



SYNERGY AND ENVIRONMENT TO
EMPOWER DECENTRALISED SCHOOLS

TOOLKIT GREEN S.E.E.D.S.

MODULE 4 Seeds for Communicating

UNIT 3 Students' voices at school



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UNIT 4.3

STUDENTS' VOICES AT SCHOOL

Reggio Emilia's Listening Pedagogy defends the need to listen and be listened to, *with all our senses, not just our ears*" (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 2).

What role do students play at school? Who normally participates in decision-making at school? How and for whom and for what are decisions made? Is a school based on dialogue between teachers and young people possible? How are young people understood at school? What concerns them?

These are the questions which a good number of schools would answer by saying they are more concerned about what students will do and be in the future than what they are, do, think, or need right now. This is because students are seen as bearers of posterior maturity and are only thought of as beneficiaries of education. They are rarely granted a significant role in this as active participants. However, what would happen if we treated students as individuals with the right **and to be listened to?**

Why are student voices in rural schools important? There are many arguments which could be used to answer this question. The two most important ones are based on the possibility of connecting the curriculum, generally distant from



Caption by Francesco Tonucci showing how unusual it is to be listened to.
Source: Frato, 2002, p. 190

the reality of isolated schools, which are multi-grade and in remote locations, with local needs and interests, and those of the students, and context. It should also be pointed out that work which takes students' voices into account not only



promotes social participation, but also empowers them and makes them more critical, something which is really relevant in rural education, where there is a high dropout rate.

Throughout this didactic unit, the reader is invited to rethink the traditional idea of student participation at school, emphasizing the value this can have in improving learning, education, and schools. To achieve this, a wide range of creative and participative strategies aimed at giving voice, strengthening listening, dialogue, and action with regards to students are offered.

1. What is listening *for and to* students?

It is true that the students who fill the halls of school are not always visible to the teachers, educational practices which are used to teach them, or the educational policies which affect them.

Within this background of student invisibility, a vision of the student as a social actor, as an educational participant with rights has emerged in Reggio Emilia with the creation of Listening Pedagogy. This conceptual change about childhood means recognizing young people and listening

to them. In short, it can be defined as recognizing and expanding the role of the child as a participant with full rights to express themselves, to be listened to, and to be taken into account with regards to those topics or aspects which affect them since they are the “**experts of their own lives**”.

The expression ‘listening to student voices’ is not only offering students the opportunity to communicate their ideas and opinions or take their evaluations into account; rather, it is providing students with the opportunity to commit themselves to the educational process in decisively and actively, with them being conscious of the role they can play when making decisions and contributing to and constructing a school thought up by students and with them in mind.

In terms of the practical development of this approach, we can speak of a continuum of participation and student voice. At the basic level are those activities which involve consulting students as to their opinion on different topics or school issues. At the highest level, one may speak of joint, collaborative activities and the students working with teachers to answer specific questions or problems at school identified by the students.

PRACTICAL CASE

How can students help the teacher?

Cora, a young and inexperienced teacher, arrives at a rural school with a very traditional spatial, material, and human mindset designed for adult. Unhappy with the situation, she wishes to propose an educational community in which decisions at the school are made democratically by student and teacher alike. At the beginning, the other teachers do not like the idea of giving students a voice and reaching agreement, but Cora finds a starting point which her colleagues are interested in: 'the playground we want'. This year there has been a consultation process in which the students have provided very valid ideas for improving recess areas: change the location of the dumpsters, decorate the playground with student handicrafts, plant more trees, create a school vegetable garden, promote collaborative games, etc. All viable and sustainable changes have been made, thereby adapting recreational areas to meet student needs.

Given the success and degree of satisfaction expressed by the educational community, other consulting processes followed; these allowed for student voices to be heard on topics such as how to improve the school and classroom, how to improve teacher-student relations, and whether everyone feels recognized and comfortable at the school.

