

# Step<sup>Up</sup> Project

School Excellence Fund: Step Up Project

October 2018 - October 2021

## School Report:

St. Bricins Vocational School

Railway Rd, Corporation Lands, Belturbet, Co. Cavan

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.



## Effective Questioning and Success Criteria | Our Journey

St. Bricin's College, Belturbet Co. Cavan

*Encouraging quality questions and co-creation of success criteria in the classroom*

- Vocational School

- Rural Area

- 176 Students

- 21 Staff

- Co-Educational

- Geography, English,  
Science, Art

- 3 Teachers in Step Up  
Team

### Identifying a focus

In September 2018, a whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in our school. The quality of Teaching and Learning was identified as good overall in the key findings.

Questioning was identified as the dominant assessment strategy, but the report suggested a greater use of higher-order questioning with appropriate wait time to further develop learners' experiences in the classroom. Eager to move into 'highly effective' practice, questioning was selected as a focus in Year 1 of the Step Up Project.

Also highlighted on the WSE-MLL report was the need to provide more effective written feedback to students at a whole-school level, in order to help them progress their learning. This became our focus in Year 2, further utilising highly effective questioning to improve feedback.

The Step Up Project provided a great opportunity to maximise the Teaching & Learning opportunities and help move us to highly effective practice across the areas of Geography, English, Science and Art at Junior Cycle.



*Students reflects on the use of questioning in lessons.*

## Key Implementation Practices

- The Step Up team scheduled meetings, and targets were set with clear deadlines
- Staff Drive was used to minute meetings and store resources/evidence/samples of Questions and Success Criteria creation methods
- Staff liaised with Link Inspector and JCT Link Advisor
- The Step Up team presented on Effective Questioning and WALT (We Are Learning To)/WILF (What I'm Looking For) to staff
- Resources uploaded to our Step Up folder on our staff drive.

## Implementation Steps

1. **Established Step Up team:** Assigned roles and established group norms. Selected class groups and timeline for embedding our desired practices.
2. **Review of recent WSE-MLL:** We considered recommendations and the Step Up team selected area of focus.
3. **Surveyed** all staff and students in focus groups.
4. **Researched** questioning practice and co-creation of success criteria. We investigated best practice including strategies and methodologies.
5. **Implemented new strategies** in selected classes, recorded observations and results.
6. **Key learning experiences shared with staff** and the staff of CMETB at the Teaching & Learning Symposium. Resources created were shared with staff.



*Student responses and thoughts on questioning and asking questions in class.*

“ Step Up afforded us opportunities to implement recommendations from the WSE/MLL report. It allowed us as a team to work at a deeper level on effective questioning.

”

*Step Up Team Co-ordinator, Anne-Marie Fay*

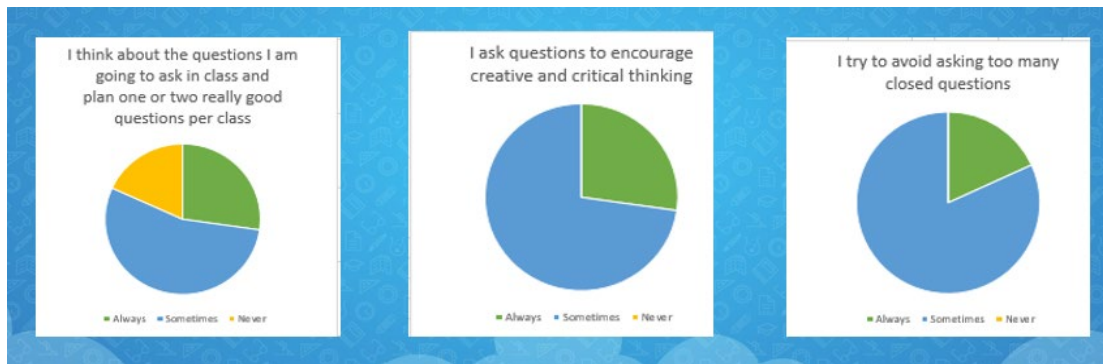
# Implementation Narrative | Year 1

We at St. Bricin's College have always been eager to engage with new initiatives and place a strong focus on embedding best practice across the curriculum in all subject departments.

