# Step<sup>Up</sup> Project

School Excellence Fund: Step Up Project

October 2018 - October 2021

School Report:
St. Columba's College
Stranorlar, Co. Donegal

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.

# Classroom Feedback Approaches| Our Step Up Journey

# St. Columba's College, Stranorlar, Co. Donegal

School Excellence Fund

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- Voluntary Secondary School

- Urban Area

- 65 Teachers

- 840 Students

- 9 Teachers in our Step Up Team

- English, Business, Science

## Identifying a focus

School self- evaluation plays a dominant role in our school planning and development.

As part of the school self-evaluation process, we undertook an action project to investigate the area of formative assessment in the classroom. The focus of our project was to look at our everyday classroom feedback approaches. Our project was a student-centred approach where our students shared their feedback in the classroom through interactive strategies. We also envisioned that the project would promote collaboration and cross curricular links within our school community. Through the School Excellence Fund the Step Up Project provided the perfect opportunity to maximise student learning through student and teacher feedback and help us progress from effective to highly effective practice in our school.

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St. Columba's College has always been eager to engage in new initiatives and places a strong emphasis on seeing best practice taking place in teaching and learning. Therefore, we believe that by focusing on formative feedback in everyday classroom learning we aim to improve student engagement and participation by allowing students to feel an increased sense of ownership towards their learning experience.

*"To me 'formative assessment' describes all those processes by which teachers and learners use information about student achievement to make adjustments to the students learning that improve their achievement. It's about using information to adapt to your teaching and adapt the work of the students to put the learning back on track (Dylan William, 2016).*

## KEY IMPLEMENTATION PRACTICES

**The Step Up team established group norms** and met regularly. Goals and targets were set, and timelines were established.

**A 'Padlet' learning log** was created for the project teachers to record their personal reflections and observations throughout the process. 'Padlet' allowed them share ideas with the team.

**Advice was sought** from the Link Inspector and JCT Link Advisor on regular occasions.

**The Step Up team presented the project to teachers**, outlining its aims and shared the feedback strategies amongst all teaching staff to establish cross circular links.

**The Step Up team presented the project to various stakeholders in the school,** including the Board of Management and The Parents Council.

## IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

1. **Identified the relevant 'Statements of Practice for Teaching and Learning'** relevant to our project. We decided to focus on Domain 1: Learner Outcomes, Standard 1: Students enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn and expect to achieve as learners and Domain 4: Teachers' Collective/Collaborative Practice, Standard 1: Teacher's value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration.

2. **Established a Step Up team**, within the English, Business and Science departments where teachers volunteered their time and commitment. We created teacher reflective

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learning logs through "Padlet" and established an email group to aid communication and to keep all participants up to date on the progress.

3. **Researched and investigated** various teaching and learning strategies and established a refined list of feedback strategies that we implemented in our classes. We then selected class groups from 2nd year and formulated a two year timeline for implementation of the project.

4. **Presented our project aims** with our school's Board of Management and Parents Council.

5. **Informed parents and sought permission** from parents of the 2nd year students involved in the Step Up project.

6. **Formed a student focus group** of a mix of students from our second year classes.

7. **Surveyed** our 2nd year students' pre feedback strategies to assess their attitudes to learning.

8. **Implemented and observed** the various feedback strategies in our lessons and resurveyed the students.

## IMPLEMENTATION NARRATIVE

Our Step Up project focuses on two key areas in the Statements of Practice for Teaching and Learning. The first one we established is Domain 1, Standard 1 where *"students enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn and expect to achieve as learners"*, from this we collectively decided that feedback for teachers and students was an area of everyday teaching and learning that would allow us to move from effective to highly effective practice.

We simultaneously wanted to focus on growing closer working links between different departments in our school. From this we focused on Domain 4, Standard 1 where, *"teachers value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration"* as this was an area that we felt we could improve within our school community.

