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## Hearing All Voices – Transforming the Lives of Vulnerable Youth: The power of participation

By Carolyn Conway, Grazyna Bonati, Liz Arif-Fear, Tricia Young

### Introduction

Through the power of rights-based, participatory, student-focused learning, disadvantaged<sup>1</sup> and vulnerable teenagers at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training), significantly transformed their lives for the better. Child to Child's London-based project [Hearing All Voices](#) worked in secondary schools and Colleges of Further Education<sup>2</sup> with young people from a range of marginalised groups. These included migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (MARs), students with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN), low-achievers and those from low income families. What they shared in common, was a sense of disengagement from parents, teachers, classmates and wider communities. *Hearing All Voices* enabled these students to take more control over their lives and build a better future for themselves. The project led to substantive transformations academically, socially and emotionally, equipping students with the 'soft skills' more likely to lead to employment and improved life chances overall. Teachers' professional practice was also positively impacted as they were supported to deepen their understanding of how to facilitate meaningful participation of young people and see for themselves why working in this way unlocks potential.

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of disadvantage in the UK education system is any child who qualifies for free school meals or has done at any point in the last six years. However, for this project, disadvantaged students are identified as: migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (MARs) and those at risk of becoming NEET.

<sup>2</sup> Further education (FE) colleges in the UK offer education in addition to that received at secondary school often with a vocational focus. They also provide ESOL (English for speakers of Other Languages) classes for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

*Hearing All Voices* offers insight into what can happen when there is a radical shift in the relationships between adults and young people, a shift which disrupts the traditional power dynamics typically found in educational settings.

## Meaningful participation of children and young people

Meaningful participation is central to the ethos and success of *Hearing All Voices*. It is a right set out in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>3</sup> which calls for adults to listen to young people and to take their views seriously in all matters that affect them. In order to fully engage children and young people in meaningful forms of participation, they must be included and actively involved in decision-making and power-sharing processes and structures. The greater their involvement, the greater the benefits and simultaneously the impact of learning.<sup>4</sup> Activities which simply involve children *taking part* or those where children are *manipulated* to represent adults' views or fulfil adult agendas are not considered genuinely participatory and would not produce the same results.<sup>5</sup> There is considerable evidence to suggest that the role of the adult facilitator is central to the achievement of quality children and young people's participation.<sup>6</sup> *Hearing All Voices* equips adults with the vital competences to successfully support quality participation.

## Participation in practice: *Hearing All Voices*

By promoting students' voices through meaningful participation, *Hearing All Voices* (HAV) aims to engage young people as active citizens. In so doing, it increases academic achievement and enables them to develop 'soft skills' that enhance employability – Agency, Communication and Teamwork (ACT) – thus ultimately improving their life chances.<sup>7</sup> In this way *Hearing All Voices* is designed to directly tackle the growing inequality in life chances for disadvantaged young people and the culture of low expectations they routinely experience.<sup>8</sup>

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3 UNCRC Article 12 (respect for the views of the child) states that: 'Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously'. Available at: [https://353ld710iigr2n4po7k4kgvv-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC\\_summary.pdf](https://353ld710iigr2n4po7k4kgvv-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_summary.pdf)

4 Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship UNICEF

5 Skelton, T. (2007). 'Children, Young People, UNICEF and Participation', *Children's Geographies*, 5(1-2), pp.165-181.

6 Wyness, M. (2013). 'Global standards and deficit childhoods: the contested meaning of children's participation', *Children's Geographies*, 11(3), pp. 340-350.

7 See The Sutton Trust-EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit available via:

<http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/> for an accessible summary of research outlining the evidence for the positive impact of social and emotional learning on improving achievement and life chances of disadvantaged students.

8 Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (October 2014): 'Cracking the code: how schools can improve social mobility'. Retrieved from <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2014-soc-mob-child-pov.pdf>

Project activities were piloted over three years (2013-2016) with eight groups of 13 to 17 year-olds, a total of 126 students. Each group met once a week for approximately 18 weeks. It became abundantly clear over the course of the pilot that both adults and young people found meaningful participation extremely challenging. Teachers struggled to create participatory spaces and adopt appropriate skills and attitudes to effectively support participatory processes. Young people initially lacked both the *hard* and *soft* skills needed to maximise their participation and also displayed a deep-rooted mistrust of adults' promises to listen to them and support them to take action.

