



Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership

Learning to Lead: Accreditation of Student Voice Projects

The idea of students taking responsibility for their education and having a major input into Teaching and Learning is one that often causes unease within the teaching profession. It is a common misconception that students lack maturity, are too young and too idealistic to have relevant, useful ideas that would benefit the development of education.

In Bedfordshire, however, this is not the norm. Student Voice has been developed in schools across the authority for over a decade, with the majority of schools having Student Councils, and many schools participating in initiatives that are considered radical, including Student Interviewers, Students as Learning Partners, Peer Mentoring and Peer Listeners. Each Student Voice initiative provides young people with the opportunity, not only to be heard, but to have an impact, whether it is within their individual schools, or in the wider community. The level of commitment offered by young people is immense, as is the work load they take on in order to ensure that they are making a difference to their own and other's education. Their level of input is so high, that it was decided young people should receive recognition for the work they do.

Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership (BSIP) has spent the past few years working with schools and students on the inclusion and development of Student Voice in education, offering training schemes and support for all schools in the Authority, and also schools in various different places around the country.

As a result of their work, BSIP have developed a Student Voice and Leadership course. This comprises six modules, all available at Level 2 (equivalent of GCSE), Level 3 (equivalent of A levels) and Level 4 (equivalent of Year 1 Bachelor Degree), making it accessible to more young people. The course has been piloted at Hastingsbury Upper School, with 17 Year 10 students and 2 Post 16 students taking it up. Hastingsbury have a strong Student Voice foundation in place, however, it has been difficult in the past to ensure that a broad range of students are represented within the initiatives. Disaffected students, students who lack confidence, and students not engaged with their education were often unwilling to become involved. However, the Student Voice and Leadership course has been largely taken up by students who fall into these categories, students that have previously never had to deliver presentations, or conduct research projects. Students with poor relationships with staff, who find it difficult to engage with their education. The group have just embarked on the third module of their first year with the course. The modules that have taken place this academic year are:

Students as Researchers

This module provides the students with the basic research skills needed to carry out a successful project, for example holding interviews and focus groups, developing questionnaires, and conducting observations. The group also focused on developing presentation skills, and the ability to speak publicly about their work. This was the first module delivered within Hastingsbury, and the students were given a freedom with their

work that they were unlikely to have experienced in other subjects. The beginning of term was spent working on activities that required the group to work as a team, developing a sense within the students of what it is like to work as a team and make them realise that others would be reliant on the work they completed during this course. They then decided the focus of their research, some selecting to research the school environment, others focusing on how improvements can be made to make the school healthier. In order to record their work, the class were given the option of keeping a log book to store any work sheets, notes and pictures that they may use during their projects. All students opted to do so, and the log books proved to be invaluable when marking the work of the term. Log books have been used ever since. The students were also given the responsibility of selecting the types of groups they worked in: friendship groups, pre-selected groups, pairs, trios etc. The class chose to work in friendship groups. Once the module had been completed, the class reviewed their decision as a group, and came to the conclusion that this was not the best method for them, and that they would like to work in a different way on the next module.

Students as Learning Partners

The second module of the course focuses on students working with staff to improve Teaching and Learning. Firstly, the class conducted Learning Walks; a process that involves visiting 3-4 lessons during the space of an hour and observing previously decided foci, for example, seating plan, teacher-student interaction, and behaviour. They then wrote letters to teachers that they had selected, asking for permission to conduct an observation in one of their lessons, and also wrote letters to the teacher whose lesson they would be missing, asking for permission to be absent, and their reasons why. Once they had conducted their observations, they wrote a report stating their findings, and future actions that could be taken as a result. They then developed presentations which they delivered in front of a panel, explaining the process they had gone through, and the conclusions they had reached as a result.

Students as Research Leaders

The students are now embarking on the third and final module of the first year. Students as Research Leaders draws upon the skills and understandings developed in the first two modules and extends them. The students are now expected to take more responsibility within their research projects; whether it is that they work individually, or take accountability for a particular part of their team project.

Throughout the year as the course has progressed, the improvements in the students' abilities are immense. Not only have they developed practical skills in terms of research techniques and presentation skills, they are also more confident and comfortable when speaking about their work, and take more responsibility willingly. The next three modules of the second year will again build upon the skills the students have already acquired, and will also require new skills to be developed. The content has yet to be finalised, but below is a brief description of each:

Students as Peer Tutors

When compared with the other modules, Peer Tutors is noticeably different. Rather than focusing on the teaching of others, the students will have to plan a lesson and deliver it to a group of peers or younger students. Once this has been completed, they will then have to plan a further two lessons, not to deliver, but to demonstrate their ability to plan and use forward thinking. It will also provide them with a better understanding of what teachers have to do to ensure that lessons are well prepared and to a high standard.

Students as Peer Listeners/Peer Mentors

This module contains two different Student Voice initiatives, which means it can be taught as one module, taught separately, or one section can be taught. Peer Listeners are trained students who are able to help their peers when they are experiencing difficulty, whether it is at school or home. The Peer Listeners do not give advice, but listen to the students' problems and encourage them to try and resolve their situations.

The Peer Mediator's role is to help resolve conflict between two or more students, and prevent minor disagreements becoming larger arguments.

Both aspects of the module highlight how students can work together, for each other.

Students as Commissioned Researchers

This module merges all skills developed in the modules of the first year, and provides the students with the ultimate responsibility: Conducting research on somebody else's behalf. The students will have to work together to ensure that all the necessary work is complete and on time, and that their research is to the highest possible quality.

The modules are marked individually, and levels are given based on the reports, log books and presentations provided by the students. No written exams are taken for this course.

Both students and staff participating in the course at Hastingsbury have commented on the good practice developing as a result. Students and staff who previously did not have good working relationships now have a better understanding of, and therefore more respect for, each other. The students themselves have helped with the development of the course, and have experienced enormous personal benefits from taking the course.

The next step is to promote the course to other schools and Further Education colleges to ensure that young people have the opportunity to study and participate in such an innovative programme.

This course is proof of just how valuable student input is. The dedication and perseverance shown by students is huge, and with the right support and guidance they have the ability to do fantastic work and make a real impact on the way that education develops in the future. It has taken a long and at some points arduous journey to achieve the level of recognition that Student Voice work now receives. But the benefits being reaped far outweigh the problems. It does raise the question: Why has the value of young people's input taken so long to receive recognition? Students are a schools most untapped resource, yet they are there every day, experiencing all aspects of school life. The Student

Voice and Leadership course is tapping into this resource. Schools and education authorities now are aware of how powerful student input can be, and by providing a course recognising this, are displaying to the students just how important they are.

Lindsey O'Brien
Student Voice Consultant
Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership

For more information please contact the BSIP office:

Student Voice Course
BSIP
County Hall
Bedford
MK42 9AP

Michelle.argent@bedscc.gov.uk

01234 276738