



Irish Primary PE Association  
Cumann Corpoideachais Bunscoile na hÉireann

# Getting Started with Student Voice in Primary PE



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IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL  
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn



# Getting Started with Student Voice in Primary PE

## Introduction

Listening and responding to children's voices is central to their feelings and ownership of their experiences as well as shaping them in ways that promote continued participation in physical education and activity. Using student voice strategies in physical education lessons can help gradually amplify children's voices through making choices, sharing their perspectives, and directing and taking responsibility for their learning.

## What is student voice?

Student voice is a mechanism which requires intentional opportunities for students to authentically contribute to their experiences and preferences for the purpose of authoring or co-authoring their own and others' learning experiences (Iannucci & Parker, 2022). It involves and empowers children to be collaborators and decision makers regarding their own educational experience (Iannucci & Parker, 2022). Beyond just asking children to share their opinions and perceptions, it means speaking with children rather than for them (Fielding, 2004). In other words, student voice requires children's voices be listened to, understood, and enacted in practice. Adopting a student voice approach acknowledges that children have distinct perspectives and that their perspectives are valued.

## Why is student voice important?

Student voice empowers children to "speak and act...as critics and creators of educational practices" (Cook-Sather, 2018 p.17). Including the voices of children engages children in decisions that influence what and how they learn. Student voice makes for a more involved learning environment; rather than being passive recipients of what the teacher says, they become active learners. This active learning subsequently allows them to take ownership of their learning. Because they own it, what they learn is more relevant, they learn in ways that work better for them (Ni Chróinín et al., 2022), and they value their physical education learning more. Student voice puts children at the centre of the pedagogical decision-making encounter allowing them to learn how to be learners – the ultimate goal of education. The gradual acquisition of voice allows them to learn how to use their voice and make educational decisions about how and what they learn.

### How can you get started with student voice?

Using student voice takes practice and must be learned – by the children and the teacher. This handbook provides strategies for teachers to implement student voice in ways that build both teacher and student capacities. Within it you will find strategies to inform your teaching decisions regarding how and what children will learn. Embedding these student voice practices is an inclusive approach that can support relevant and worthwhile learning experiences for all children – not just the athletically privileged. Enacting these strategies, however, may require some changes in current teacher approaches as teachers have to learn how to release some control; and truly believe that children have the ability to make decisions about their learning. Implementing student voice requires teachers “to be courageous, compassionate, and confident enough to ease our grip on control” (Iannucci & Parker, 2022, p.46).

Children find their voice by using it, but they may not have much previous practice (especially in school), so progressively scaffolding opportunities for children to have authentic input in their own (and others’) learning experiences is important. They need to start with small choices and then proceed to larger more complex ones. If they are asked to make choices before they (or you) are ready the result is often a dismal failure and children end up confused and receive mixed messages about who is making decisions. How you act on the information children provide and the choices they make is also crucial to building trust (Iannucci & Parker, 2022). Through the consistent and progressive process of inviting children to use their voice, and as a teacher, **listening and responding** to that voice, trust can be built, and children will believe their voice is valued.

We hope this handbook provides you with a place to start. As has been said before, “start small, start smart, and don’t quit”. Let us hear about your journey.

#### References

- Cook-Sather, A. (2018). Tracing the evolution of student voice in educational research. In R. Bourke & J. Loveridge (Eds.) *Radical collegiality through student voice: Educational experience, policy and practice* (pp. 17-38). Springer Publishers.
- Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295-311.
- Iannucci, C. & Parker, M. (2022). Beyond lip service: making student voice a (meaningful) reality in elementary physical education. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 93(8), 40-48.
- Ni Chróinín, D., Parker, M. Coulter, M., & Sweeney, T. (2022). *Listening and responding to children’s voices in primary physical education*. Presentation at 4th CIASPE Congress, Luxembourg.