At the outset of the project, it was recognised that second year students are at a stage of growth and development which often poses challenges for them. In some instances, through classroom observation  teachers have noted that when students' progress to second year they begin to adopt a 'laissez faire' approach, their quality of work begins to deteriorate and their attitude to learning can often become negative. Therefore, the aim of the project was to enhance more active participation and engagement by developing our use of a range of feedback strategies in our classrooms. Through research and engagement

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with the Link Inspector, the Step Up team decided on various formative feedback strategies to be implemented by the team in their second year classes.

In year one of the project we focused on using written feedback methods in our classes. As a Step Up team we collaborated and compiled a list of written feedback strategies that we felt would help in assessing our students. It was important that we ensured each feedback strategy was student-centred and manageable. The various feedback strategies involved the students sharing feedback with their teacher on what they had learned or any misunderstandings they had from studying a topic in class.

Before implementing these strategies, our student focus group was surveyed to assess their attitudes to learning. One strategy that we found very successful was our classroom "twitter" boards. Students gave feedback based on their own reflections of their learning by writing a tweet. The feedback shared from the students was discussed to assess if there were common strengths or weaknesses and with that, it provided teachers with an overview of student knowledge or gaps within a studied topic. By asking students to provide teachers with feedback based on their reflections on learning, it was anticipated that students will become more active learners where they are willing to share their thoughts.

Today I have learned

A Question I still have

I didn't know

Today I have tried to

*"I felt the study was beneficial to my own learning and has addressed areas in my teaching practice that can be improved for the benefit of myself and the students. I believe the students showed a positive response to the project, the enjoyed sharing their "tweets" or using their phones for the ICT feedback strategies, therefore I felt that this put them at the centre of their learning.*

**English Teacher**

Following these written feedback methods, we met with our student focus group where they explored their opinions on the feedback strategies. The focus group was also re-surveyed at the end of year one to assess if their attitudes to learning had changed. Data from the survey illustrated the students' enjoyment from using the interactive methods in their lessons. They noted that the feedback strategies helped with their

learning where they were given the opportunity to get involved, voice their opinions and it provided a peer led learning approach.

Following this we wanted to further develop our project in year two by introducing ICT feedback strategies. Our Step Up Team explored a range of feedback methods to incorporate into our lessons. A popular questioning tool which we used was Kahoot. However, we rarely used it as a means to provide feedback to students, so we wanted to develop this, in order to make it more effective for us. From this we analysed student participation and their results from the Kahoot quizzes which in turn allowed us to provide students with detailed, specific and high-quality feedback.

> " *I really enjoyed using Kahoot in our classes, the online quizzes were great fun.* "
>
> **Student**

Throughout this process we shared our classroom observations on our teacher 'Padlet' where we reflected on what was working best for our classes and subjects. Similarly in year two we alternated between the written and ICT feedback methods to enhance student engagement and participation.

Having completed the two year project our student focus group shared their views on what feedback methods they preferred and what they found most beneficial to their learning. This was conducted though a final survey. Students preferred when teachers alternated between the written and ICT feedback methods throughout their lessons as they provided a variety of interactive learning approaches.

As a Step Up team we found the student voice and invaluable source to our project.  It helped us to recognise what methods students' preferred and found useful to their learning. The project provided an opportunity for cross curricular links and teacher collaboration. It also encouraged us to take time to reflect on our teaching and learning strategies and what was working best for our students.

Following the completion of the project we have shared the feedback strategies as a whole school initiative.

Overall, our project overlaps with the Framework for Junior Cycle at several points. In the principle of *'Learning to Learn'*, feedback that is correctly structured and highly effective can improve a students' ability to learn. In the principle of *'Engagement and Participation'*, the focal point of our project was to allow students to feel an increased sense of engagement and this was successful. Finally, the project also involves the principle of

> " *Like all initiatives introduced, some students engaged more than others. For those students who engaged whole-heartedly they seemed to enjoy the experience and benefit. It was good to see the students participate more in the learning and not just let the teacher do all the work.* "
>
> **Science Teacher**

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*'Wellbeing and Inclusive Education'*, where we believe that a student who received positive constructive feedback allows them to improve and thus gain a sense of achievement and accomplishment.

