

Step^{Up} Project

School Excellence Fund: Step Up Project

October 2018 - October 2021

School Report:

Coláiste Muire

College Road, Ennis, Co. Clare

Nine schools took part in the Step Up Project. Schools submitted a final report telling the story of their Step Up Project. The reports are descriptive accounts of what happened in school given their unique context and circumstances. The reports are not prescriptive of what should happen in all schools. Reports should be read in conjunction with reading the overall Step Up Project composite report.

Step Up Project

Coláiste Muire



Praxis: Reflection and Action

School Context

Voluntary Secondary, Urban Area, Single-Sex Female, 70 Teachers, 984 Students, iPad School

13 Subject Teachers Involved in Step-Up Project

How We Identified a Focus & Process of Narrowing Our Focus

The school is very progressive and has a long history of spearheading and being involved with various initiatives that positively impact and develop teaching and learning. The school is already at an effective level of implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle and its involvement in the Step-Up project sought to further develop this. Emerging from a WSEMLL, a previous focus on reflective practice and goal setting in the *ATS2020 project (Assessment of Transversal Skills 2020)*, and the importance of reflection in relation to LAOS and the Framework for Junior Cycle, we decided that our project focus should be framed around reflection. From our professional observations and experience, the Step-Up team agreed that students' action needed to be central to the process as well, so that their reflections were acted upon and made real. As a result of this, we settled on Praxis as our focus for the Step-Up project.

In terms of positioning our focus within the context of LAOS, we saw our project as helping us to move towards Domain 2, Standard 3 in providing students with a sense of ownership over their own work, developing their reflective capacity and ability to set and achieve goals, and generate a sense of action-orientation. Additionally, in terms of our practice, we aspired towards realising Domain 4, Standard 1 in acknowledging the school as the primary locus for CPD, engaging collaboratively with each other and engaging in CPD that improves our own practice and meets the needs of students and the school.

Praxis not only offers students the opportunity to engage with learning outcomes in class but it encourages increased levels of enjoyment in learning, measurable progress and achievement. This process also promotes students' well-being, as they learn about the importance and process of negotiating risk, mistake, challenge, and achievement. Through this, students are positioning themselves in a more autonomous role, creating a sense of self-efficacy in realistically assessing their own progress, and setting and achieving

meaningful personal goals. A further aim was to encourage teachers to evaluate and reflect on their own teaching and learning, directly acting on this reflection. Thus, our intention was for both learners and educators to fully engage in the praxis model.

In choosing praxis as our Step-Up focus, we were aspiring to further embed self-evaluation, reflective practice, action orientation, and responsiveness in our school in an effort to help students to assume responsibility for their own learning through: negotiating their learning experiences; engaging in meaningful goal setting; creating a positive relationship between students and their learning contexts; and empowering students to begin recognising, transferring and applying skills learned in one context to another.

Principal Ms. Jean Pound outlines the choice to be involved and the focus of the project.



As reflection is such a key component of the New Junior Cycle Framework and LAOS, a focus on praxis across departments would lend great strength to students' engagement with their respective subject areas and Junior Cycle more generally.

Implementation Steps (Achieved and Intended)

STEP UP TEAM

After acceptance onto the Step-Up project, a committee was established comprising of seven teachers (two each from English Business and Science, and one teacher not involved in the project) school management and the SEN coordinator in the school. One of the subject teachers was appointed as Step-Up coordinator.

SURVEYED STAFF AND STUDENTS

In order to establish level and type of reflective practice taking place and to see benefit of this to the students. Surveys were carried out and data analysed.

FOCUS GROUP

Based on the feedback from the survey from students a focus group session was held to drill down into some of the data received from the student cohort

JCT AND INSPECTORATE

Review of MLL and liaising with the inspectorate and JCT to help inform our decisions. Aim to move from an effective level of reflective practice to a highly effective level

IMPLEMENTED REFLECTIVE STRATEGIES

Templates for reflection were developed, embedded in classroom practice and shared among colleagues.

KEY LEARNINGS SHARED WITH STAFF

Findings from surveys shared at whole school level. Step Up discussed at Departmental Level. Templates available for colleagues.

INTENDED IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

Focus on student and teacher action and allow it to be shaped based on reflection. Emphasise the association of reflective practice with the Indicators of Wellbeing from Junior Cycle.