As one 16-year-old participant put it:

*'We expected just a 'normal' project – to talk about it. Not to actually DO anything!'*

To address these issues, a two-phase approach was adopted. The first phase focused on equipping adults with non-directional coaching skills to enable them to facilitate and support meaningful participation; in the second phase, the adults used these new skills to facilitate students' participation in a cycle of Child to Child's Step Approach, participatory action research intended to bring about positive social change. Training materials to support these phases were co-produced in partnership with adult and student stakeholders.

*Phase 1: Prepare to ACT* – adults were trained using specially developed HAV training materials. These materials contained reflective professional development modules on applying non-directive coaching techniques in the classroom, which aimed to improve teachers' ability to work in partnership with young people and enhance levels of participation. Teachers were immediately able to apply their newly acquired skills in supporting young people to *Prepare to ACT* and develop their Agency, Communication and Teamwork skills. This initial stage provided both adults and young people with the necessary *ACT* skills to implement Phase 2 of the project.

*Phase 2: The Child to Child Step Approach.* Students took part in one cycle of Child to Child's award-winning participatory action learning approach.<sup>9</sup> Following the steps shown in Figure 1, young people select an issue of concern, take action to address it and bring about positive change in their lives, schools and the wider community.

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<sup>9</sup> UNICEF awarded Child to Child the *Maurice Pate Award for Innovation in Education* describing the Step Approach as a revolutionary way of enabling communities to improve their lives by engaging children. It has been used successfully over the last 30 years impacting thousands of children in over 70 countries.

## CHILD TO CHILD STEP APPROACH

### Living Place

(school, home or community)

### Learning Place

(classroom)

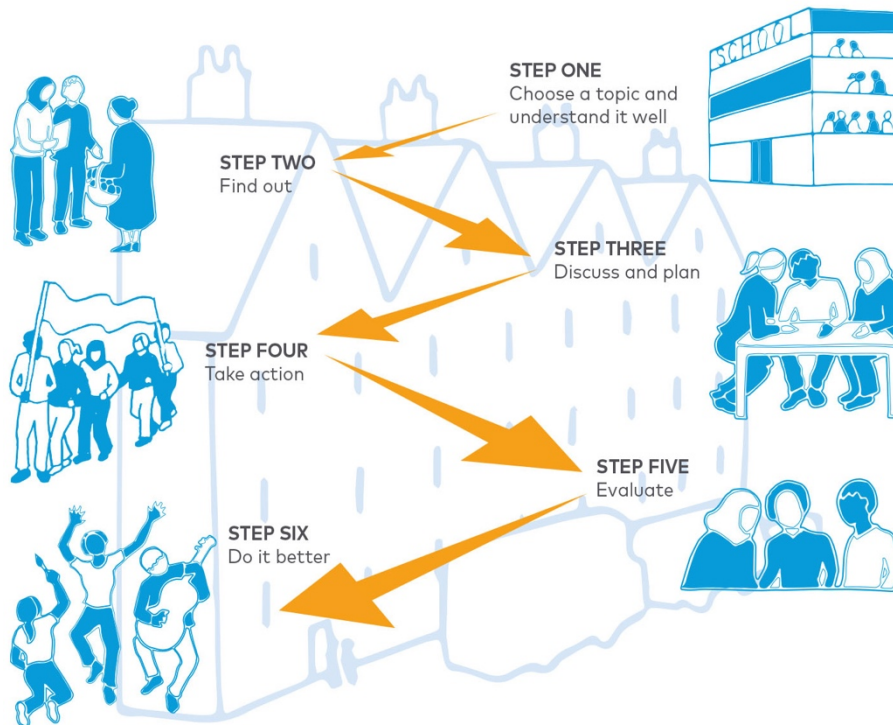


Figure 1: The Child to Child Step Approach

In addition to utilising and building on students' ACT skills, the process also developed a range of other skills: language skills; learning skills such as researching, reasoning, coming to conclusions; and life skills<sup>10</sup> such as problem-solving, decision-making, critical and creative thinking, empathy, self-awareness, negotiation and building relationships with others.

Teachers drew on the bespoke training materials, which contained ideas for activities for each step in the process.

Each group of students created their own journey following these steps:

#### *Step 1 – Choose a topic*

School staff conducted a range of participatory activities to help students think about the issues directly affecting them and the wider community, both locally and internationally. This produced a great deal of interesting discussion, even among students who had previously struggled to communicate effectively in a school setting. It also provided staff with real insight into the views and lives of their students.

