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The voice of children in a Junior Infants classroom

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How children take part in decision-making in a Junior Infants classroom

A Junior Infants teacher in St. Oliver Plunkett's National School gives the children in her class a voice in decision-making as often as possible. The junior infant children are new to school and very young, so this happens in very simple yet effective ways. The voice of the child in decisions-making is established in this teacher's class from the very first day of school.

On the first day of school, she gives each child an individual school teddy that they leave in school. These teddies can be used as breathing buddies when children are upset, story buddies during story time, and to help them have a voice in decision-making.

On the first day of term, she invites the children to sit in a circle and explains that they will have a morning check-in at the start of every day and a check-out at the end of every school day. She introduces the idea of a 'speaking object' at the beginning of every meeting and the children choose what object will become the 'speaking object'. Only the child holding the object may speak, so every child has a chance to have their voice heard.

The morning check-in meeting is used as an emotion check in and for the children to discuss and make decisions about:

- Which book do they want to read?
- Which movement break do they want?
- Which movie will they watch during lunchtime?
- Which play station will they play at during play-based learning time?

The afternoon check-out meeting is used as an emotion check in and for the children to:

- Reflect on the day and share their views.
- Suggest any changes they want in the classroom.
- Address things that happened during the day (explained below).

If a child wants to discuss an issue during the school day and the teacher or another child cannot listen respectfully due to classwork, being outside, not having the time etc., a note is written on the 'to be discussed' board. The teacher explains to the children that issues written on the 'to be discussed board' will be addressed during the check-out meeting to avoid the child feeling unheard or disrespected.

As the year progresses, the teacher introduces more ways of empowering the children to have a voice in decisions made in Junior Infants.

1. When choosing which book they will read, the children can place their school teddy beside the book of their choice.
2. The teacher uses coloured mats for the children to vote on which movement break they would like to experience during the day. The teacher gives them a variety of options, for example, 'children who would like to do Cosmic Yoga stand on the green mat, the children who would like to do a Go Noodle dance can stand on the yellow mat', etc.
3. She uses pegs with the children's names for them to vote on where they would like to play. For example, children who would like to play on the small world station peg their names on the red ribbon, children who would like to play with the water peg their names on the yellow ribbon, etc.
4. Another voting method is to put the children's names on lollipop sticks which can be placed in coloured buckets representing different activities or stories – e.g. if a child wants to pick Peter Pan as the story, they put their lollipop stick in the red bucket.
5. The teacher also uses sticky dots for children to vote, or drawing smiley faces, or the interactive whiteboard on which children can move pictures and names with their fingers.



The children often make very practical suggestions about how their voices can be heard in the classroom. These suggestions are always heard and implemented as much as possible.

How the children are ensured Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence

Space

- Children feel safe to express their views because the teacher starts the new term by explaining that they will have daily morning check-in and evening check-out meetings during which they can share their views in a safe way using a speaking object.
- The teacher allows enough time to listen to and hear children's views by having many ways for them to do this each day, such as check-in and check-out meetings, using their teddies to indicate what they want, a variety of voting methods and a discussion board.
- The teacher makes sure all children are heard by using listening and decision-making approaches that meet different children's needs.

Voice

- Children are provided with support to give their views through a variety of decision-making methods and the use of the discussion board, which ensures that no child's views are disrespected.
- Children can raise things that matter to them at many stages each day, including the check-in and check-out meetings, the use of the discussion board and the invitation to make practical suggestions about ways to have their voices heard in the classroom.
- Children are offered a variety of ways of giving their views, which the teacher builds on as the year progresses.

Audience

- The teacher shows the children that she is ready and willing to listen to them by using open body language, talking to children in age-appropriate ways, the availability of many ways for them to a voice in decision-making and acting on their views.
- Throughout each day, the teacher explains to the children what she can do about any requests they make or things they raise.

Influence

- Children know how much influence they can have on decisions because the teacher offers them choices about what book to read, what movie to watch or what activity to do. She also invites them to make practical suggestions about other ways to have their voices heard and acts on the suggestions they make, where possible.
- Children are given feedback at the daily check-out meeting and are given the opportunity to give the teacher feedback about what they liked and did not like.
- The teacher shares the impact of their views on decisions by explaining that all children can express their views throughout the day but that some days, their top decisions or choices will not be voted for.
- The teacher explains the reasons for decisions taken, which is often the result of a vote by all the children. She sometimes must explain to children that their views cannot be acted for reasons of safety, time or resources.