

## **Development of a method for student's participation (An example from the Republic of Ireland)**

**Siobhan O'Higgins, Elena Nora Delaney, Miriam Moore, Saoirse Nic Gabhainn and Jo Inchley**

### **Summary**

The aim of this research was to demonstrate how effective a participative research methodology that adheres to health promoting principles and the Health Promoting School (HPS) approach can be. The achievements that this research focused on were student empowerment and participation. Empowerment is the third of ten principles established by the Egmond Agenda (2002) and identified in the Halkidiki Resolution (1997).

- The methodology described in this research was an attempt to marry a health promoting process with health promotion research
- This research methodology is an example of how to capture sets of indicators for a health promoting school, from the student's perspective
- The participative research methodology can be applied in any school in order to inform the development of policies and school plans that will then adhere to HPS principles.
- The indicators identified by this group of students are relevant for their own school, but could also be applied to other school settings if they were agreed, by all the stakeholders, as being relevant indicators of a health promoting school.

The research presented here was undertaken in schools in the Republic of Ireland as part of a larger cross-national study.

### **Indicators**

In Ireland, there was a focus on working with students in the classroom to develop indicators of the health promoting school. The philosophy of health promotion emphasises community participation as integral to the success of all health promoting interventions. An aligned step could be to develop, disseminate and adopt methods that enable all members of a community, such as a school, to participate in the development of appropriate health promotion indicators. Through participation in the process of this research the students may be empowered through the experience that their voices are being heard by adults and may then be acted upon. In Ireland, the National Children's Strategy (2000) outlines as the first of its three key goals, that 'Children will have a voice'. This research fits into this national goal, using participative techniques to facilitate students to have their views heard by teachers, legislators and other adults in positions of power.

This research focused on enabling students to identify indicators pertinent to them and their health within the context of their own school. Once identified by students, the indicators could be used to explore the extent to which their

school may be considered a health promoting school. The indicators identified by the students have relevance for the individual, classroom, and the school.

### **Aim of work**

The aim of this research was to facilitate students to iterate the indicators they feel best reflect a health promoting school. It employed participatory methods in which students are seen as social actors rather than research objects (Cotmore, 2003).

Students are active and vital members of school communities, and the process of listening and recording their voices needs to be undertaken in ways that honour them. Children in Irish society are not accustomed to having their views being taken into account either at home or at school (Lynch, 1998; O'Quigley, 2000). Thus, in order to facilitate students to communicate their views in totality, the protocols employed need to be child-centred and age-appropriate. .

In engaging with students we, as researchers, gain valuable insights into their perspectives and so it is important the students also gain from the process. This is achieved through student empowerment both by having their views valued and enjoying the process; having fun is viewed as an important aspect of being and staying healthy (O'Higgins, 2002). If a truly reciprocal relationship can be developed, the process will have honoured the students. Further, in this process, students are not excluded from either the data analysis or data reporting phases of research, and thus remain in control of their data for an extended period.

This research adapted protocols first developed in Ireland in 2004 (Nic Gabhainn & Sixsmith, 2005; 2006). In order to include students' perspectives on well-being in the process of developing a national set of well-being indicators for Ireland, a study design that attempted to honour students whilst eliciting rich data was developed. That protocol involved individual students creating data and groups of students analysing and reporting on both analysis and synthesis of the data originally collected. Subsequent investigations revealed that there were substantial differences in the perspectives of parents, teachers and students on the datasets (Fleming, 2004). All groups shared the understanding that family and friends are very important for students' well-being, but there were differences in many other areas. These differences emphasise the value of involving students directly, rather than accessing their views through adult proxies.

### **Description of research**

The current research was conceived by Dr. Saoirse Nic Gabhainn in conjunction with Jo Inchley (Scotland) and conducted by researchers Siobhan O'Higgins, Elena Nora Delaney and Miriam Moore. Students from three different types of schools in Dublin City were involved in the process during the spring

term 2006. All student groups were in their 4<sup>th</sup> year of post-primary education and were approximately 16 years old.

Three schools were selected to represent single sex and co-educational establishments, though the schools were otherwise broadly similar. The school principals were contacted and parental consent requested in advance. Three workshops were held in each school with three different class groups. The protocols for the workshops with the students were standardised, although variations inevitably arose due to the participative nature of the workshops.

- Students in the first group were asked to respond to a single question: “If you went to a new school, what would it need to have for it to be a healthy place?” They wrote their responses on flashcards, which were subsequently collected by the researchers. Thus workshop 1 focused on data generation.
- Students in the second group were given the cards generated by those in the first group and asked to place them into categories. Students used as many categories as they felt were appropriate and also added to the responses as they wished. Thus workshop 2 focused on data analysis.
- Students in the third group were given the categories developed by those in the third group (along with the content of the categories). They also added cards as they wished. This group organised the categories into schematic representations on large posters, the format and presentation of which was decided by the students within their groups. Thus workshop 3 focused on data synthesis and presentation.

