

# WHAT WE RECOMMEND



CATALYST



eucunet  
European Children's Universities Network



Funded by the  
European Union

# A GUIDEBOOK TO ORGANISING YOUR OWN 'WHAT WE RECOMMEND' WORKSHOP

## ACCORDING TO PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

**Don't limit a child to your own learning, for the child was born in another time.**  
— Rabindranath Tagore

### HOW WILL THIS BOOKLET HELP YOUR ORGANISATION?

We all know that we are living in a world that is in the process of transformation, and this applies to organisations as much as to anything else. Technological changes are forcing a process of rapid evolution, and these changes are occurring in ourselves, in our institutions and in society, and they are occurring exponentially. In order for us to adapt to these changes, we need to be able to think differently.

But how do we learn to think differently? One way is to consider things from a completely different viewpoint. This is the opportunity that looking at the world from the perspective of children gives us. It is a quick, efficient and powerful way of learning to think differently. We have a lot to learn from the directness, curiosity and values of children. And we must remember that we have a shared agenda – we all share the future that we create today.

This booklet offers suggestions on how your organisation can set up a 'What We Recommend' workshop, where young people are given the chance to share their views about the issues affecting your work so that you can face the inevitable changes with new perspectives and fresh ideas.

### WHAT IS SIS CATALYST?

SiS Catalyst is an initiative, co-ordinated through the University of Liverpool, U.K., promoting the need to involve children in the dialogue between society and our scientific and technological communities. It draws upon many different sources of ideas, energy and wisdom, from people and institutions around the globe, including government and non-government educational, cultural and scientific institutions and organisations, expert advisors and other individuals and groups who share our vision.

One of the key messages of the SiS Catalyst project is that children are integral members of our society, crucial stakeholders in the future. They need to be included in the development of policy or planning, especially when it directly concerns them.

A major activity of SiS Catalyst has been the 'What We Recommend' project, a series of workshops held in 20 different countries during 2014. It provided the opportunity for groups of 10- to 16-year-olds to reflect on education and to make recommendations on different aspects of Science in Society, and access to knowledge.

We have developed this toolkit as we wish to promote the development of public engagement with children activities for all organisations. We see these as a way of ensuring that the perceptions and viewpoints of young people are incorporated into institutional planning and policy development.

Although SiS Catalyst has worked primarily with educational organisations, the process can be expanded to all public bodies. In fact we recommend that all public bodies should carry out 'What We Recommend' activities.

### WHAT IS A 'WHAT WE RECOMMEND' WORKSHOP?

'What We Recommend' workshops were developed within SiS Catalyst, based on the knowledge gathered during all of our action-research on 'listening to and empowering children and young people'. Although 'What We Recommend' was developed specifically for SiS Catalyst the process we used can be easily adapted and reproduced to any context of having young people express their view on matters affecting them.

'What We Recommend' was designed as a one-day workshop with a group of young people who have never previously worked together. The workshop set up a series of activities designed to help prepare the young people to identify their own thoughts and come up with their own recommendations.

In order for young people to make their recommendations five steps should be carried out:

1. Informing the participants of the process and of how the results of your consultation with them will be used
2. Getting to know each other in order to make everyone less self-conscious and open to interaction, by using warm-up and energizer activities as a way to create a fertile atmosphere for expressing and sharing ideas
3. Creating a safe place where the young people will feel their views and opinions are valued, by collectively setting and agreeing on the rules so that children know they are respected and empowered
4. Stimulating the young people's thinking by engaging them in a mixture of group activities and individual activities, such as discussion games and the snowball process
5. Helping the young people choose the way they want to present their work, such as through a story, or a little drama, or some form of written expression.

This type of workshop needs focus and hard work from the young people but the first rule is to ensure that everyone is enjoying himself or herself!

We offered the organiser of What We Recommend workshops a timetable for running their workshop. They were allowed to adapt this timetable but we asked them to respect these 5 steps.

Based on a four-hour workshop, we suggested:

- 30 minutes dedicated to welcome, information and icebreaker
- 10 minutes to establish the contract
- 1h45 to get young people thinking and reflecting in group
- 1h15 to get the young people establish their recommendations
- 15 minutes for the evaluation by the young people

Depending on the age of the young people, their background, their links, some organiser transform the workshop into a two-day workshop. Time constraint pushes some other to a condensed session of less than 3 hours.

