Building democratic literacy – West Lothian Council - Transcript

**CLD Manager:** West Lothian Council is committed to empowering young people to take an active role within their communities and creating opportunities for them to influence policy and the services that are provided for them.

With that in mind, the Council (along with partners) have introduced Democratic Literacy. Now Democratic Literacy has a number of themes running through it. One of those themes is pupil council training. Another theme is support to youth forums, support to West Lothian Youth Congress and, also, support to youth members of local community councils.

**CLD Worker 1 (to a group of students):** Today, really, we’re going to look at specifically the Pupil Council in your school. But more generally, about youth participation; young people having a say in things.

**CLD Worker 1:** There is two main aims: one is about learning and one is about action. Learning, really, just refers (self-evidently) to young people learning about democracy.

For us, the starting point really… young people aren’t born democrats. They need to learn how these processes work. So, for us, what we do is we develop a whole range of programmes – educational programmes – that help young people understand democracy, citizenship… no matter where they are.

**CLD Worker 1 (to a group of students):** This is really important. Young people should be seen as citizens now – not in the future. And that is quite revolutionary. Because what it’s saying is that you should be treated with respect now; you should be treated in the same way that adults would expect to be treated.

**CLD Worker 1:** Another purpose, for us, is about helping young people to organise their own organisation, if you like. It’s not a Pupil Council in the sense that the school runs it, or the council runs it – this is very much providing young people with the opportunity and the skills to develop their own organisation; be a leader.

They set the agenda, they chair their meetings, they think about what campaigns and issues they should take forward. So, for us, that’s also very important to recognise – that it’s young people led and, partly, our role is to help them to create that kind of youth-led organisation.

***Different teachers and supervisors discuss and mediate the voting system with pupils and explain how to cast a valid vote.***

**Teacher:** The fact that we use the outside agencies gives the whole awareness of pupil voice, a lot more importance. Pupils, kind of, respond differently to other bodies coming into the school and it’s not just a case of, ‘Oh, we need to write a name on a piece of paper and that’s us voting for somebody.’ They really get a taste of what it’s going to be like once they're voting for real and once they’ve left school.

***A supervisor reads out the results of the student vote.***

**Principal Teacher:** The pupils who decide to run as candidates and those who are elected get very specific benefits from it. It’s a real confidence boost for them and they learn skills. They learn communication skills, how to work in a team and so on. But, wider than that, it definitely is beneficial for the year group as a whole.

They feel more empowered, I think, to take a role in their school. And even though they might not be the elected representative, they know that if there's something that they’d like to see improved or something that they feel they could contribute to, they know the routes, now, to go down to see that happen.

**Student:** I have just been newly elected to the Pupil Council. I’ve been on it for the previous 5 years and this will be my 6th year, obviously. I'm also a member of the West Lothian Youth Congress and was just newly elected Vice Chair of that.

**CLD Worker 2:** I think some of the successes would be to come into schools like St Margaret’s today, where this is, I think, the third series of elections that we’ve done and see how, each time, the school embraces it that wee bit more. And, also, I think we’ve raised the expectations of young people, so I think we need to revert to some other kind of election. You know, hands up in class or something! They would, hopefully, start to challenge that – I would hope anyway.

**Student:** What I’ve learned from it is that you shouldn’t be afraid to speak out because you’re entitled to your own voice. You shouldn’t be afraid of people who are supposed to be more senior than you; senior management and things like that. Because they're people as well and they understand arguments and it’s all about finding compromise.

**Teacher:** It’s interesting [that] when they first formed together, in their year councils; there were the ones who automatically want to chair the meetings and there's always somebody who minute takes. But because we have a rotational basis, they all get the chance to do it.

And some of the ones who were a little bit quieter at the start of their election, certainly, blossom throughout the process. They're the ones that by six or twelve months down the line, are very skilled at chairing meetings, asking management to come to meetings or they’re writing the letters or speaking at assemblies.

Which, at first, you think that pupil’s not going to be doing that because it’s not their character. But they certainly become much more confident individuals and they're a lot more able to communicate – not just with their own peers in the sense of their own friends, but throughout their whole year group.

**CLD Worker 2:** Hopefully, from participating in these programmes, they will become active citizens in the broadest terms – whether that’s participating in local political structures or just actively in their community. But it’s about increasing their ability to be active citizens and creating a desire for them to do that, I think.

**Student:** I do, genuinely, enjoy representing people and I do, genuinely, think that everyone should have their voices heard and should be listened to and respected. And I believe that it’s my duty, as a member of St Margaret’s Academy, as a pupil, to represent others when they’ve got views and they can’t or don’t want to do it for themselves.