Although it seemed unthinkable at the beginning, years and practice have led to the institutionalization of students taking an active and participative role and teachers accepting the fact that students can promote changes to their school which teachers and students can work on together. Starting with less academic topics, such as the playground or school has allowed them to consolidate spaces and times to listen to student voices and to even rethink curricular issues such as classroom practices, the degree to which students participate in the teaching-learning process, or the use of more innovative teaching material.



2. What principles does Listening Pedagogy follow? **RAMPS**

The proposed case demonstrates that listening to student voices requires that the entire educational community be fully convinced that they know about and have something to contribute with regards to their education, the school, and what happens in it. It requires creating room and time in which students can speak and express themselves in relation to issues which affect and

concern them, “ensuring more horizontal forms of communications, because we do not see the same thing from the same place.” (Susinos, 2014, p. 120).

These listening and participation processes can be constructed around five basic principles which Lancaster (2006) calls **RAMPS**.

RAMPS FOR LISTENING TO STUDENTS' VOICES

***R**ecognising children have many ways of expressing themselves*

***A**llocating communication spaces*

***M**aking time for listening*

***P**roviding opportunities*

***S**ubscribing to a reflective practice*

Principles which encourage children being taken into account. Source: Lancaster (2006).

3. How can we give voice to students?

Before explaining some strategies, which allow one to give voice to students, here are moments which should be respected in every process aimed at giving voice, regardless of the level of participation or strategy one

may wish to carry out.

MOMENT 1. STOP, THINK, LISTEN. Adults and young people agree upon the topic of concern, the topic which they wish to talk about, improve, or communicate.

MOMENT 2: DESIGN THE STRATEGY. Students feel most comfortable with; this will act as a



method for answering the topic at hand and will give voice to students. During this phase, it is necessary to offer students individual time to reflect and combine different communication formats (oral, written, visual, etc.) which are adapted to their age group.

MOMENT 3. SHARING IDEAS. Consult and create dialogue spaces where all viable proposals provided by the participants are examined in depth, expanded upon, dealt with, and refuted.

MOMENT 4. CONCLUSIONS AND DECISION MAKING IN ORDER TO ADVANCE. Deliberative dialogue should lead to agreement between students and teachers. This last step includes the process of democratic knowledge construction (ideas, changes, proposals for improvement, etc.); children are

recognized as individuals capable of making sense of reality. Adults should commit to the proposals made by students in the interest of the common good.

With this framework for action in mind, below are a selection of strategies which are characterized by their versatility and adaptability (age, language, etc.), which allow the child to freely and easily express themselves, and which can be the starting point for higher levels of participation. To facilitate and encourage their use, the structure of each strategy includes their description (what they are) and their execution (how to put them into practice).

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

WHAT?: Anonymous messages exchanged between students to ask or answer an agreed-upon question.

HOW?: Selecting a topic, each student expresses their doubts or uncertainties to other students in written form, which they then answer.

** Students should actually exchange messages in bottles.*

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE...

Dear classmate, I'm starting primary school this coming year and I'd like to know what games you play at the older kids' playground. I'd also like to ask, if you could change anything about the playground, what would it be?

ANSWER... Hi, friend. Well, at the older kids' playground we play a lot of different games, such as football, tag, hide-and-seek, and more.

DRAWING-CONVERSATION

WHAT? Pictures with text created by students, based on a selected topic.

HOW?: Each student draws their vision of the proposed question. While drawing, they talk and reflect with their group and/or the teacher.

** Ideal for young learners.*

**WHAT KIND OF PLAYGROUND DO I WANT
AT MY SCHOOL?**



Message and answer between two students.

Source: own.