As teachers, we wanted to focus on an aspect of our craft that we use every day. Following on from the WSE-MLL in September 2018, where it was observed that questioning was the dominant assessment strategy used. It was also recommended that 'A greater use of higher-order questions with appropriate wait time would further develop learners' experiences in the classroom'.

We selected effective questioning as our area of focus. This was an area we felt we were quite accomplished in but could move to the more effective level with some interventions and attention. We also wanted to improve our student's ability at asking, creating and formulating questions.

**Domain 2** – Learner Experiences: **Standard 2** - Highlights the importance of students growing as learners through respectful interactions and experiences that are challenging and supportive. It's clear that students would need to have a strong ability to ask questions confidently and would be willing to risk incorrect responses and understand the value of making mistakes, using them as learning opportunities.



At the outset of the project, we conducted some basic research with staff and students. A survey from the NCCA assessment toolkit was completed with staff. This revealed some unexpected results, as everyone felt they were excellent at questioning already!

However, upon deeper analysis of the results, we felt that there was some work we could do in helping staff to create and use higher order questions in class more often.

Another important aspect at the outset of this project was to ascertain what our students thought about questioning and asking questions. An online survey and focus group was conducted with the groups involved in the project. This process allowed us to gather real life data from the students without influence from their peers.

From this initial school-based research, we decided to use a two-pronged approach to the project.

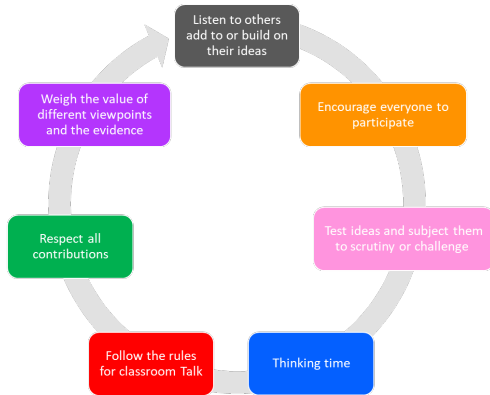
## Firstly, we as the teachers involved decided to;

- Plan questions prior to our classes
- Use question stem posters based on the revised Blooms Taxonomy
- Use effective questioning strategies in our classes.

## Secondly, from the students' perspective.

- Provided question stem bookmarks that we had for all students in our classes.
- Active learning strategies – Effective questioning can help support and sustain these strategies.

**Our first strategy** was to create a thinking classroom. We wanted to make students feel safe during their learning. The classroom climate must be such that students feel secure enough to take risks, be tentative and make mistakes.



If the questions are not causing students to grapple and think, they are probably not worth asking. Huesler & Metcalfe highlight that ‘research has shown that making mistakes is actually better than not making mistakes’ (2012)

In a thinking classroom, teachers plan their questioning in ways that will promote differentiation, challenge, independence of thought, alongside opportunities to think together, share views and ideas and discuss or explore the differences in their thinking.

We went through what a thinking classroom is, we explored this with the students and what it would look like in our context.

**Our second strategy** was to plan effective differentiated questions prior to our classes.

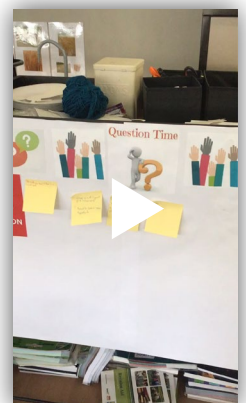
We felt that while we were already good at questioning, we needed to practice creating higher order questions so that it came more naturally to us in the classroom. Research questions need to be planned to promote and model deep thinking and to guide the learning task.

**Our third strategy** was Hands up for Questions. Students were encouraged to raise their hands only to ask questions, not to answer them. In terms of small changes that can have big effects, this is one of the most significant strategies we have introduced. It encouraged all students to change their attitude towards questioning.