## STRATEGY 1:

# Using CHOICE to Find Voice



### Why?

Children like having choices about their participation. Making choices helps children figure out their preferences and gives them ownership of their learning. It is something they choose rather than the teacher telling them to do.

### How?

- Introduce two warm-up ideas in the classroom. Let the children vote / select in which warm-up activity the whole class will participate.
- Introduce two warm-up ideas in the classroom. Both warm-up activities take place at the same time in adjacent spaces. Each child chooses in which activity they wish to participate, but once they make the choice they cannot switch.
- Before the lesson outline that children will decide an activity at the end of the lesson that reflects the content of the lesson. Towards the end of the lesson allocate some 'free time' for children to show their learning.

"It was nearly the easiest when we started, we were doing gymnastics, so they got to pick their music for the warm up. So straight away they had their choice. And then they did their different stations. And then in the end, they were allowed to pick the station that they wanted to stay practicing at"  
(teacher)

"Explaining that you hope that they'll gain more enjoyment out of things, and that you want to try and make things more inclusive and more fun for them, and then maybe just start off small even something picking pairs or picking their partner and picking their groups and that kind of thing"  
(teacher)

"You could give them a choice of two activities, but the outcome is still the same" (teacher)

"It was a lot more enjoyable when she let us pick who we do the PE with and what we do and the way we got to pick what we were doing or we got to pick between two different options, and it made a bit more enjoyable than it would have been if it were just told what to do"  
(participant)

## STRATEGY 2

# Learning to Direct Play



### Why?

Children like to feel in control of their participation. Helping them learn how to direct their own play is important so they have the skills they need when opportunities for self-direction arise.

### How?

- Introduce a warm-up activity in the classroom (e.g. follow the leader/ pair chase/ ball passing/ moving to music) that involves pairs. In the classroom each pair agrees one change/ rule they will add to the activity. Pause mid-activity to allow the children to make another change if the activity is not working.
- Divide the class into small groups. Each group will participate in the same activity. After a few minutes of play challenge each group to make ONE change in how they are playing to make the activity better.
- Allocate 'free time' for children towards the end of the lesson. Use the same pairs as in the warm-up. Ask the children to devise a new activity to play based on the activity they played in the lesson.

"I tried to explain if they came up with a suggestion that wasn't safe or wouldn't work or whatever. I'd always try and explain it and help them adapt it a little bit so that it wasn't just a flat no, that they couldn't do it. That you try and work around and build it into something else if it wasn't going to work, if their idea wasn't going to work fully, that you'd give them some suggestions on what they could pick so you're not taking away the voice completely but moving and changing a little bit so that it will work"  
(teacher).

"We had a two-player game, we matched up into pairs and we would have to make the rule up. Everyone had their own rule and that made me feel like everyone was included in their own way"  
(participant)

"I really enjoy it because we get every now and again we get a choice and we get to pick what we're doing and sometimes we get to make up a game or a team"  
(participant)

## STRATEGY 3

# Identifying and Responding to Children's Preferences



### Why?

Understanding what is important to children in their participation is key to designing impactful experiences. Through strategies 1 and 2 children are practicing making judgments about their preferences. Alongside helping children learn to direct activities, it is important to identify and respond to their preferences. These strategies will provide an insight on children's individual and collective preferences that will help you to respond.

### How?

- **Write and Draw:** This is a classroom-based activity. Prompt the children by asking them to think about the features of PE they like/ dislike. For example, they may prefer practicing alone/ with a team. They may have a favourite type of activity. They may like playing in a specific space. They may like/dislike when activities are competitive. Ask each child to draw a picture that represents the features they like. Then ask them to write a short explanation of their picture.

- **Top 3:** This is another classroom-based activity. Divide the class into small groups/ tables. The group is given 10 statements about PE participation. Each group is then tasked to identify the 'top 3' most important statements for their PE participation.