## HOW DOES A 'WHAT WE RECOMMEND' WORKSHOP CONNECT WITH PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT?

The European Union has stressed the crucial importance of Public Engagement. The most comprehensive discussion of Public Engagement has been carried out by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) at the University of West England (Bristol, UK), who offer this definition:

*Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activities and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.<sup>1</sup>*

The NCCPE categorise public engagement into three often-overlapping purposes of

- Informing
- Consulting
- Collaborating.

These purposes form the basic structure of the 'What We Recommend' process, in particular the need to *consult* young people and *collaborate* with them on the final outcomes of the project.

### The Importance of Children's Voices

SiS Catalyst promotes mutual learning and both sides of this learning opportunity – children and adults – need to be considered. Young people not only need to be engaged in the process, they also need to be empowered as a consequence of their involvement. This will require an open and honest relationship with the young people, based on the recognition that what they say is important and will be acted upon.

For many young people the opportunity of having their views and opinions genuinely included in the process of planning and developing future initiatives is in itself a very empowering thing. The 'What We Recommend' workshops

<sup>1</sup> The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement was established in 2007 to support a culture change in the higher education sector through public engagement activities. More information can be found on their comprehensive and valuable website: <http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/>

enable young people to consider and learn about their own decision-making: to gain a greater understanding into how they choose between options, and a deeper comprehension about the present and future consequences of choices they are making in their own lives.

Authenticity is an essential prerequisite of public engagement. The need for both the adults and the young people to speak in an authentic voice with openness and truthfulness must be communicated to the young people throughout the whole process. In order to gain an insight into the viewpoint of children, this authenticity must be a two-way process.

Thus the workshops benefit both the organisation listening to the children's recommendations and the children themselves, who through the workshops gain greater self-assurance and confidence that they have a place in the society they live in.

### Motivating the young people.

No learning or engagement is possible without motivation, since it is motivation that sets the agenda, whether participants are aware of this or not. Children often have their own very complex motivations, completely different from adults' (which is one reason why it is so crucial to hear their points of view). Children's agendas, however, are often underestimated or neglected, with the risk of imposing the agenda of the institution or of the person organising the encounter, thus confusing children's motivations with the adults' desire to motivate them.

Children should be allowed to define why they are interested (or not interested) in a specific piece of knowledge. This will alter the level of control imposed on the children, allowing them to choose what is important to them on issues they deal with in their daily life. The adults must be ready to receive not what they wanted from the children but what the children wanted to share with the adults.

## HOW CAN YOU GO ABOUT SETTING UP A 'WHAT WE RECOMMEND' WORKSHOP?

### Preliminary questions

As you begin considering a 'What We Recommend' workshop it is advisable to ask three important questions:

- Why would your organisation wish to have a dialogue with young people?
- What are the benefits to your organisation?
- How will the young people benefit?

### Kinds of people involved

Identifying a group of young people to work with requires careful consideration. Ideally the group should involve young people from a variety of backgrounds including those from both wealthy and poorer neighbourhoods. It is also important to include young people from minority backgrounds, such as those with disabilities, from ethnic minorities or from social or ethnic groups traditionally side-lined. For the SiS Catalyst 'What We Recommend' events the young people were aged between 10 - 16 years old. This mixture of ages was found useful but not essential. The most important thing is that young people feel respected and trusted.

Getting such a group together will usually require working through one or more intermediary or go-between, such as a community-based organisation, one or more schools or a faith group. These intermediaries need to be clear about the purpose of the work and need to be in agreement with this purpose. A neutral third party, who is neither the teacher nor the parent of the child, is the best option as such a party is less likely to unintentionally influence the children's openness to

the ideas under discussion or their personal expression of ideas.

The facilitator is the guardian of the process of conversation and reflexion, becoming accessible through eye level interaction and appropriate language. The facilitator is not an expert, but is there to guarantee the smooth running of the workshop and the quality of the discussion, making sure that everybody is given the time and attention to express their opinion. The facilitator will also be there to recap and analyse what has been said, but not to teach, convince or judge. While resisting the temptation to answer all questions, the facilitator will encourage the young people to reflect back on the questions and their responses.

It might also be useful to invite a representative from a local authority to join the discussion near the end of the workshop.

### Choice of location

The choice of location can vary but it is important to remember that this choice sends a strong message to the children. The aim of the location is not to impress the children but to help them feel relaxed and in a safe space. Within the room, the best set-up is often a circle of chairs, with the facilitator sitting in the circle to be perceived as part of the group rather than as the 'teacher'.

