

Case Study: Cardiff Local Authority Education Inclusion Service

A participation approach

The Education Inclusion Service in Cardiff worked with the Children's Commissioner for Wales to support the development of a right way approach to additional learning needs.

The service used the The Right Way: a human rights approach to additional learning needs, to consider how they could further a rights approach in their work, and identified an opportunity to develop their participation practice.

Using our Making Decisions Together Toolkit the inclusion service created participation opportunities for different groups of children and young people, all with additional learning needs. Specialist teachers from the inclusion service visited the groups in their education setting to deliver the sessions.

To set up the participation project specialist teachers from the service visited the settings a few times to get to know the children and young people. In these visits they introduced themselves, did activities about children's rights and invited the children to take part in the toolkit sessions, making clear that participation was voluntary. Then the specialist teachers delivered all four sessions in the toolkit over a period of four weeks. Each session took around half an hour.

Power of collective identity

Janet Palmer, Lead Specialist Teacher, described the sessions as 'very powerful'. Janet explains, 'In the mainstream settings this was the first time the young people had the opportunity to discuss their additional learning needs with other children with additional learning needs. In specialist settings, or resource bases, children and young people tended to have a strong identity about their Additional Learning Needs, and a strong collective identity. But a sense of isolation came out very strongly in the mainstream settings. These sessions were an opportunity for them to meet other pupils, sometimes to voice their disquiet about feeling different. It enabled them to talk to specialists together, and identify those things they have in common.'

'Starting the sessions with the warm up games was very effective, not just for supporting children to engage with the session, but also in helping them build relationships with each other, particularly in mainstream settings where they may not have come together before. All the children contributed to the sessions and by the third session children were definitely leading the session, it wasn't the adults.'

Empowering children to feel confident

Janet explains that, 'In all settings, it was so valuable to have an opportunity to talk to the children and young people about how they feel about their learning, and the wider range of their needs. In education we can be very focused on educational outcomes and what a child needs to progress. This is really important but it makes it hard to find time to talk to a child about their feelings and priorities. All the teachers involved in our sessions really enjoyed the chance to work with the children in a non-educational way.'

'We were able to really talk to the children about their feelings about their person centred-reviews, and it identified to us and their teachers quite a lot of gaps in their understanding about their support and their ALN, and helped us realise that their experience could be that the meetings are 'done to' them. It was the first time they had to discuss this and children really valued the opportunity to talk about things they didn't understand.'

'It showed we need to do more to empower children. There is a need to build this into our practice, so that children themselves take ownership of what they need to feel confident - in their learning and wider life.'

Need for participation across settings

Janet explains that all ALNCOs and inclusion teams at a local authority level would benefit from using this resource to understand the collective needs of children with ALN in settings. The team in Cardiff carried out sessions during a period in which masks were being worn in secondary settings and there were high levels of staff absence. Janet explains that it was essential to make sure children's voices are heard at a local authority level, especially when opportunities have been so restricted over the last two years because of the pandemic.

'All schools should take this on. Teachers were in awe of their pupils and how they contributed in these sessions. Giving this time, away from the pressures of education, will mean that we can really listen to what children and young people need.'