How to play: provide the 10 statements to each group. Assign roles:

- ✓ A reader: reads each statement aloud
- ✓ A leader: manages group discussion of each idea in turn
- ✓ A reporter: records the number of each idea that is important to the group
- ✓ A referee: makes sure everyone gets a fair chance to contribute

Once the group has discussed each statement they must identify and rank the top 3 most important statements. Where needed, the leader can organise a vote using 'hands up'. Make sure the children know to come to you if they cannot agree. Each group sticks their 'top 3' onto a page and includes a short written explanation of their choices.

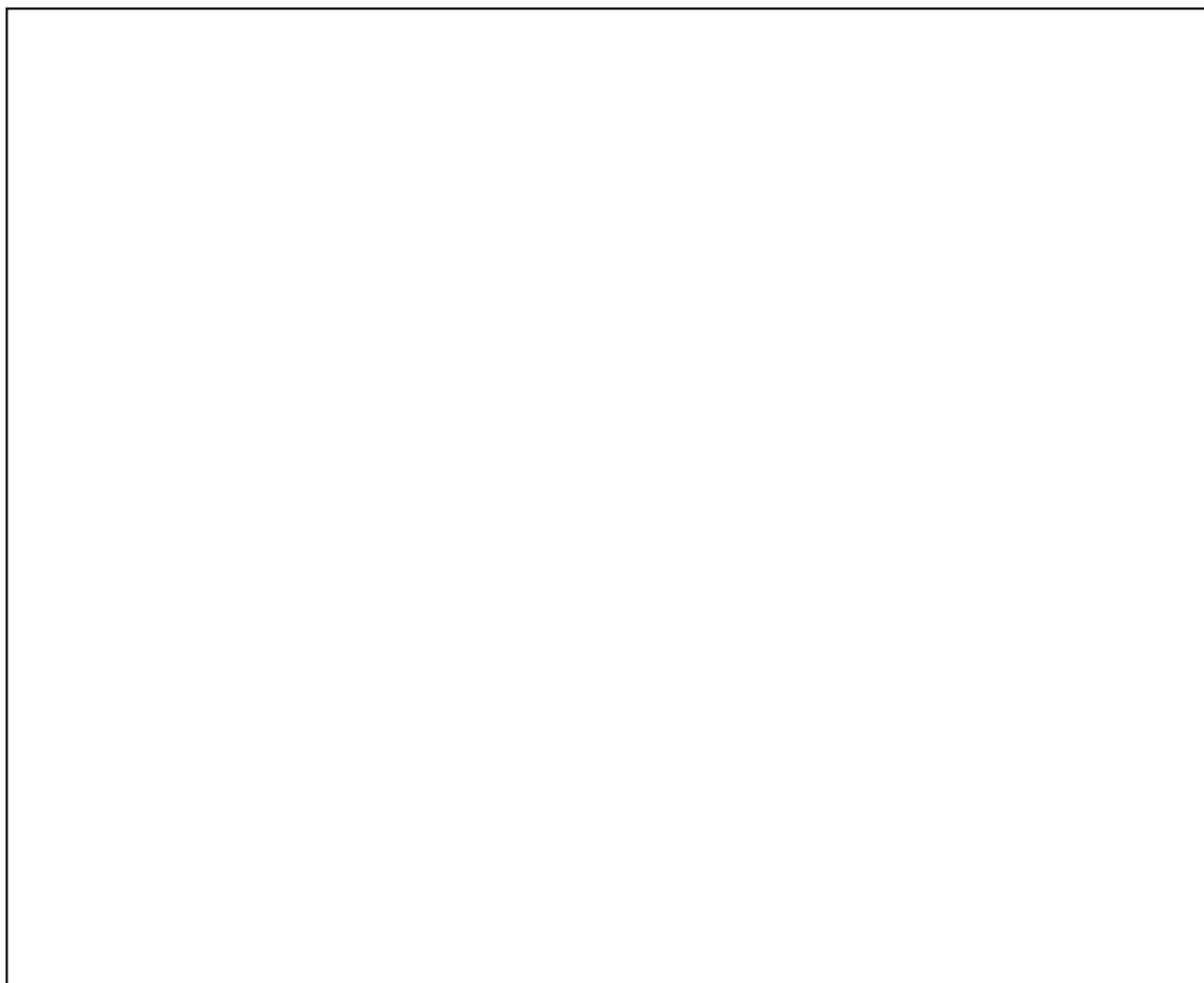
- **'Show and tell':** Ask children to bring in an artefact to talk about a physical activity they enjoy. This could be a photo/ gear/ a medal or certificate/ a (small) piece of equipment. Give each child a turn to share about the activity they enjoy. Lead a discussion of how PE might better connect to the children's out-of-school physical activity lives.