## INSIGHTS GAINED FROM SIS CATALYST 'WHAT WE RECOMMEND' WORKSHOPS

### Start from what the participants know

Our workshops asked the young people for recommendations on higher education. To make them aware of the power of knowledge we asked them to think about a situation where something small went wrong for them recently and how knowledge and technology helped to make it right. We chose to start with something very down to earth that they could relate to very easily. We followed by asking them to think of one of their problems that had not been solved, and see if there was any way that more knowledge might improve the situation. This discussion led us to discussing how important knowledge is in order to improve the world and to exploring the links between the production of knowledge, the sharing of knowledge (including the place of higher education) and the people who benefit from the knowledge.

### Allow the young people to create the rules for the workshop

Giving the young people control over the 'contract' underlying the workshop is an important ingredient leading to a successful workshop. In particular, we have found the following activities helpful:

- Ask participants if they can explain what a contract is. (Contract: An agreement between two parties.)
- Let participants establish their own rules for the wellbeing of the workshop.
- Encourage the participants to think about conditions that will help or hinder communication.
- Write down on a paperboard every rule they come up with.
- Always make sure that the contract is framed in positive rather than negative language, i.e., that it starts with 'we will...' rather than 'we will not ...'.

There are also three important questions that must be considered and shared at the beginning of the workshop:

1. What are the participants expecting from each other?
2. What are they expecting from the adults sponsoring the workshop?
3. What are the adults expecting from them?

### Let the workshop be always aware of the rights of the children

Making children aware of their own right to decide on procedure will empower them not only during the workshop but also in their daily life. An atmosphere of freedom is a necessary condition for dialoguing. The young people have to feel free to articulate what they want in the way they want.

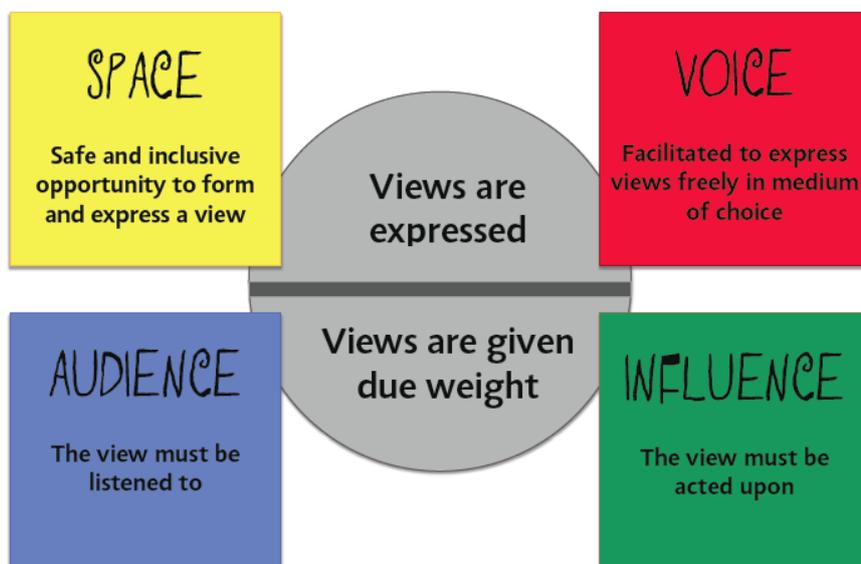
Children have the right to have their voice heard and listened to. Their voice is a very powerful tool. The facilitator and any other adults present must ensure that they are not being tokenistic and are not just using the children for their own proposes, but are consulting them from a genuine interest in institutional change.

It is *essential* that the young people are assured that what they say will not be used against them by others. During one of our 'What We Recommend' workshops, for instance, a child raised the problem of the corruption in his country, expressing his view of who was responsible for the corruption. This statement could have put himself and his family in grave danger, and it was our duty to let him know that his view was welcomed in the workshop but that we kept its confidentiality.

### Making listening a central part of the workshop

Organising a workshop is an invitation to the young people to express their views. This activity will be useless (or worse, offensive) if the young people do not perceive that the adults are listening to them, with the genuine possibility of being influenced by their views. The following figure illustrates the different aspects required in a listening process.

## Listen to and empower children and young people



Source : Laura Lundy, 2011



## CHOOSING THE TOPIC FOR A PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN PROCESS.

The identification of the topic or questions to be explored with the children is the most important element of any public engagement activity. It should also relate to both their reality and the intended purpose of the activity being developed.