**The fourth strategy** was to work on our thinking time. Waiting after asking a question creates a slight tension in the classroom, which encourages students to think and form a better answer. On average, teachers only wait 0.7 and 1.4 seconds after asking a question (Stahl, 1994). This is not long enough to enable students to think of a good answer.

Remember, the longer you wait, the more the students believe you will ask them to answer and the higher your expectation becomes for a high-quality answer. We agreed to deliberately wait a minimum of 5 seconds before moving on.

**Our fifth strategy** was all about question time. We decided to dedicate specific time in class for questions, used post-its to encourage students to ask questions and celebrated and rewarded good questions with a question of the week award.



*Teacher reflection on Questioning Methodology used in lesson*

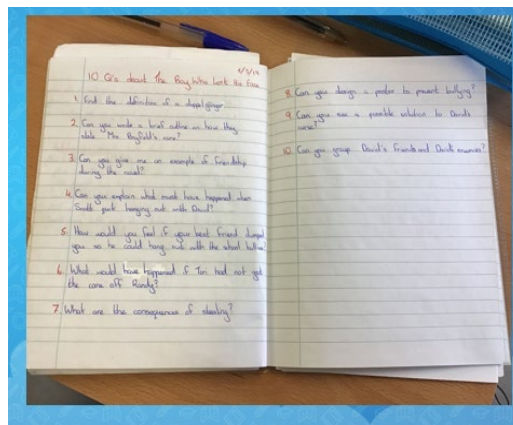
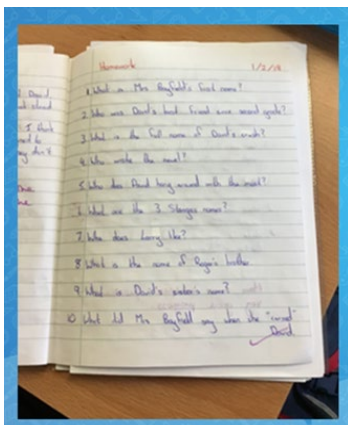


# Implementation Narrative | Year 1

**Our final strategy** was for both teachers and students. We designed, created and printed a poster and set of bookmarks, containing question stems from the revised Blooms Taxonomy for teachers and students to use as a visual prompt. This served to scaffold those students who needed it.



Following implementation of these strategies over a 4-week period we compared questions created by students at the start of the intervention with questions created at the end and noticed a distinct improvement in the quality of questions students were asking and creating. This can be seen clearly in the example below where the students work has moved from remembering to creating on the Blooms Taxonomy question stem prompts.



“ In searching for common denominators among the world’s most brilliant change-makers, one thing I kept finding was that many of them were exceptionally good at asking questions ”

We presented this process followed to all staff at a staff meeting and sample of the question stem bookmarks were distributed. The posters were displayed in all classrooms.

Staff were encouraged to implement the strategies delivered at the CPD across all subject departments within the school.

(Berger, 2014)

# Implementation Narrative | Year 2

Further utilising highly effective questioning to improve feedback to students was our goal in Year Two of our *Step Up* journey. With a new *Step Up* team in place, we wanted to continue to build on the embedded practices of highly effective questioning to raise attainment across Junior Cycle. Furthermore, this aligned with our SSE practices of formative assessment. Through observation of our VShare report system, we identified gaps in the quality of feedback to students in progress assessments. We felt that we needed to equip all staff with the skills to use questioning to co-create success criteria, leading to a more constructive feedback experience using WWW (What Went Well) and EBI (Even Better If).