<sup>10</sup> Life skills have been defined by the World Health Organisation as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life'."



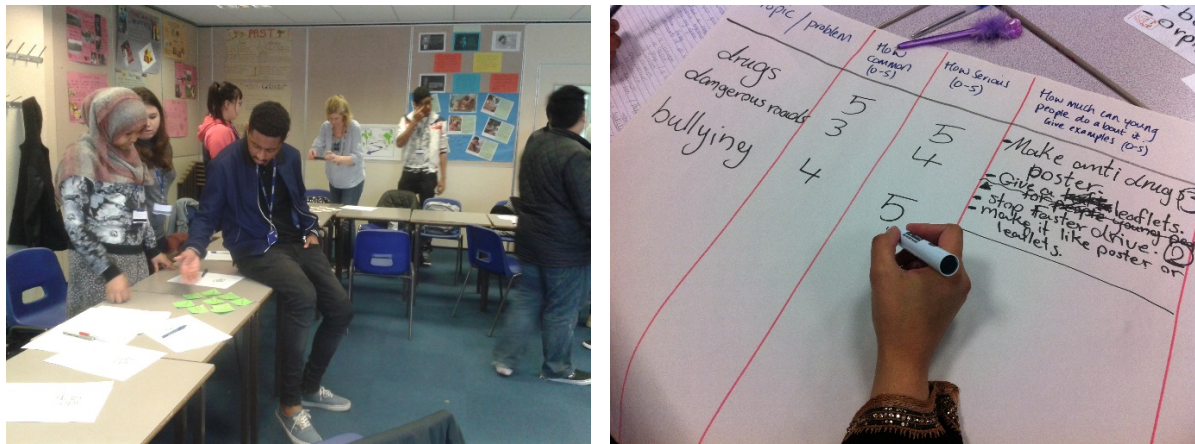


Figure 2: Students discuss their choice of topic and rank ideas

Students identified and addressed issues such as: knife crime, safety on the street, bullying, homelessness and the challenges faced by Ebola-affected orphans in Sierra Leone.

### Step 2 – Find out

Students conducted desk-based research and also designed and carried out surveys in their schools and in the community to learn more about their chosen topics.



Figure 3: Year 8 students (12–13 year olds) conduct street surveys to gather local residents' opinions on street safety in their area

By this point in the project, students were becoming much more committed and enthusiastic as they began to trust that what they were doing would have an impact in the real world. This had a positive knock-on effect on their relationships with their teachers and support staff as they became more trusting and increasingly more confident. It was the first time most of the students had ever interviewed members of the public. It was a nerve-racking but enjoyable experience!

### Step 3 – Plan action

Students shared the information they had collected in Step 2 and together developed action plans to address their issue. Students further developed their ACT skills as they found they needed to compromise and cooperate with each other when working together. They demonstrated team-working skills well beyond their capacities at the start of the project. The young people came up with a vast array of inventive and creative ideas to address the issues they identified.

### Step 4 – Take action

Some of the actions taken are described below.

- Homelessness

After learning about the needs of rough sleepers at a local charity, students raised over £100 through a film screening at their college and selling homemade refreshments. They also collected and donated 20 bags of second-hand clothes for service users.



Figure 4: Delivering clothes collected for a local charity supporting rough sleepers in London

- Bullying in schools

On discovering that bullying was extremely widespread among their peers at college, three groups set out to address this issue by creating Facebook pages with original and found material and launching awareness-raising poster campaigns. One group also designed and delivered a successful interactive anti-bullying workshop for their college.



Figure 5: Anti-bullying poster designed by students

- Children in difficult circumstances (Ebola-affected orphans)

Students from migrant and asylum-seeking backgrounds, some of whom have come to the UK as unaccompanied minors, decided to focus on an issue that resonated with them: the challenges facing Ebola-affected children in Sierra Leone – ‘because they’re less well-off than us.’ Through the *Child to Child (CtC) Pikin to Pikin Tok* project, they learned about an orphanage in a remote area of Sierra Leone. They discovered that all of the 59 children living in the orphanage (all of whom had lost parents/caregivers to Ebola) wanted above all else to go to school and, if possible, have running water at the orphanage. The students launched a fundraising campaign, holding a raffle, requesting donations for raffle prizes from local shops and selling tickets at the college. They set up a stall at the college International Day, selling homemade food and drink, giving manicures and engaging people in a presentation about the plight of these orphans. They also designed a logo and T-shirt and made a video with messages of support for the children. Raising a grand total of £750 they were able to pay for a full year of schooling for the children and have sparked interest in other schools regarding fundraising to build a well and improve the orphanage buildings. The children in Sierra Leone subsequently sent back a video to thank the students for their efforts.