Posters in all rooms displaying the indicators of wellbeing. Further surveys to plan for action.

Key Implementation Practices

The Step-Up committee established group norms and met approximately once a month. The group brainstormed, set goals and targets, established timelines and communicated necessary information. Subject members of the Step-Up committee were responsible for liaising with their relevant department colleagues and communicating information and strategies.

A variety of styles of reflection logs were kept by teachers and students to record their reflections and progress throughout the process.

Advice and guidance was received from link Inspector and JCT link Advisors at termly conferences and consultation meetings in the school.

The Step-Up committee presented initial learning and sample reflection templates to all staff after Year 1.

Journey – Implementation Narrative

Initially, our aims within the project were too ambitious– targeting first to third year students– and so, with the support and guidance of our JCT and Inspectorate Advisors, we limited our focus to just one year group; our first-year student cohort at the time. In order to understand the base from which we were working, we generated significant quantitative and qualitative data from staff and student surveys that helped us to plan our Year 1 intervention. This data revealed that staff engaged in reflection around their practice on a regular basis and they frequently endeavoured to include elements of reflection in their lessons. However, there was an appetite for guidance around the variety and ways that reflective tools could be engaged in the classroom. Staff also expressed their openness to discussing and experimenting with reflective tools as they saw reflection as being very beneficial for students.

In contrast, initial data from students suggested that students were not familiar with reflective tools and that they had a very narrow understanding of what constituted reflection. Initially, students saw benefit to reflection but this must be viewed in the light of

their understanding of reflection as largely correcting errors in order to improve. Additionally, the majority of students showed little awareness of Success Criteria use in lessons.

All members of the three departments who were teaching the year cohort committed to engaging with the project and embedding reflective practice and tools in their daily and weekly classroom activities. As a team, we developed a bank of reflective resources and decided which we would use in our respective subjects to try and expose students to a variety of reflective tools. We also agreed that in an attempt to minimise reflection fatigue we would each use different terminology: Skills Log, Reflective Diary, Journal etc. Students willingly engaged in reflective activities individually, in pairs and small groups throughout their classroom activities across subjects and this was commented on by staff. At different times throughout the Year 1 intervention, staff noted how well students were engaging with the various reflective tools and how they were becoming more autonomous and active within the learning process, actively seeking to shape and impact its direction.

Focus groups with students at the end of Year 1 revealed that our attempts to reduce reflection fatigue by using various terms for reflection proved very confusing for students and that, perhaps relatedly, students found it quite difficult to see connections between reflective activities that were done in different subject areas. Additionally, even after the Year 1 intervention, some students still expressed confusion around what was included within the remit of reflection. Student data, generated through survey, revealed that students' understanding of how useful reflection was had declined throughout the period. However, students in the focus group clarified that this was because reflective practices had become so embedded in classroom practice that sometimes students weren't even aware that they were reflecting and so they didn't always consider it reflection as it became a natural part of teaching and learning.

Step Up Team Coordinator,
Richie Hayes talks about
data gathering in year 1



Through staff survey, at the end of Year 1, staff noted how important reflective practice had become in their teaching and how useful it was, in terms of engaging and keeping students motivated. Additionally, the majority of teachers detailed how they were now actively engaging in reflection around their own practice on a daily basis. In particular, staff praised the collaborative focus of Year 1 and how it had been a very worthwhile form of CPD.

Moving into Year 2, our focus was— again with the guidance of our Inspectorate and JCT Advisors— to develop students' reflective capacity into the realms of action through individual and group goal setting. It was intended that students would be facilitated to generate action from their own reflective practice through the use of specifically designed departmental post-examination reflections and a series of goal setting activities including students' knowledge of: study skills, note taking, note making, evaluating their own contributions in class, and analysing their strengths and areas for improvement. This action orientation was framed in the light of the Key Skills for Junior Cycle and the Wellbeing Indicators.

Sadly, our focus on developing students' reflection into action was paused due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Teacher Barry Donnellan outlines some of the successes and challenges of the project



Key Praxis Practices

It was essential that all teachers involved in the project would develop a **common understanding of praxis** so that there was consistency across departments and classes and so that greater unity of purpose was achieved.

Teacher and Student Reflective Logs

Teachers kept logs. Students were encouraged to maintain logs that allowed them to track: their own levels of reflection, what they had learned and their experience of the learning process. This facilitated students' and teachers' observations of changes in their practice over the course of the intervention periods, as well as offering valuable insights into further learning opportunities.