The rationale and format of the workshops were explained to the students before their own consent to participate was requested. In order to honour the students and their willingness to give their time, energy and opinions to the researchers, the protocols were devised to be as ‘student friendly’ as possible and games were played at the end of each workshop. Students in each school then produced schema that represented what the students in that school felt were relevant indicators of a school that would be good for their well-being (i.e. a health promoting school).

## **Main findings**

In all three workshops the students were active participants and worked hard to generate rich data, which they analysed and presented as schema that they felt would be well received by adults. Each student group produced similar indicators. All aspects of the health promoting school concept emerged, particularly around the physical and psychosocial environment. Student groups highlighted aspects of the school physical environment; this included aspects of building safety, hygiene, student space and facilities for sport and exercise. Access to healthy food and nutritional issues also emerged as being of particular importance. Interpersonal relationships featured strongly, particularly those between students and school staff. Students in two of the schools also emphasised the concept of discipline and authority in order to allow the school

to run effectively; for them to learn in class and to create an atmosphere of mutual respect.

This research verified how willing students are to become involved in such participative activities and their enthusiasm to present their ideas to adults who are willing to listen. Of particular importance are the holistic nature of the views they shared about how schools affect their health and their ability to creatively articulate what they believed would be indicators of a health promoting school.

Enjoyment was a key aim of the research process. The researchers conveyed this to the students at the beginning of each workshop and attempted to foster an environment that would support this aim. This was achieved in the way the researchers communicated with the students, in the playing of games and most importantly in listening non-judgementally to all that the students had to say. It was very gratifying how seriously the students engaged with their tasks and how much they enjoyed the creative process. There was very little 'messaging around' within the workshops. Previous work had shown how important it is for the researchers not to try and control the students' behaviour, for example, friends were allowed to work together.

All of the student groups stated that they were not interested in participating in the decision-making processes within the school; they felt it was a waste of time. School councils were perceived as just another form of tokenism. Most, if not all, of their interactions with adults in power, are based upon adult concepts of how to engage and communicate. Such attempts to engage with students are not felt by the students to be empowering and to be only nominally participative.

### **Recommendations to future health promotion schools projects**

The main implications for the evaluation and development of future health promoting schools projects fall under three headings:

- This particular protocol as a way of collecting rich and valid data from students has been clearly demonstrated as being effective and incorporating elements to help increase the degree to which participants are honoured as a part of the process.
- The participative methodology facilitates students to express their views in ways that are accessible and understandable to adults. The process attempts to empower students to express their views and so can be used to strongly advocate that students deserve (and can rise to deliver) an equal role within policy making alongside the other stakeholders in education.
- The voice of students in schools in relation to their needs deserves to be creatively iterated and explained to the adults within the system.

### **Challenges for future research in health promotion schools projects**

On the basis of this research project the challenges for future research related to HPS projects involves researchers going back to basics. As the main

stakeholders in the education system students' views need to be elicited using methodologies that honour them as full and active participants. The empowerment of the student needs to be at the hub of all our research efforts, employing health promoting research methodologies to inform our health promoting schools initiatives. Indeed, empowerment is one of the ten concepts of the Halkidiki Resolution (1997). Future research needs to include the development of ever more creative and empowering protocols that allow the voice of the child to be truly heard and faithfully represented.

## References

Cotmore R. (2004) Organisational Competence: The Study of a School Council in Action *Children and Society*, 18, 53-65.

Department of Health and Children (2000) *The National Children's Strategy – our children, their lives*. Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Egmond Agenda (2002) <http://www.euro.who.int/document/E78991.pdf>

Haudrup Christensen, P. (2004), Children's Participation in Ethnographic Research: Issues of Power and Representation. *Children and Society*, 18, 165-176

Fleming, M.M. (2004) Parent and Teacher perspectives of Children's Understanding of Well-Being. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Department of Health Promotion NUI Galway.

Jensen, B.B. & Simovska, V. (2002) Models of health promoting schools in Europe. <http://www.euro.who.int/document/e74993.pdf>

Lynch, K. (1998) The Status of Children and Young Persons: Education and Related Issues. In Healy, S. & Reynolds, S.B. (Eds.) *Social Policy in Ireland – Principles, Practices and Problems*. Dublin: Oak Tree Press.

ENHPS Halkidiki Resolution (1997) <http://euro.who.int/document/e62361.pdf>

Nic Gabhainn, S. & Sixsmith, J. (2005) *Children's Understanding of Well-being*. The National Children's Office: Dublin.

Nic Gabhainn, S. & Sixsmith, J. (2006) Children photographing well-being: facilitating participation in research. *Children and Society*, 20, 249-259.

O'Higgins, S. (2002) *Through the Looking Glass: an exploration of young people's perceptions of the words health and happy*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Department of Health Promotion NUI Galway.

O'Quigley, A. (2000) *Listening to Children's Views – the findings and recommendations of Recent Research*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank all those involved in this research: Maureen D'Eath, Health Promotion Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway. The principals and teachers in the participating schools. Most importantly, all the students in the three schools who gave of their time and energy to the process.