Figure 6: Fundraising for the orphanage (left) and children at the orphanage in Sierra Leone (right)

All of the students were immensely proud of their achievements – which certainly surpassed the expectations of often sceptical teachers.

#### *Step 5 – Evaluate*

Various reflective activities were conducted to help students evaluate their work, their level of participation in the project and to decide if they needed to take more action.

#### *Step 6 – Do it better*

The students supporting the children in Sierra Leone were concerned about the project's lack of sustainability and wrote a letter to a number of international aid organisations operating in Sierra Leone requesting funding for the orphanage.

### Impact – the difference *Hearing All Voices* makes

Although students came from diverse backgrounds, each student's level of personal growth and success was clear to see, in addition to the enormous change in teachers' attitudes and practices. Changes were evident on multiple levels:

#### *Transformation in young people's lives*

At the outset, some of the participating students were extremely disengaged, with low levels of attainment, negative attitudes and poor life and employment prospects. Participating in the project enabled them to become more confident and resilient and to develop a sense of agency. One teacher noted:

*'Some students seem completely changed characters.'*

*Learning and study skills* improved, as students became more involved in their projects, developing IT, literacy, numeracy, research and business skills as they set up Facebook pages, sold raffle tickets and food, designed logos, slogans, posters, leaflets and T-shirts. Students became more engaged in and committed to their studies. One student realised he had not been applying himself at college and re-enrolled for the following year.



As students became increasingly involved in project activities, they also developed a range of *life skills* – communication, decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking and creative thinking, enabling them to achieve greater levels of participation and ownership as they selected their own topics, conducted research, made their own decisions concerning what action to take and gradually assumed more responsibility for what they did – once again boosting their self-confidence and sense of agency. Students realised that they were capable of more than they had thought and both students and teachers were amazed by the change and development in the students' abilities and attitudes towards work. Most evident of all, was students' increasing levels of *resilience* and *confidence*:

*'They are starting to believe in themselves and that what they have to say is important enough to express openly. Their self-esteem has increased greatly – they are feeling good about themselves.'* (Teacher)

*'Everything is possible if you try hard ... don't give up. We are more confident.'* (Student)

Changes were particularly noticeable in female students who were initially side-lined in the group:

*'Girls started taking an active part, contributing their own ideas, both in all-girls and mixed groups.'* (Teacher)

There was also greater inclusion and marked impact on learners with special educational needs. A student on the autistic spectrum worked cooperatively with others to design the poster in Figure 5. Two students --twins – with multiple health issues and learning difficulties, attended and contributed to a great many sessions despite generally poor attendance at the college. They cited the project as the only reason they continued to attend after their exams had finished.

- *Transformation in young people's relationships with each other*

Improved communication and team working skills are the central focus of the first phase of *HAV: Prepare to ACT*. The way in which students utilised and developed such skills was evident throughout their implementation of the Step Approach. Relationships improved in even the most challenging of groups as individuals pulled together to achieve a common purpose. Many students initially found it very difficult to express an opinion and listen to others but the project helped to develop their abilities to express themselves. One teacher noted:

*'This was initially a very hostile group. ... They would not speak to each other at first, but this term they have really changed ... they became delightful, with greatly improved communication skills, much greater collaboration and improving sense of agency.'* (Teacher)

Students were able to work together more effectively, using and improving their newly developed communication and teamwork skills.

- *Transformation in young people's relationships with adults*

Students moved from being highly dependent on teachers and adult facilitators to becoming both significantly more autonomous and able to work collaboratively, only seeking assistance from adults when necessary. Students were aware of this shift in autonomy. Intergenerational relationships became more trusting. This had a substantive impact on behavior in the classroom:

*'(I learned how to) get support and help when I need them.'* (Student)

*'I am freer, more relaxed about student behaviour – I can maintain discipline without being so controlling.'* (Teacher)

- *Transformation in attitudes of adults to young people*

Adults' attitudes towards their students changed completely. They developed greater appreciation of the capacities of young people and were more willing to listen to their students and take their views seriously. Greater mutual respect was evident. After some resistance to allowing students more autonomy in one session, a teacher commented with some surprise: *'They are actually quite skilled!'*