"You were listening to the children more... they were at the heart of it"  
(teacher)

"It was a lot more enjoyable once she let us pick who we do PE with and what we do"  
(participant).

**Write and Draw template**

**Draw a picture of what you like in PE**



**Tell me about your picture and what you like and don't like in PE**

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**Top 3 Statements (print a copy for each group and cut into 10 strips)**

**1. I like playing with my friends in PE.**

**2. I like practicing by myself in PE.**

**3. I like trying out and learning new things in PE.**

**4. I like playing games I already know.**

**5. I like games that I can win.**

**6. I don't like games that are too competitive.**

**7. I would like more PE times each week.**

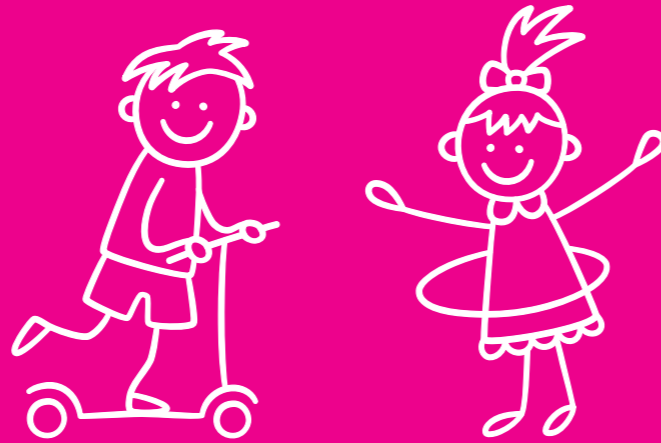
**8. I would like less PE time each week.**

**9. I like when we get to share our ideas of what happens in PE.**

**10. I prefer when the teacher tells us what to do.**

# STRATEGY 4

# Change One Thing



## Why?

Children are capable of making judgements about aspects of the experience that promote and inhibit enjoyment and learning. Giving children control over some decisions about their participation increases the impact of the experience and also builds towards their making decisions about their participation elsewhere.

## How?

Before the lesson: The children vote / nominate/ select three spokespeople who will represent their views to the teacher. Their role is to listen to their classmate, filter the information and make a collective decision on what to change by handing a 'change one thing' card to the teacher. In lesson 1 the children have the power to 'change one thing'. The spokespeople are the only ones who can play the 'change one thing' card. All three spokespeople must be agreed on the change to be made. The spokespeople represent their idea to the teacher. If safe, and possible, the change is made, and activity continues.

After the lesson debrief on the experience from the point of view of both the spokesperson and the other participants focused on the question 'How can we make this system work better next time?'

In lesson 2 keep the same spokespeople as lesson 1. Again, the spokespeople are given one 'change one thing' card.

In lesson 3 change the spokespeople. Again, they are given one 'change one thing' card. In lesson 4 keep the same spokespeople as lesson 3, this time they have 3 'change one thing' cards to play.

Continue to include new spokespeople and more 'change one thing' cards as the lessons continue.