Further observations were made through a staff and pupil survey carried out by our *Step Up* team. Upon reflection of these results, the following was apparent:

## Staff Survey

- 1) WWW/EBI were used regularly by staff
- 2) Success Criteria were used regularly in lessons
- 3) Opportunities for co-creation of success criteria were rarely used

4. Are students using 'EBI' to improve?

[More Details](#)

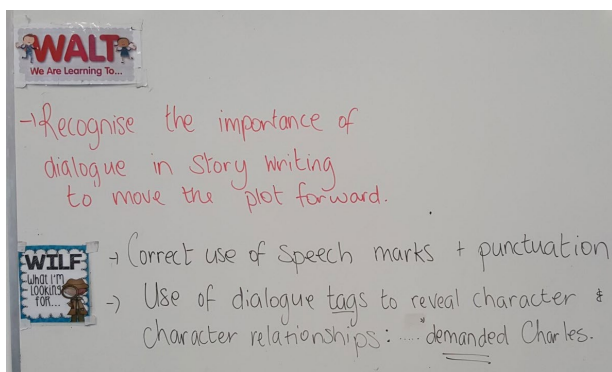
[Insights](#)

Regularly	1
Sometimes	8
Rarely	1
Not sure	1



## Student Survey

- 1) Most students understood WWW/ EBI and had experience of these terms in most lessons
- 2) Most students had experience of using success criteria in lessons
- 3) Most students didn't understand how to use EBI to improve their work
- 4) Only a small number of students had experience of co-creating success criteria in lesson
- 5) Some students also identified that the EBIs they received were not in line with the success criteria from lesson.



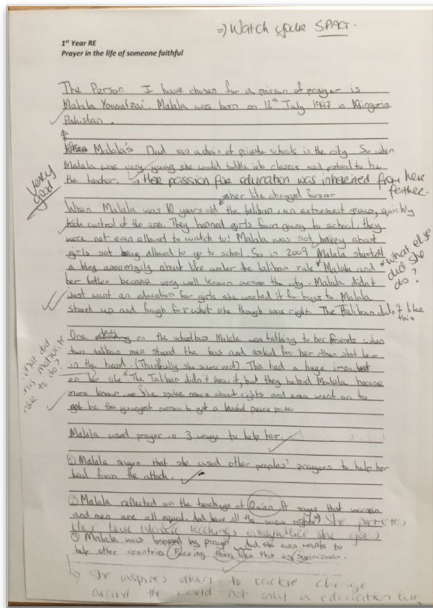
WALT & WILF headings are displayed in every classroom

*Students reflect on the benefits of success criteria*

From this initial school-based research, we as the teachers involved decided to:

- **Create more opportunities for co-creation** of success criteria in our lessons
- **Compare results** to lessons where we the teacher provided the success criteria by interviewing students
- **Use WALT** (What I am Learning Today -Learning Intention) and **WILF** (What I am Looking for – Success Criteria) to provide students with clear instruction and expectations
- **Link** our EBI directly to the success criteria provided in lesson to improve quality of feedback to students

# Implementation Narrative | Year 2



Name: _____		Test: A Person of Prayer – Malala Yousafzai 30 marks			
WILF – What am I Looking For	Yet to meet	In Line	Above expectations	Exceptional	
Background info (6/7 lines)				✓	
The Control of Taliban & Malala's response (5/6 lines)		✓			
The shooting and how Malala reacted				✓	
3 ways Malala uses prayer – Heal, Reflect & Inspire			✓		
<b>Result:</b> 26/30 = 87%					
<b>WELL DONE</b>					
<b>WWW:</b>					
→ Excellent knowledge & understanding of Malala & importance of prayer in her life demonstrated throughout oral answer + clear revision structure – well done Ben!					
<b>EBI:</b>					
→ Refer to all examples of context displayed by Taliban, as covered in class					
→ Why did Malala become a target for Taliban?					
→ Reiterate on how Malala uses prayer to inspire others to tackle change/initiatives					

**Exam Practice for Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> April**  
Q: Describe a person of prayer, highlighting the role prayer has played in their lives.

**WILF**

- Write out the Q in RED pen
- Brief background information on Malala-4/5 lines
- Mention her life-changing experience
- Impact of this experience
- Influence of prayer in her life- describe the 3 ways as outlined on pgs 112 & 113
- Use paragraphs, mind your SPAG.

*Exemplar feedback linking to the success criteria using EBI and WILF*

The next step in planning was to use this data to inform staff of our next steps and how to get there at a whole school CPD. We presented our findings and delivered CPD on **co-creating success criteria using questioning stems** displayed across all departments in Year One of our journey. We shared samples of directed and less directed steps to success.

