

Student voice – Why did we feel the need for a sensory student council?

Gill Coates, QToD, shares the successful experience of getting a group of learners from a large county together to form a student council

This year in Kent, we have looked to expand the ways we gather the student voice. As a sensory service, we already gather views from our learners through a variety of ways including postcards, questionnaires, through their reports, and our 'On the Road to Independence' events. However, we wanted to gather more in-depth views and felt setting up a student council for our learners would be one way to achieve this. Many schools have student councils that provide an opportunity for learners to offer feedback to their school. A student council can offer learners more than just the opportunity to provide feedback; it also supports peer well-being, and gives opportunities for mentoring and role modelling. Learners will feel they belong and their diverse range of voices can be heard. For many of our learners, they may be the only deaf/hearing impaired, vision impaired, or multi-sensory impaired learner in their school. The student council would also offer an opportunity to meet learners with needs similar to their own.

In March this year, the government published their improvement plan for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), 'Right support, right place, right time'. The plan highlights the need for co-production and considers children and young people to be the stakeholders in developing the national standards. Dame Christine Lenehan, DBE gave the keynote speech at the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) 'Involve, Engage and Inspire – Deaf young people and decision making' conference. Throughout this keynote speech, she reiterated the need for young people to be involved and for professionals to be creative with ways to co-produce. The need for the learners' views has been expressed on Head of Sensory Service Forums, at the Sensory Reference Group (in Kent), and also at Kent's Children's Hearing Services Working Group (CHSWG).

Planning

As peripatetic specialist teachers, we cover not only a large age range (0–25 years) but also a large area, Kent has a land area of 1,368 square miles.

Therefore, we had a lot to consider in getting a group of learners together to form a student council. Our day was free for the families as we were funded by Kent County Council. We decided that our age range would be Year 2 and above. We felt that learners in this age range would





be comfortable to articulate their views on their needs, schooling, and support. Due to the time of year, we were holding our first meeting (we thought that Years 11 and 13 might not be able to attend due to revision and public examinations). Following discussions with the sensory service, we consulted with parents about suitable timing and venues. We decided to hold our first meeting at the weekend so parents/carers would be able to get their children to the event. We contacted a wide range of activity centres in order to see what would be available for our day. We settled on a farm school where staff are qualified teachers. It is registered as an alternative provision and teachers have experience of working with learners with additional needs.

Obviously, we wanted the day to be a fun experience for our learners, but a key part of the day was gathering learner's views. We were also mindful that this would be the first time the learners would have met. We wanted the activities to be interactive and enjoyable. Our ice-breaker activity was to decorate gingerbread people to represent themselves; our next activity was to consider what support they already had in place and ways they felt they could be more supported. Our final activity was getting them to think



about the future and we supplied a prompt for this activity: For this activity they would draw around themselves and each other and write the answers to the questions inside their body shapes. All activities were adapted to meet the needs of the learners. At our previous 'On the Road to Independence' event, the panel was made of deaf/hearing impaired, vision impaired, and multi-sensory impaired learners – at these events the learners showed that they could advocate for the needs of other learners, so we were hopeful that the learners would support each other with the activities as well as drawing on the support of staff.

The day

On a very hot day in June, we met together at the farm





school. Unfortunately, some learners were unable to attend, but actually, we felt that the smaller group may have been more beneficial so the learners could interact more and not be as intimidated as in a larger group. For our vision impaired learners, we had a sighted guide. We alternated practical and focused discussion activities including feeding a variety of different animals, gathering eggs, and having a cuddle with the more fluffy variety of animals. Listening to the discussions about disability, and watching the younger learners gazing up at the older learners with hearing aids/cochlear implants or a cane was also great. For a number of learners, it was the first time they had met another learner with a similar sensory need. We had an age range of Year 3 to Year 12. The learner in Year 12 is currently running for head girl at her secondary school, and we felt that this learner provided such an inspiration for the younger learners attending. For the deaf/hearing impaired learners, there were discussions around vocabulary they used to describe themselves. Some considered themselves Deaf, others hearing impaired. Some mentioned that they saw themselves as disabled, others did not. They also talked about what support they received from school, eg seating positions, use of the 'Roger' assistive listening device, access to lipreading. Ways they felt they could be supported further were meeting learners with similar needs, telling others about misconceptions about their hearing loss, and disability awareness across the school. One final activity was about the future – it was great to see all the learners helping each other by drawing around each other. We also noted the high expectations some of the learners had for the future including wanting to be a lawyer or a rollercoaster designer/engineer. We were encouraged by the way the learners shared their opinions, their thoughts about their current support, and their aspirations for the future.

The future

The day was so well received, and parents emailed staff to say how much their children had enjoyed the day and were already looking forward to the next one, which we plan to hold in October.

Throughout the cycle of co-production, part of it is implementing the feedback received. After the event, we had a debrief about the meeting. The information will be shared not only with the specialist teachers but also with the wider SEND team at Kent County Council, East Kent and West Kent CHSWGs, the Sensory Reference Group, and other stakeholders involved. At the next meeting we would like to share with our learners what changes we have/plan to make following our last student council meeting so learners feel their opinions that they shared were valued and heard.

Following this event, we were contacted by Kent County Council's Educational Psychology Service to discuss joint working to capture the learners' voices in Kent, and we plan to share our day in the Kent County Council SEND newsletter.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1139561/SEND_and_alternative_provision_improvement_plan.pdf



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BATOD Magazine

This article was published in the Sept 2023 issue.

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