"There were a couple of the quieter kids that I think definitely benefited more, they really came out of their shell a little bit ...I said 'you don't have to pick the activity that's there's loads of people at, you can be the only person at your activity station if you wanted'. So, then I think they felt a little bit more secure in making their decision, then that they could pick something, it didn't have to be the popular choice"  
(teacher)

"A big part of it is recognizing the children's role in making those responsible decisions in PE and children are well able to do that, but in PE it ranged from children they established rules and games, they had the choice to make new rules and they had routines, they had expectations, there was regular small group work, peer work, and they made decisions and as well as negotiated those decisions with each other to some extent, because obviously the rules weren't very fair sometimes"  
(teacher)

"Because when you are just in charge you would feel more important. You're in charge of making your own game, you feel more important"  
(child)



# Change One Thing



# STRATEGY 5

## Special Interest Badges



### Why?

Giving children opportunities to self-direct their participation increases the relevance of the experience and also aids their making decisions about their participation. A 'badge' can provide a target to build towards. Badges are earned through self-directed engagement, hard work, and persistence. Badges are not easy to earn, because they represent achievement and effort they have desirable.

### How?

Each child will take steps to engage in physical activity and earn a movement badge across a 5-week period.

#### Before: In the classroom

- The teacher presents the 5 badge choices (image below).
  - o ACTIVE WITH OTHERS: Creating and following through on being active with others, e.g. walking with a family member, physically active play with friends
  - o NEW TARGETS: Working towards a new individual goal, e.g. swimming 10 lengths in the pool, running for x minutes without stopping, scoring x baskets in a row from the free throw line

- o NEW SKILLS: Taking up a new class/ activity, returning to an activity to try and master a skill, selecting a skill to improve on (e.g. free taking in hurling, dance move)
- o NEW ADVENTURES: Being active and/or being a spectator in new spaces, going to the mountain biking in the forest, sea swimming, skateboard park,
- In pairs, children discuss options for which badge they will work towards and why.
- Each individual child writes about their badge selection, goals, and steps to earn the badge in their movement log (template below).

#### In week 2-4

- Check in through a whole group discussion sharing
  - o Examples of NEW movement activities they are trying out
  - o Examples of skills they have practiced/ mastered/ improved
  - o Examples of targets they have reached/ times they have improved/ distances covered
- Each child records their progress in their own personal movement log

#### In week 5

Each child completes a final reflection in their movement log outlining what they have achieved and why they have earned the badge.

Badges can be presented to individuals by the teacher/ peers.

"Sometimes I liked sharing my ideas because I could get good feedback about it, like oh yeah, that was really good. But maybe like it wasn't like criticizing me. It was more helping me to learn more and maybe make it better by adding stuff instead of taking away stuff or something"  
(participant)

"We used to vote, we had a worry box sometimes and we used to write down what we wanted and then don't put anyone names and we can just look at it"  
(participant)

## Movement Log

<b>NAME:</b>	<b>ACTIVITY BADGE:</b>
To earn the badge I will	
<hr/>	
<hr/>	
<hr/>	

### Progress Report: Record steps towards your target

Week 2	
Week 3	
Week 4	

### Final Report: Week 5

I have earned the \_\_\_\_\_ badge because

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My next steps to keep my badge are

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## Movement Badges



## STRATEGY 6

# Connecting to Children's Wider Physical Activity Lives



### Why?

Making explicit connections between what happens in PE and other parts of children's lives is important to increasing the relevance of PE and helping children make sense of their experiences. Sharing aspects of their physical activity participation is an opportunity to celebrate their achievements and get to know the children better.

### How?

Here are some ideas to help children share their perspectives and experiences. Select the one that works best for your class and context.

- Fill in 'My physical activity diary' (template attached) for one week. At the end of the week discuss how PE connects to their participation and how PE could help more.
- Fill in 'I am a fan' (template attached) to allow children to share their wider interests in physical activity. Note: Emphasise that the person does not need to be famous. It could be your granny or your sister – what is important is that the person inspires you.

