, a focus group consists of 8 to 12 participants and is designed to allow one topic or issue to be discussed in depth. The role of the group leader/facilitator is to keep the discussion focused on the topic and to ensure that every voice is heard.

Focus groups can be used to

- explore the thoughts, opinions, experiences of students and other stakeholders about an issue
- identify what should be included in a related survey designed for a larger number of students, for example a class group or a year group
- unpack survey findings
- identify next steps based on survey findings
- stimulate new ideas and participant-led solutions
- test solutions
- reflect on/evaluate on an initiative and to inform further planning.

Tips for organising a focus group

- Focus groups should be kept small – ideally not more than ten participants 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 students from different ages and stages of their education, care should be taken to build familiarity and trust within the group.
- Students should also be asked if the composition and organisation of the focus group is supporting their participation and what, if anything, would make it better.
- Focus groups can include different stakeholders, e.g. teachers, school management, parents.

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.

Designing a focus group session

- Agree the purpose(s) of the focus group
- Ensure that the group assembled is representative of different students and/or stakeholders' experiences and perspectives
- Discuss if and how participants might be involved in the design of the focus group session.
- Design the questions. Plan to use no more than five questions. The questions should be open ended. An open question cannot be answered with 'yes' or 'no'. They require more than one-word answers. Some examples include the following....
 - What are your first thoughts when you hear the following word(s)?
 - What did you think about ...? How works well about....? What would be even better.?
 - Tell me about.....
 - What's the first thing that strikes you about, e.g. the new proposals?"
 - Can you give me an example? Is it the same for all students?
 - If you were to give advice on next steps, what would it be?
- 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 participants how and where their feedback has been considered.

When planning or reviewing a young people's voice initiative use the prompts below to check for consistency with Lundy's model of participation.

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.

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 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
 - how the feedback will be acted upon.
- Consider using small group work in response to the open-ended questions before hearing from the whole group. This will allow an opportunity for the students 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 participants when you will meet with them to convey how and where their feedback has been considered.
- Discuss how participants can have a role in reporting the feedback gathered.

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.

Preparing and making the presentation of findings

- Prepare a sharp, short focused presentation on the focus group findings. Possible formats include use of testimonies, slide presentations, graphics, visuals, handouts, posters sessions.
- Agree who will make the presentation – students or students and other stakeholders
- 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? Would a student survey be useful?
 - Are there challenges arising from the feedback?
 - What might be the next steps?

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

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