

Developing pupil voice at Pitcheroak School, Worcestershire

Pitcheroak School is engaged in the development of a curriculum that encourages students to consider that they have a voice that should be heard. Teachers at the school saw a need to reflect on the readiness of the older students, and help them to prepare for a more independent life after school. This case study describes how – starting with their immediate families and community – students with a range of learning difficulties were introduced to ideas such as democracy, rights and responsibilities. This has led to a wider experience of the world and the opportunity to consider the impact of their views on people beyond themselves and those close to them.



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'It is important for our students to have the opportunity to reflect on their rights and responsibilities and to consider how their voice can influence others in their families, school council, communities and the wider world; and how it is vital they learn that taking an active part in a democratic process is a valuable right not enjoyed by everyone.'

Sheila Holden, Head Teacher

School activities

The need for a greater feeling of personal responsibility among students and the stimulus of contact with the Electoral Commission 'Remember to Vote' letter to the school prompted discussions among the staff. The question was asked by the staff at Pitcheroak: *'How can we develop our young people's voice and encourage greater participation in decision-making?'* The school agreed to develop a project to establish a school council via an election process. This project was given emphasis by being included in the School Development and Improvement Plan, with a major aim of including all students and staff.

In order to clarify the role and purpose of the school council, a staff workshop was organised to reflect on this group and how it should develop in the future.

To stimulate interest and encourage participation, a visit to the Houses of Parliament was organised for the sixth form students. A Q&A session with the local Member of Parliament and a tour of the chambers took place. Further staff workshops were delivered and the local district council supported the school with lessons focusing on democracy and how elections are organised. Actual voting booths and other equipment were loaned to the school, and school council elections were held. Local council officers took part and students helped with all aspects of the day, including the all-important count.

Running alongside the work on elections and democracy was the Open College Network diploma in independent living. Part of the diploma is about understanding rights and responsibilities, which was addressed through reflection on how this relates to students' home, school and community life.

'I believe my students have benefitted in a number of ways – having the confidence to use their voice and share their thoughts and views during discussions and debates that have taken place in the safety of our classroom. It has made them aware that they do have rights, they do have a voice and that they can and must use it if they wish to be heard. We're empowering our students to think for themselves and to prepare them for the challenges of adult life. We are confident that some of the information shared will provide a good foundation for our students to continue to be good citizens and aspire to achieve great things in life.'

Claire Amos, School Council Co-ordinator
and Head of Sixth Form

Why create a school council?

The council helps to develop:

- **Children's Rights** – It recognises that children have rights, including the right to have their opinions taken into account in decisions that concern them.
- **Active Citizenship** – It enables pupil voice to contribute to the preparation for citizenship by improving pupils' knowledge and social skills and, in doing so, enhances the quality of democracy.
- **School Improvement** – It recognises that consultation with pupils can lead to better school performance, whether in terms of pupils' improved behaviour, engagement or attainment.
- **Personalisation** – It utilises pupil voice to ensure that schools are meeting the specific needs of their pupils.

Impact of global learning

This project was an important step towards embedding global learning into the curriculum. In order for students to engage with issues beyond their immediate experience, the staff felt that a structure should be created to support other work that takes place in individual classes. A school council has now been established and a system of 'circle times' acts as a conduit for students and staff to discuss issues and relay them to the council. Decisions are then disseminated to the school community. School council meetings have taken place, with important issues such as the introduction of a 'house' system, student lockers and improvement in ICT provision on the agenda. It increased awareness of the students' impact in the school and of their role as an example to others, enabled a greater student participation in decision-making and developed a feeling of inclusion.

Pitcheroak School in context

Pitcheroak School is for pupils aged from 4 to 19 with a range of moderate and severe learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders, behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, and other increasingly complex learning and communication difficulties. 76% of the pupils are boys. The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium is above average. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic communities, or who speak English as an additional language, is below the national average. Students in the sixth form are able to benefit from attending the local college of further education and from work placements on a weekly basis as part of their course.