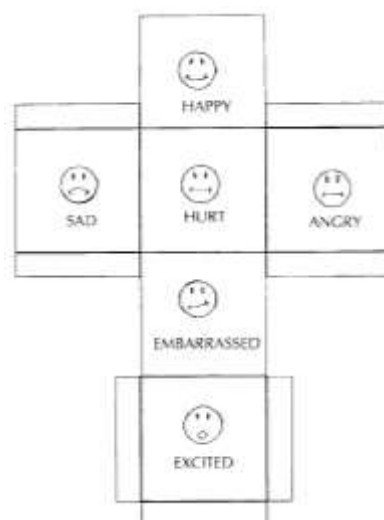
FEELING DIE

WHAT?: Technique for exploring students' emotions.

HOW?: Each student roles the die and, based on the face which appears, must complete the agreed-upon sentence with a feeling: "I'm happy at school when...", "I'm sad at school when...", etc.

** Especially useful for working on emotions.*

THE FEELING DICE



Source: Messiu (2008).

CROSSED STORIES

WHAT? Written or spoken story about a topic. Allows the points of view of students, or those of other members of the school community, to face one another.

HOW? A topic is chosen and two educational-community agents (school-teacher, school-family, school-school) are asked to explain their points of view. Afterwards, both writings are used to analyze the same reality from two perspectives.

**An excellent way to examine opinions from different members of the educational community.*

TEACHER: WHAT GRADING MEANS

I understand grading as a process by which I gather information about my students in order to give them a grade so they can orient their actions and decision-making. But I also gather information about myself, classroom circumstances, about the school, etc.

STUDENT: HOW I AM GRADED AT SCHOOL

Teachers base our grades on how well we do our homework, our notebooks, and exams.

They also focus on our daily classwork and how we perform working in groups.

Evaluation according to the point of view of a pupil and if a teacher. Source: own

ASSEMBLIES OR DEBATES

WHAT? Meetings and dialogue with peers or between teachers and students.

HOW?: Planned meetings for reflecting on a specific topic.

** An excellent way to reach a consensus on proposals and/or making decisions democratically.*

ASSEMBLY. WHAT KIND OF SCHOOL DO WE WANT?



Photo of a participative assembly

Source: own

MUTE PANELS

WHAT? Reflexive writing which invites students to reflect and give their opinion.

HOW? Mute panels are placed throughout the school (the entrance, playground, library door, etc.) so students can freely share their opinions on a topic.

** Ideal for promoting free participation through reflexive writing.*



Template for developing the mute-panel technique.

Source: own

PHOTO-VOICE

WHAT? Process combining participative photography and text.

HOW? Each student takes photos on their own, based on the proposed topic, in order to show their concerns about it; this is accompanied by their own reflexive text.

** Individual cameras recommended.*

WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE AT MY SCHOOL



We'd like to have more trees so we can shield ourselves when it's sunny. The few trees there are are pretty, but we think there's too much cement. We'd like to have more green areas and flowers to enjoy.

Photovoice about what we would like at school. Source: own

UNFINISHED PHRASES

WHAT? Written and spoken story created around a topic based on three groups of incomplete phrases: 'I applaud...', 'I don't like...', and 'I propose...'

HOW? Firstly, participants must complete the proposed phrases using pos-its and then speak about their answers with the rest of the class. Lastly, everyone talks about the answers and the contents of each group.

** This is a very flexible activity which can be adapted to all ages and all circumstances.*

I applaud the fact that the teachers ask us what kind of playground we'd like to have.

I don't like the competition and fights which occur when we play football.

I propose that the teachers teach us new games so we can have more fun.

In short, we believe and consulting and listening to students changes our way of seeing and thinking about educational institutions. Recognizing student voices means seeing them as 'allies' capable of helping to improve teaching, education, and the school itself. It involves and

requires recognizing the voices of children as a vehicle for change and improvement, accepting the power of their voice, their ability to inform and to construct school-related theories and reforms.

DO IT IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Think, listen, and decide on a topic which concerns your students. Choose one of the aforementioned strategies and put it into practice accompanied by a

colleague. Afterwards, reflect with the students and your peer about the value of the completed activity.



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TO LEARN MORE

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