- *Transformation in teaching practices in the classroom*

Even very experienced teachers became aware that creating more participatory environments and facilitating participatory activities demanded a significant change from their usual practice in terms of their own attitudes, behaviours, skills and techniques in the classroom. Over the course of the project profound shifts in all these areas were achieved. One college trainer noted:

*'Teacher X has changed completely – this project has affected the rest of his teaching – his approach to the students and teaching has changed. He is more confident, more willing to challenge them – more comfortable with them and a much better teacher. He communicates with them better. Their expectations of what they can do have been raised. Teaching style has changed from teacher giving out information to sharing working in partnership, exploring things in common.'*

The greatest change in teachers' techniques was in being less *directive* and more willing to share power with students:

*'I've learnt to step back and let students drive the process.'*

*'I have become less controlling, allowing the students to participate more.'*

- *Transformation in relationships with the wider community*

An especially valuable change was the experiences students gained communicating with *members of the public* outside the classroom and a greater *sense of empathy* towards others. Not only did teachers notice students being *'nicer and more caring towards each other'*, but students started thinking about helping others more vulnerable than themselves outside of their own college:

*'I liked to help the children. I learnt not to think about myself but to think of others – the poor.'* (Student)

In addition to the beneficial impact felt within educational institutions as relationships strengthened between students and educators, relationships with the wider community were strengthened through greater engagement both locally and internationally. Students became more active as citizens through their involvement in the project, whether engaging with local issues such as safety on the street or the plight of rough sleepers, or international issues such as supporting Ebola-affected children/orphans in Sierra Leone. Several of the adults who engaged with participating students commented on how impressed they were with the students' levels of professionalism and desire to seriously engage with the selected issues. The long-term benefits of the project were wide ranging:

*'Negotiation skills, overall confidence dealing with people, respect for others, teamwork, awareness of charity work and contribution to society ... and an unforgettable experience!'* (Teacher)

## Conclusions: the way forward

*Hearing All Voices* demonstrates what can be achieved when staff and students have the skills, will and confidence to engage students in meaningful participation. It highlights the impacts that such activities have on students' academic, personal (social and emotional) development and well-being and on teachers' professional practice. Children and young people are equipped to become active citizens capable of making a real difference to their own lives and the lives of others. As one teacher summarised: *'Great concept. What education needs! It prepares them for life!'*

If participatory programmes such as *Hearing All Voices* were introduced at an earlier stage in education, could they prevent children from becoming disengaged in the first place? This is a question we should consider. If – as the evidence from *Hearing All Voices* would suggest – such participatory approaches are so successful, what impact could they have on younger children?

Proactively adopting early interventions such as *Hearing All Voices* could enable society to cut short – or ideally, prevent entirely - the cycle in which many young people find themselves trapped: emerging from schooling without the necessary skills to enter the labour market and/or becoming involved in anti-social and even criminal behaviour as a consequence of having become so marginalised by their experiences. As educators, citizens and duty bearers with a responsibility for upholding children's participation rights, we must

ensure that children can influence and play an active role in decisions which affect them. We have an obligation to fulfil our duties towards children and young people to enable them to find and use their voices, gain the skills they need and become fully engaged active citizens now in preparation for adulthood. In this way we might break the pattern of disengagement and disadvantage, unlocking the potential of all students and enabling them to fully realise their rights.

## Authors

*Carolyn Conway* designed and manages the *Hearing All Voices* programme. She has been working to promote the rights and participation of children and young people since 2006 when her association with [Child to Child](#) began. She is especially committed to transforming working practices in schools to make them more participatory environments in which young people have a voice.

*Grazyna Bonati* evaluated the *Hearing All Voices* project in its final year, after being involved in Child to Child for the last 26 years. She is an international consultant on child participation, and how it can contribute to many aspects of community development.

*Tricia Young* is the Director of Child to Child. She has worked for a diverse range of organisations in the UK NGO sector and is committed to realising the rights of disenfranchised populations worldwide. She is working to position Child to Child as the key focal agency for children's participation globally.

*Liz Arif-Fear* is a graduate in Human Rights (MSc) and has been working with Child to Child since 2016. As a former ESOL teacher and passionate human rights advocate, she is committed to promoting the rights of children and their right to participation, self-expression and quality education.