



Equal Voice

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The programme shows the **Equal Voice** techniques being introduced to teachers and pupils in a mainstream primary school and in a school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). We see children beginning to express some feelings about real-life situations and follow a teacher who is trying the techniques for the first time. The programme tries to demonstrate some benefits of children using drama to create more opportunities to discuss and assess their behaviour.

The practical introduction of Equal Voice

There are many different ways in which a school can apply **Equal Voice**. It is designed to be flexible. The basic programme begins with a staff training day to introduce the philosophy, handbook and video, and to give a practical demonstration of the techniques. Part of this training session examines the current awareness and ethos within the school, with particular regard to self-esteem. This might cover expression of feelings, the handling of withdrawn, disruptive and aggrieved children and a look at the types of punishment and reward used in a school. The training day finishes by outlining a possible action plan for the school.

What is Equal Voice?

Equal Voice sets out a practical philosophy which gives more responsibility to children for their behaviour, using drama and role play as a vehicle to encourage personal expression. It is designed to help primary school children express feelings, confront problems with their peers and develop a happier class and school ethos; particularly with regard to behaviour and self-expression.

Equal Voice is a collection of simple techniques, all of which encourage children in honest expression and respect for each other. They provide a safe and supportive atmosphere in which to air feelings and set clear rules on the judgements and intervention of adults and peers. The techniques help because they allow children to bring into the open activities or feelings which may have previously been unacknowledged. Some techniques are there to encourage the children's general expression, others are particularly suitable for looking directly at a specific issue.

Equal Voice has been developed for Key Stage 2 children, although the philosophy and techniques have been successfully applied at Key Stage 1 and in reception classes.

What are the aims of Equal Voice?

- ▶ To provide teachers with easy-to-use techniques which focus on puzzling or disruptive aspects of children's behaviour.
- ▶ To give all children an equal opportunity for self-expression.

- ▶ To raise awareness of day-to-day issues which affect a child's self-esteem.
- ▶ To create safe structures where children can express themselves freely under the guidance of teachers.
- ▶ To encourage children to take more responsibility for the well-being of their class and school.
- ▶ To contribute towards a happier and calmer working environment.

How has Equal Voice developed?

Equal Voice started in 1991 as part of an anti-bullying initiative in inner London primary schools. The original **Equal Voice** team consisted of theatre practitioners and child development specialists whose aim was to find ways for schools to help children discuss freely what they see happening and how they personally feel. The team worked directly with children, looking at their self-esteem in situations of conflict.

First the team looked at 'What is conflict?' Conflict is often seen as negative and to be avoided, but it is also a healthy part of school life. It is not just about fighting, but is also about people exploring their boundaries, taking new approaches and breaking new ground – learning. Whether learning to tie a shoelace or tackling a concept like infinity, learning is a common kind of conflict. The learning process (or conflict!) can create feelings of vulnerability and frustration. Not being able to express or deal with those feelings can lower self-esteem.

Children at school do not always articulate to adults the depth of understanding they have of the daily drama of classroom life. Their level of understanding of what goes on is often more sophisticated than their level of expression. In general, children are sensitive to, and supportive of, each other when feelings or difficult truths are expressed.

Equal Voice was originally developed with one class in each of ten primary schools (Years 3–6). There were three clear immediate benefits for the children but they were short term and not applicable across the whole school. It was realised, therefore, that long-term effects within a school could only happen through working closely with teachers as well as children and the focus began to shift in several ways. For example, before looking for ways of raising self-esteem the team first looked, with teachers, at some of the ways that it was often lowered. The programme was developed to provide more support for teachers when they were running **Equal Voice** follow-up sessions alone.

A whole-school approach to **Equal Voice** was subsequently piloted in a range of schools: inner-city, suburban and a school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The work has received extensive support from education bodies, charitable trusts, development corporations and arts funding bodies. **Equal Voice** has been piloted by practising teachers at all stages of development. The focus of all development has been to make some new ways of dealing with old problems easily accessible.

What are Equal Voice techniques?

Drama Sessions

A structure to support regular drama sessions within a class which can cover imaginary or real scenarios.

Linespeak

An introduction to reasoning and debating issues, which includes all participants equally.

Puzzles

An introduction to individual presentation and a way of demonstrating the many things that can be happening to people under the surface which can affect their behaviour.

I-Time

A tightly structured way of safely expressing grievances and disputes which focuses on feelings and provides no judgements or retribution.

Circle Talk

A framework within which a class can regularly, and safely, raise and discuss issues.

Seconds Out

A method for investigating disputes by getting one person to represent another's position.

Talk Table

The setting up of a space and structure for children to discuss and resolve certain types of problems without adult intervention.

What are the benefits of using Equal Voice?

One of the important benefits of **Equal Voice** is the provision of a safe environment for expressing and hearing feelings which can calm and improve the school ethos. Often the expression of feelings is made easier when there is no need to find the roots or justify the reasons for those feelings. Sometimes just complaining or expressing irritation can improve a situation.

Another important benefit is that, by using imaginary disputes (i.e. drama) to introduce some of the individual **Equal Voice** techniques, models can be set up for resolving real disputes.

Equal Voice gives children more responsibility for their behaviour. This encourages peer-group pressure, elevates the status of those with reasoning and mediation skills and can improve the self-esteem of a class. If some form of disruptive behaviour, for example, bullying, goes against what the class, and hopefully school, ethos expects, it is very difficult for the protagonists to continue.

All **Equal Voice** techniques promote the raising of self-esteem, whether directly or obliquely. They do not necessarily solve problems but help throw new light upon them.

Extracts from the Equal Voice handbook.

The programme will be transmitted on Channel 4 on
Thursday 21 May 1998 between 11.00 – 11.30am
and as a night-time transmission on
Wednesday 21 October 1998
between 05.15 – 05.45am, repeated on
Wednesday 3 February 1999 between 05.30 – 6.00am.

For further information about
Equal Voice and the training programme please contact:

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Channel 4 Schools broadcast a range of resources for primary PSE in
the series **All About Us**. In particular, there is a video on Bullying
and one on name calling and school rules.

No Bullying Here Video 1 x 15-minute programme £9.99

Sticks and Stones and School Rules, OK! Video 2 x 15-minute
programme £10.99

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The **Equal Voice** video is available, price £9.99, by calling
the above number.