- Movement mapping. Ask the children to draw a birds-eye view of their local area (or share a sketch map you create) on an A4 page. Ask the children to mark in the spaces where they like to be active. They enjoy colour coding their maps using different shades/ colours – most- least active OR most- least enjoyment OR most-least time they spend in each location. It's interesting for children to review each other's maps and notice which spaces are the same/ different and for children to learn about new spaces where they might be active. Children can also make maps in pairs/ groups using colour coding to distinguish each child's activities – this makes for some great conversations.

"We had a PE journal, because some people don't like saying things out in case some people might not like that and then the other people might not, they might just feel left out or something. Instead, we had a PE journal that we're writing every day and the only person who would read it is our teacher. Some people expressed their feelings more with writing than actually saying it out instead"  
(participant).

"Sometimes we might be doing a game practicing our kicking and it would be a quite an enjoyable game and then we'd have to think up a new rule that would allegedly make it better, but then it would end up being not as good as it was before..."  
(participant)

### My physical activity diary

<b>NAME:</b>		
<b>DAY</b>	<b>DESCRIBE ONE ACTIVITY IN WHICH YOU PARTICIPATED</b>	<b>WHY WAS THIS IMPORTANT TO YOU?</b>
MONDAY		
TUESDAY		
WEDNESDAY		
THURSDAY		
FRIDAY		
SATURDAY		
SUNDAY		
<b>At the end of the week, looking back, I notice:</b>		
_____		
_____		
_____		

### 'I AM A FAN' Profile

<b>NAME:</b>	
I am a fan of:	
The way I know this person is:	
Three words I would use to describe this person are:	
I am a fan of this person because:	
The way I think I could be more like this person is:	
If I met this person I would ask them:	
If I was this person for a day I would:	
In PE I can be more like this person by:	

## STRATEGY 7

# Certificate of Achievements\*



### Why?

Celebrating participation and effort alongside success and accomplishments are important to helping children understand 'what counts'.

### How?

This is a classroom-based activity.

1. Help children reflect on their experiences by: a) reviewing their goal-setting diary, b) chatting with a partner/ group about their standout memories, c) answering prompt questions such as 'what was the biggest challenge I set myself?', or 'the biggest difference between me starting out and me now is...'
2. Ask each child to make two lists – one with examples of effort/ doing your best (e.g. not giving up/ persisting/ working on a new skill/ practicing hard), and another for achievements/ successes (e.g. getting the ball in the hoop/ making a great pass/ running a race within a set time/ helping a friend learn a new skill).

3. Provide each child with a template to write and design a certificate of achievement for themselves. Encourage the children to include 1 idea related to effort and 1 related to success.
4. Finally, ask the children what advice they might provide to another teacher starting to try and include your ideas more in PE.

\* this idea was built on an example shared by Aamber Hickman @EdTechGodsis

"I think it's usually good to have a choice. Sometimes they're could be like the moment we mentioned before where you wouldn't like to but usually we'd rather make a choice than just do whatever..."  
(participant)

# Certificate of Achievement

NAME:

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*Congratulations to me!*  
*In PE this term I have earned this certificate by:*

**Trying hard:**

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**Achievement:**

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# Conclusion

**Remember:**

- **Start Small** – start with little choices (voices) and then slowly scaffold the extension of voice.
- **Start Smart** – start with strategies you know will work.
- **Don't Stop** – once you start to provide children with voice taking it away sends mixed and confusing messages.



"Always let the children during PE especially, have a choice if they want to do one thing or the other, or if they want to change something about the game or not"  
(participant)

"Always make sure you ask the kids what they want to do and not just ask it because, and actually incorporate it into the PE every time"  
(participant)

"Make sure that the kids enjoy it and actually ask them if they enjoy the games, you don't want them to not enjoy the PE"  
(participant)

Participant 1: "It's good for the children too, if we're doing something new, just to try and focus on learning that new skill"

Participant 2: Yeah, instead of just going off doing your own thing, make sure we're learning the skill"