DIRECTED STEPS	LESS DIRECTED STEPS
Speak in a clear tone and use vocabulary appropriate to presentation	Be nice to your audience.
Ambitious language choices are chosen for specific effect – I find Donald Trump mesmerising.	Talk loudly to ensure that they hear you at all times.
Some level of consistent eye contact and positive body language with the audience.	Work together and make sure everyone has a part to play.
Props or elements (music/lightening) are used to allow the audience to relate to the character.	Engage your audience.
Verbal (Varied tone) non-verbal (gestures) are used to engage the audience.	Ensure to look at your audience at all times.
Varied facial expression are used to reveal feelings/emotions to the audience.	Use correct English when speaking.
If working in groups each member speaks for 2 minutes.	Know your topic, so the audience learns something.
Visual aids are used to engage and show awareness of topic through research.	You can add things to your presentation, to help you.

## Cycle of Feedback: Teacher – Student – Parent

**English**

**Level:** Higher

**Grade:** Above Expectations; diligent student who worked in earnest this year.

**WWW:**  
Excellent preparation for CBA 1 in English: Oral Communication. Sustained engagement of the audience through non-verbal features gestures, and movement.

**Area for Improvement (EBI):** Keep working on varied tone and adding props to demonstrate your character's personality. For written English, keep developing vocabulary and sentence structure to prepare for next assessment.

We also shared examples of highly effective feedback, linked to the success criteria of a lesson. Staff were provided with opportunities to create success criteria and give feedback to their colleagues on a short task. A bank of examples was created by the Step Up Team and put on the shared drive. Staff were encouraged to continue to add to this folder.

A member of the Step Up Team was assigned to all departments, offering support and peer observation opportunities where co-creating success criteria could be witnessed in action. Staff were set two targets for our next staff meeting:

- To update their department plans to allow for WALT and WILF.
- To share one piece of evidence of WALT and WILF in action to our Step Up folder.

The final stages of our Step Up journey were unfortunately disrupted by Covid-19, but we are continuing to embed these practices, most notably through our Teaching and Learning group,



# Implementation Narrative | Year 2

established on the back of our SSE process. Our focus on improving feedback through success criteria and questioning has reminded staff of the importance of sharing with the students exactly what we are looking for in our assessment of their work. It has also helped teachers recognise that the quality of their feedback relies heavily on the quality of success criteria they provide.

*"Step Up has enriched the Teaching & Learning experiences of our staff & students, creating even further opportunity for student voice at every turn."*

*Acting Principal, Stephen Smith*

## Enabling Conditions

- Time allocated for administration, planning and slots allocated at staff meetings to allow feedback of progress to whole staff
- Collaboration with inspectorate and JCT guided the *Step Up* team regarding best practice
- There was a consistent approach in the methodologies and strategies used for highly effective questioning and creation of success criteria across all participating subject departments.
- At parent teacher meetings, the *Step Up* members informed parents of the implementation of these new practices while discussing student attainment.

## Future Planning

Going forward, our hope is to see evidence of whole staff CPD on questioning and success criteria, implemented in the feedback process.

Observe quality of feedback on progress exam cover sheets and reports home. We will select a sample of progress exams at random across all year groups and subject departments. We will also monitor reports home to identify best practice. Evidence of gaps in quality of feedback will be addressed at our next whole school CPD.

We will check subject department plans for evidence of questioning and success criteria methodologies and strategies.

Continue to encourage peer observation of effective questioning and co-creation of success criteria in action across all departments.

## Impact

- Question stem posters are displayed in all classrooms
- WALT and WILF headings permanently fixed to all whiteboards across the school
- Staff led CPD on Teaching and Learning, and our *Step Up* journey at all meetings thereafter.
- Increased awareness among staff and students of the importance of questioning and creation of success criteria to enable further learning opportunities.
- Invitations opened to all staff to observe highly effective practices in questioning and creation of success criteria within Step Up Departments.