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Stakeholder engagement

Indentifying and engaging stakeholders

Summary

1. Stakeholder engagement defined

(Policy) advocacy is the process of negotiating and mediating a dialogue through which influential networks, opinion leaders, and, ultimately, decision makers take ownership of your ideas, evidence, and proposals, and subsequently act upon them (Eóin Young & Lisa Quinn, 2012).

Anyone can be an advocate, all it takes is to be wanting to achieve change in society in general, but more typically in a specific field or area. Introducing innovative, unorthodox methods in a school – usually part of a system that is the most difficult to change – needs advocacy activities, namely convincing education stakeholders of the benefits of the method, Creative Writing Laboratories (CWLs) in the case of CREAM.

It is not enough to have strong arguments, and well working evidence-based methods, you will also need to find a way to reach the relevant stakeholder groups, and convince them. For that, you need to identify them as well as their role in the education/schooling process.

One of the greatest challenges to advocacy activities is identifying and understanding the target audiences and their needs/motives. At the planning stage you need to consider that policy and decisions in general are made by people, not institutions. Therefore, advocacy activities must be targeted at individuals within identified stakeholder groups. Successful advocates carefully analyse their target audience to ensure their efforts and resources are directed in the most efficient manner.

When making the first steps in identifying and understanding the target audience, it might be useful to create a distinction between primary and secondary audiences. In other words, advocates need to answer the questions:

• Who has the authority to make the changes that need to be made? and

• Who influences them

The primary audience includes decision makers at any level with the authority to directly affect the outcome of the advocacy goal – in CREAM to gain their support for CWL activities. These are individuals, for example, who must approve a change of internal school regulations. The secondary audiences are individuals and groups that can influence these decision makers. The opinion and actions of the latter group of individuals are important in achieving the advocacy objectives, since they have the potential to affect the opinions and actions of the decision makers – both as supporters or as adversaries.

For example, if you would like to achieve the systemic introduction of CWLs in your national school system, and you are a teacher at a school piloting the methodology, your stakeholders can be:

-       The students who have experienced and enjoyed using the method, they will be your supporters

-       The STEM professionals committed to better learning provisions can be your allies or maybe they need convincing as well

- Non-STEM teacher who will have to collaborate with their STEM counterparts and understand that it is support for them too, not just extra work

- Non-formal STEM providers who may be your allies to help amplify your message on the benefits

- The political decision makers who are influencing or deciding on the implementation of relevant education policy (might be education ministers, state secretaries, local council members, mayors) that need convincing

- Financial decision makers that have an impact on the available funding

- Training providers and other institutions that would have a role in training teaching professionals using the training material provided

- Parents and their organisations that can help you achieve your goals, but they may need convincing of an unknown method

- STEM teachers' professional organisations that may need convincing or may already support such innovative methods.

2. Dealing with various stakeholder groups

You can identify the various stakeholder groups according to the level of influence they have on the implementation of CWLs and the level of interest in it.

Those with a high level of interest and high level of influence need the closest management as they have the biggest impact on success.

People with low level of influence, but high level of influence are important because they may talk to high influence people and have an impact on their actions.

In the high-influence, but low-interest people may be your trickiest stakeholders. Their lack of interest may result in uninformed negative influence, thus you need to anticipate their needs and inform them in ways that can raise their level of interest.

In case of low-interest and low-influence stakeholders, you need to monitor the group just in case their situation – or impact on other groups may change.

Stakeholder Map: Who Needs What?

For each target group (and in the case of very influential people e.g., a minister or mayor, each target) you can make decisions on which quadrant they belong to and what tools can be used for engaging them answering a few simple questions:

1. What do they know about STEM education and creative writing?

If you provide too basic information, that may be redundant, and you lose their interest. If you do not ensure a common ground, it can cause problems later on.

2. What beliefs may influence them in supporting your goal?

What do they think about arts? How do they view the role of STEM? What is their belief about child agency and self-directed learning?

3. What personal interests can have an impact on their support?

Do they have children attending school? Are they up for re-election? Could it offer media coverage for them? – and other similar factors can have major influence.

4. What can be the impact of their support on your goals?

It is important to understand how their direct support can help you in implementing innovative teaching methods, but it is equally important to see what might be the impact of their not doing anything or directly acting against your goals.

3. Key stakeholder enviroments

Institutional environment

While institutions are supposed to follow the laws and regulations, in reality they might be stricter, and controlling, or the opposite, they are willing to go against some rules to provide extra support. Analyse and list the practices that are in your favour, or that are preventing a system to realise that innovative STE(A)M practices are key to better learning outcomes and inclusion.

Financial provisions

Often the first question from decision makers when hearing a new idea is "how much will it cost?". While many changes can be made without any extra financial burden, you need to assess the financial resource needs of what you want to achieve, the current financial provisions in place, what are they supporting, how flexible they are.

Public opinion

Your advocacy efforts can be tremendously easier or more difficult depending on how widely supported your messages are. Misconceptions and rejecting the unknown are not uncommon in the topic of education innovation, by being aware of the general trends of public opinion you may customise your messages and activities specifically targeting negative beliefs, or building on positive ones.

4. Stakeholder engagement tools

Stakeholder engagement tools

Anything can be a stakeholder engagement tool that is helping you carry your message in a positive way to your target groups or that makes them engaged in your activities.

What you already have

Once you have reviewed your target groups, the enabling factors and the barriers in your environment, it is time to assess what tools do you currently use to promote CWL for STE(A)M education. Do you already have some established channels to decision makers? You might just need to specify your messages or be more mindful to use them as a stakeholder engagement tool.

Examples of tools you already have

-       International treaties and policy documents at international, EU or national level - use relevant quotes

-       Research articles

-       Outcomes that you can share - better learning outcomes, higher level of well-being, etc. proven by piloting activities

-       Photos - but please be aware of children's privacy rights and never share photos with recognisable people in them

-       Media articles

-       Methodology already developed

What you need to develop

If you realise that there are some groups of people who are essential to be convinced are still not yet targeted, it is time to develop some new tools to reach them.

Examples of stakeholder engagement tools that you can provide

-       Invitation to participate

-       Examples of CWL outcomes

-       Testimonials

-       Own research outcomes

-       Infographics of what you are promoting

-       Videos, audios, photos - again being mindful of privacy rights

-       Newsletters

-       Website

-       Social media posts