> " *I felt that the learning scale was a great way for me to assess my own learning after studying a topic in class.* "
>
> **Student**

## KEY REFLECTION PRACTICES

**Teacher reflective learning logs** allowed an opportunity for teachers to share their experiences of using a feedback strategy in the classroom and what effectively worked best for their students and the teaching and learning process.  It also helped in identifying gaps in learning and teaching.

**Student focus group** encouraged student voice within the project and it provided the Step Up team was invaluable information on students' thoughts and opinions on the feedback methods and what they found beneficial to their learning.

**A bank of feedback strategies** was created by the Step Up teachers from the three subject departments. These feedback resources were shared with all subject departments within the school.

**Continued collaboration** with school management, teachers and students involved in the Step Up project aided the successful planning and implementation of the project.

## ENABLING CONDITIONS

**Staff ownership was instilled** through collective decision making and support from senior management throughout the Step Up project.

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

**Collaboration with the Inspectorate and JCT** guided the Step Up team with regard to best practice.

**Time was allocated** to allow for administration, planning and discussion among the Step Up team. Meetings were held on a regular basis to share ideas and discuss the project.

**Parents were kept informed** about the new practices.

**Staff were informed** of the feedback practices through JCT workshops and staff meetings.

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# IMPACT

### In the English, Business Studies & Science departments

- Collaboration and engagement across the three subject departments provided an opportunity for teachers to successfully share ideas and strategies and discuss what they felt was working best in their classes.

- The proposed strategies provided teachers with a clear insight into our own teaching and learning methods and how we could improve, particularly if there was a gap in student knowledge.

- Reflecting on feedback from our students allowed teachers to learn from their own classroom experiences and enhanced teacher professional development.

- Sense of reward with students responding positively to the classroom feedback strategies and emphasising their enjoyment and value in the project.

- The project enabled teachers to move from effective to highly effective practice in the teaching and learning journey.

### Students

- Increased student engagement and participation in class where there was a 26% increase in the numbers of students who recognised that they can put more time and effort into their work.

- Improvement in student voice in the classroom, with students expressing their enjoyment in participating with the feedback strategies and it provided them with the opportunity to share their ideas and answers with their peers.

- By introducing more student-centred approaches it encourages peer led learning and it encourages students to take more responsibility towards their learning.

### Whole School

- A collection of feedback strategies was created and shared with each subject department. We recognised that these feedback strategies are also beneficial to Senior Cycle students and not just the Junior Cycle students as the teaching and learning methods encourage motivation and engagement among all students.

- Successful promotion of cross curricular links and communities of practice within each subject department.

- Teacher CPD days provided an opportunity for collaboration and learning.

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## FUTURE PLANNING

As with all initiatives, one of the most difficult aspects is to consider how to sustain the good practice and all that has been learned when the project has been completed. To this end, sharing learning with the whole staff was set as a priority. The Step Up team were invited to present their work to the whole staff during a JCT CPD workshop. The various feedback strategies were shared with the whole staff, including videos from the classroom of students participating in the feedback strategies.

> " *I liked when teachers used a variety of different feedback methods in class, it was fun and interactive and I felt that it was a great way to help me to revise at the end of a topic.* "
>
> **Student**

Through collaboration and reflection teachers investigated the quality of feedback in their lessons.  It also provided an opportunity for teachers to assess the levels of student engagement and participation in their second year classes. Results show that the feedback strategies provided by the Step Up team lessened these learning barriers.

The project provided a truly enjoyable and beneficial opportunity for teachers from three different subject departments to come together and share their teaching and learning experiences and also share their project with various other schools throughout Ireland.

> " *I enjoyed working with colleagues on feedback, learning from them about methods they used to check in on how their students were doing.  The whole process made me more conscious of planning for a class and trying to engage students more in their learning experience.* "
>
> **English Teacher**

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