A significant **bank of reflective tools** was generated by the Step-Up committee, with significant input from the relevant departments. These tools were cross-departmental and mobilised teachers to begin to think about reflection practices in alternative ways. Common reflection tools proved useful for students to begin to see the cross-curricular nature of what they were learning and the reflective process that they were engaged in.

It was important that students' **reflective practices were initially tightly scaffolded**. With time, reflective practices didn't need to be as rigidly designed or prompted, as students' reflective processes became more natural.

It was necessary that students' and teachers' reflection was built upon and extended into the realms of action: that there was a **direct link between reflection and action**.

Student Emma Ruddle speaks about her experience of the Step Up Project



Enabling Conditions

Formation of a committee across 3 subjects promoted professional conversations & collaboration amongst departments.

Individual focus groups informed our methodologies & guided future actions.

Consistency in methodologies and strategies across the three subject departments involved in the project.

Time was allocated to allow administrative, planning and discussion among the Step-Up team.

Staff were regularly updated about new practices and progress leading to effective teacher led CPD.

Challenges

The Step-Up project allowed us to engage in many meaningful experiences with colleagues in our departments and across the subject departments of English, Business and Science. However, we did encounter some challenges along the journey.

It was difficult for teachers to meet and plan effectively due to timetabling constraints. While we did get to meet as a core group quite frequently in the early part of the project, wider planning opportunities within subject departments were limited. It was the consensus from all the teachers that more time was needed to plan appropriately and to engage in meaningful discussion with our colleagues.

Although we enjoyed the freedom of generating a bank of reflective resources, it was considerably time consuming.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 had a huge impact on the completion of our project because of the limitations associated with remote learning. Up until then, the progress that this project was making was very positive amongst students and staff.

Impact

The Step-Up project allowed for many positive classroom experiences for both students and teachers. It allowed us to create a pool of resources that students could sample and compare to see which methods of reflection suited them best. It encouraged students to take ownership over how they wanted to engage in reflection and to pick a method that allowed for a more positive experience. Students engaged with techniques including scaling, flash card summaries, skills logs, oral and written feedback, 2 stars and a wish, and guided self-correction using success criteria. Students' skills-logs were particularly effective in relation to developing and documenting practical skills in Science.

In our teaching, we have become acutely aware of the importance of including time in our lessons where students can pause and reflect on their learning experience. We noticed that in allowing students this time to reflect they are becoming more informed around specific reflection tools that suit their individual learning style. In integrating reflection in a very focused way throughout the Step-Up project, student and teacher reflection has become embedded as a natural part of our lessons.

While subject specific templates were important, and subject specific student reflection templates were used in each of the three subjects, the creation of a universal reflection

template for subjects English, Business and Science proved to be an attractive option for students who prefer structure and consistency in their reflection processes. This has resulted in greater confidence levels in students' understanding of, and ability to, reflect.

Teacher Richie Hayes
speaks about collaboration
in Coláiste Muire



Future Planning

Looking forward, an aspiration of the committee is to expand the Step-Up project to include all teachers and students, and embed these reflective practices across all subject areas. The teachers and students involved in the project have gained great benefit from engaging with reflective practices, which resulted in reflective methodologies being embedded in classroom practice. This, in turn, empowers students to choose reflective techniques that will guide them on their learning journey.

In the medium term, our aim is to provide our department colleagues, in particular those who have not yet been involved in the project, with the information and tools to aid their incorporation of the methodologies created as part of this project in their classrooms. We aim to have a committee member, one from each department, introduce and discuss the project at the end of year department meetings, with the intention of planning its implementation for the coming September. These discussions will hopefully centre around the effectiveness of the use of these techniques in our subject areas and look at practical ways to incorporate methodologies into our classrooms. All resources that have been created as part of this project will be uploaded to a shared drive on the school IT system so that staff can access and tailor the resources to their requirements.

Members of the Step-Up committee agree that this journey has been a challenging yet rewarding experience. The Covid-19 pandemic presented us with significant challenges around the completion and implementation of some critical points of the project. However, the process of inter-departmental collaboration and engagement with colleagues and students to implement this project was very enjoyable. We hope that this new process to reflection continues to be embedded in the classroom.