The choice of topic should be entered into only on the basis of a genuine desire to listen to the opinions and perspectives of children. This intention to listen to the viewpoint of young people also needs to be adaptable to the decisions being made by the organisation itself. There is no point in asking for recommendations that will never be considered at the higher levels of the organisation.

On the other hand, the young people need to understand the limitations of any action that you can deliver on. For example if you are asking young people to make recommendations about the development of an exhibition, a university children-focused activity or a specific service by a public authority then they need to be clear as to how much responsibility for change you actually have.

And yet, children should not be limited in the scale of their recommendations or thinking since the opportunity to 'think big' is an essential first step. This can be followed by discussion about what is practical, with care being taken to ensure that the young people are given the opportunity to genuinely reflect on why options are realistic or unrealistic.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The ethical guidelines produced by SiS Catalyst ask that the ethical implications of the following the key issues must be considered before organising any event:

- the aim of the project/activity
  - Why are you doing this? What is the purpose of the event? How will the reflections of the children be used? Will the right people be involved? How have the children been selected?
- consent and assent of participants
  - Have the children and their parents been given enough information in order to give consent (parents) assent (children)
- data protection and privacy
  - What kind of information will be collected and how will it be used?
- Internet safety
  - Have you considered 'netiquette rules' if computer used by children? If personal data collected how will be it stored and who will have access to it?
- social implications
  - Have you considered the longer term responsibilities that might arise as a consequence of this activity?

**The ethical guidelines produced by SiS Catalyst can be found at [www.siscatalyst.eu/ethics](http://www.siscatalyst.eu/ethics)**

From our experience young people willingly engage in meaningful and deep discussions about issues that they confront individually, within their local community, in the larger society and around the world. For many this process raises questions that cannot be answered during a workshop. It is important to ensure that the young people feel able to take these questions further. The opportunity to 'think big' can raise 'big questions'.

These big questions can work positively as spurs for personal research after the workshop is over. On the other hand, the opportunity to address major social values and global challenges can lead to feelings of frustration and anger. Whatever the response, young people should be encouraged to become aware of the ethical considerations and their own response to these considerations with the aim of integrating these issues into their daily lives. In particular, they should be encouraged to ask what changes they might make in their daily lives as a consequence of their increased awareness of the issues and their individual relationships to the issues.

As this is a two-way process the adults involved in the workshop must expect also to consider how they will integrate this knowledge into their daily life, as well as what further steps they are willing, or able, to take in addressing these issues.

### THEMES EMERGING FROM THE 'WHAT WE RECOMMEND' WORKSHOPS

Within our What We Recommend workshops we were asking the young people to reflect on their education and to identify what they would recommend to change. The workshops took place in 20 countries across the world during the first six months of 2014.

There were three main themes within the children's recommendations:

The first theme was around equality within education. Many of the groups specifically referred to the inequality between public and private education and there were many references to the need for education to be free, accessible and well resourced for all children and young people.

*We want free education and a good school* - Youth & Children's University of Greece, Athens, Greece  
*Make the educational level of Governmental and private schools equal* - Manthan Educational Programme Society, Ahmedabad, India

The young people wanted to learn in a safe environment and to have a better relationship with their teachers. They frequently recommended that the relationship with teachers would be better if it was more individual and supported their personal learning needs.

*Teachers should listened more carefully to students* - Junior Academy, ECHO, Amsterdam, Netherlands  
*We want individual approach to each student* - Malopolski University for Children, Chrzanów, Poland

The relevance of the curriculum was also a consistent theme, with the young people recommending that learning was more practical, experiential and better prepared them for the world after school. They also recommended that the opportunities to learn inside the school were linked more to the world outside of the school environment.

*Practical learning is not used enough: students should be able to use materials and do hands on activities - Children's University of MSA University October University, Egypt*  
*Education should not be confined to just being within school buildings - Coçukistanbul, Istanbul, Turkey*

### CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK!

The digital revolution has just started and our children will live in a world radically different from the one that we currently live in. As we plan and develop our institutions, practices and policies we have a responsibility to include the perspectives of children. They will inherit the world that we leave them and it is crucial that their voices and perspectives are incorporated into the adult decision-making processes of today. We recognise that taking young people's recommendations seriously will require a prioritisation of effort and time, plus a small amount of financial resource. However, collectively we are responsible for the future and we have to learn to think differently. Asking children what they think, and then acting upon that is a brave first step.

