



Involving students in identifying needs for your learning support program

Accurately defining what is needed is a crucial first step for any community program. The key is to ensure needs are identified in consultation with those affected by your intended program as they are more likely to be accurate and will also encourage participation of those you consulted. When it comes to out-of-school-hours learning support programs (OSHLSP) your consultation must include students. Often students are seen as the subjects of a project and it is assumed they will not have the capacity to contribute their ideas or perspectives. However, this view needs to be challenged as students have different perspectives to those of adults, and if ignored could risk the success of the program.

According to the UNCRC a child is anyone under the age of 18. However, when working with adolescent and high school students it is better to use words they would more readily identify themselves with, such as student, teenager or young person. This tips sheet uses student, unless referring to other documents or information that uses the term children.

Benefits of student participation

There are many benefits of an approach that takes into account the student's ideas and values. The following is a summary, adapted from the [Community Tool Box](#), of those aspects that are particularly pertinent to OSHLSP that target newly arrived communities.

- You get a broader range of perspectives and ideas
- You avoid overlooking or ignoring the realities of the community or the target population
- You can involve people whose support you need from the outset
- You can provide an avenue for marginalised groups to have their voices heard
- It can bring together community members who might normally have no contact
- A participatory planning process builds trust and reflects collaboration, inclusiveness, and empowerment
- It implies respect for everyone in the community, and thus sets a standard for community participation and empowerment that others can follow
- It respects people's intelligence, ideas and experience, and affords people a measure of control.

Principles of student participation

At its most simple, ensuring participation in needs identification means that anyone who has a stake in the program has a voice in defining the needs. Enabling the students to identify and prioritise their own needs ensures you gain insights into their preferences, information about what has and has not worked in the past, as well as encouraging a sense of ownership of the program. Being consulted and asked to participate in design can also be an important process for the individual in and of itself.

“Many...minority individuals and groups feel that they have no voice in the society, that they are not listened to even when they are asked for their opinions. True participation means that everyone has a voice, which must be acknowledged.”



(Rabinowitz, Phil. Community Tool Box -- Participatory Approaches 2015)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines children's rights to participation as well as their right to be consulted on decisions that affect them.

Children's participation

"...is the main means by which children can be more actively included in their societies as active and responsible citizens...It increases the visibility of children's issues and helps to improve the accountability of adult institutions for what happens to children."

(Save the Children, [So you want to consult with children?](#) 2003:11)

Principles of children's participation can be used as the basis for student involvement in needs identification. The following principles are from the Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation. They are outlined in [Minimum Standards for Children's Participation](#).

1. Transparency, honesty and accountability

What do we mean? Adults involved in consultations with children follow ethical and participatory practice and put children's best interests first.

2. A child-friendly environment

Children experience a safe, welcoming, inclusive and encouraging environment that enables participation.

3. Equality of opportunity

Participatory work should include groups of children who typically suffer discrimination or who are often excluded from activities, such as girls, working children, children with disabilities and rural children.

4. Safety and protection of children

A child's safety and health is considered in every possible way, with safeguards put in place. This includes both physical and emotional well-being.

5. Commitment and competency of adults

Adults working with children are committed to the aim of consulting with children and are trained and supported to carry out participatory practices.

Data collection

When considering your data collection methods, make sure you reflect on how best to reach your target group. For example, if you intend your OSHLSP to focus on EAL students you will need to establish what services are already available for them and then be sure your data collection methods take into account language barriers for families and students to participate. You also need to consider timing of meetings and consultations to take into account the responsibilities of those you wish to speak to. Time your meetings to maximize the availability of your stakeholders.

There are many innovative ways to seek students' input and provide genuine opportunities for even primary-aged students to participate meaningfully. It is important to be honest and transparent about what aspects you are seeking their input on, how you will use their input and to what extent this can influence the



outcome. There will be times when what they have suggested is not possible, and this needs to be properly explained.

Ways of seeking input from students

- Ask an EAL teacher at a local school to conduct a short discussion in class time
- Conduct a short survey or focus group through a local school, library or student group
- For young primary students utilise more creative avenues such as drawing a picture of a favourite aspect of school or ideas about something they would like to change and then discuss the picture
- Print pictures of typical issues students face with their school work and study environment, place them on the floor and ask students to gather round them in a circle, ask each student to pick a card that prompts an idea, as the student to explain what issue it raises for them – make sure you tell students they can raise issues not depicted
- Group or pair students during a discussion and ask them to report back jointly

Strategies need to be altered according to children’s capacities, maturity and development. Informed consent is needed from both the guardians and the students themselves, and it should be clear they can decline to be involved.

Involving primary aged school students in evaluations

In 2015 CMY’s MY Education team evaluated the Refugee Education Support Program’s first round of initiatives. As part of this process students were consulted on their views of how the programs had impacted their schooling. The techniques used could also be used during needs identification.

The team used child friendly focus group discussion techniques to prompt discussion, such as asking students to select from a group of pictures or photos that represented different elements of the program and describe the feelings or thoughts that the picture prompted. A series of questions extrapolated on this initial information. They were also asked to draw their favourite aspects of the program and then suggest ways to improve it. Some rich information came from students as young as Grade 1 and the enthusiasm the students applied to the process demonstrated how valuable consultation of students is for the students themselves.

