

# Student voice:

## Build a commitment ladder

### Professional learning and development activity

#### Facilitator notes:

1. Print copies of both the commitment ladder (page 2) and the ladder template (page 3). You could also use the bullying prevention examples (page 4) to illustrate.
2. Talk through the explanations of each rung of the ladder – explain how each rung progressing up the ladder represents a greater level of commitment, starting with resistance to the idea on the lowest rung through to a strong commitment at the top.
3. Explore different views of student participation and the ladder of commitment. Discuss where your school might be on the ladder.
4. Distribute copies of the ladder template. Ask staff to rate their level of support for student participation by marking the appropriate rung on the ladder that represents their views. The ratings are anonymous – there is need for staff to name their template.
5. Tally the ratings to gauge support for change – you might do this prior to a break.
6. Share the results with staff for further discussion. If the results are less than hoped, the facilitator can ask for feedback on how the idea can be improved to generate more commitment.



# Commitment to student participation

In practice, student participation can happen across five levels, ranging from basic to high level, and from adult-led to student-led. Usually, the higher the level of student participation, the more meaningful it is to students.

## The ladder of participation

Developed by Dr Roger Hart<sup>1</sup>, the ladder of participation is a model for thinking about where children and young people are and where we would like them to be in terms of their involvement. This ladder does not suggest students have to be at the top rung, but rather we aim to move off the lower rungs of non-participation and think of ways to genuinely engage with them.

The table below gives examples of student voice at each level of involvement.



### The 7or 8 Debate

Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation shows *student-initiated, shared decisions with adults* as the top form of participation, followed by *student-initiated and directed*.

Some consider that shared decision-making is most beneficial to both students and adults. Others think that students are most empowered when they are making decisions without the influence of adults – usually this doesn't exclude adults, but reduces their role to that of support.

Both points of view have value. Ultimately, it is up to each group to determine which form of decision-making best fits with their students' needs.

#### Students' initiative, shared decisions with adults (student-adult partnership)

Students have the ideas, set up the project and invite adults to join them in making decisions throughout. They are equal partners. Students have the power to make positive changes based upon their own views and ideas, while at the same time accessing and learning from the life experience and expertise of adults.

#### Student-initiated and directed (students' initiative and leadership)

Students initiate and direct the project themselves. Decision-making happens solely among the students. Adults are available, but do not take charge, providing students with the resources and information they need to achieve their views and ideas.

#### Adult-initiated, shared decisions with students

Adults have the initial idea, but the decision-making is shared with the students. Students are jointly involved in planning, designing and implementing the project.

#### Adults make decisions, students are consulted and informed

The project is designed and run by adults. Students are not involved in the decision-making, but they are asked to share ideas that will inform the decisions of adults. Students have a full understanding of the process and of how their advice will be used. They are kept informed of the decisions made by adults.

#### Adult-led decision-making, students assigned but informed

Adults decide on the project. Students are assigned tasks, which they volunteer for only after the purpose of the project has been explained. Students understand the project and know who decided they should be involved and why.

#### Tokenism (participation for show)

Students are asked to participate in a project run by adults, but do not fully understand the issues, the reason for the project, or what their contribution adds. Students appear to be given a voice, but in reality this is limited with little or no choice about planning the project and no time to critically reflect and form their own opinions.

#### Decoration (students help implement adults' initiatives)

Students are used to support or 'bolster' a project in an indirect way (adults do not pretend that the project is inspired by students). E.g. taking part in an event but with no involvement in organising or understanding the project. Students have no role in decision-making. Involves, quite literally, decorating students.

#### Manipulation (adults use students' ideas and voices for their own gain)

Adults consciously use students to support their own project but pretend it is inspired or supported by children and young people. Students do or say what adults suggest they do, but have no real understanding of the issues or how their actions contribute. Adults' actions may be misguided rather than manipulative.

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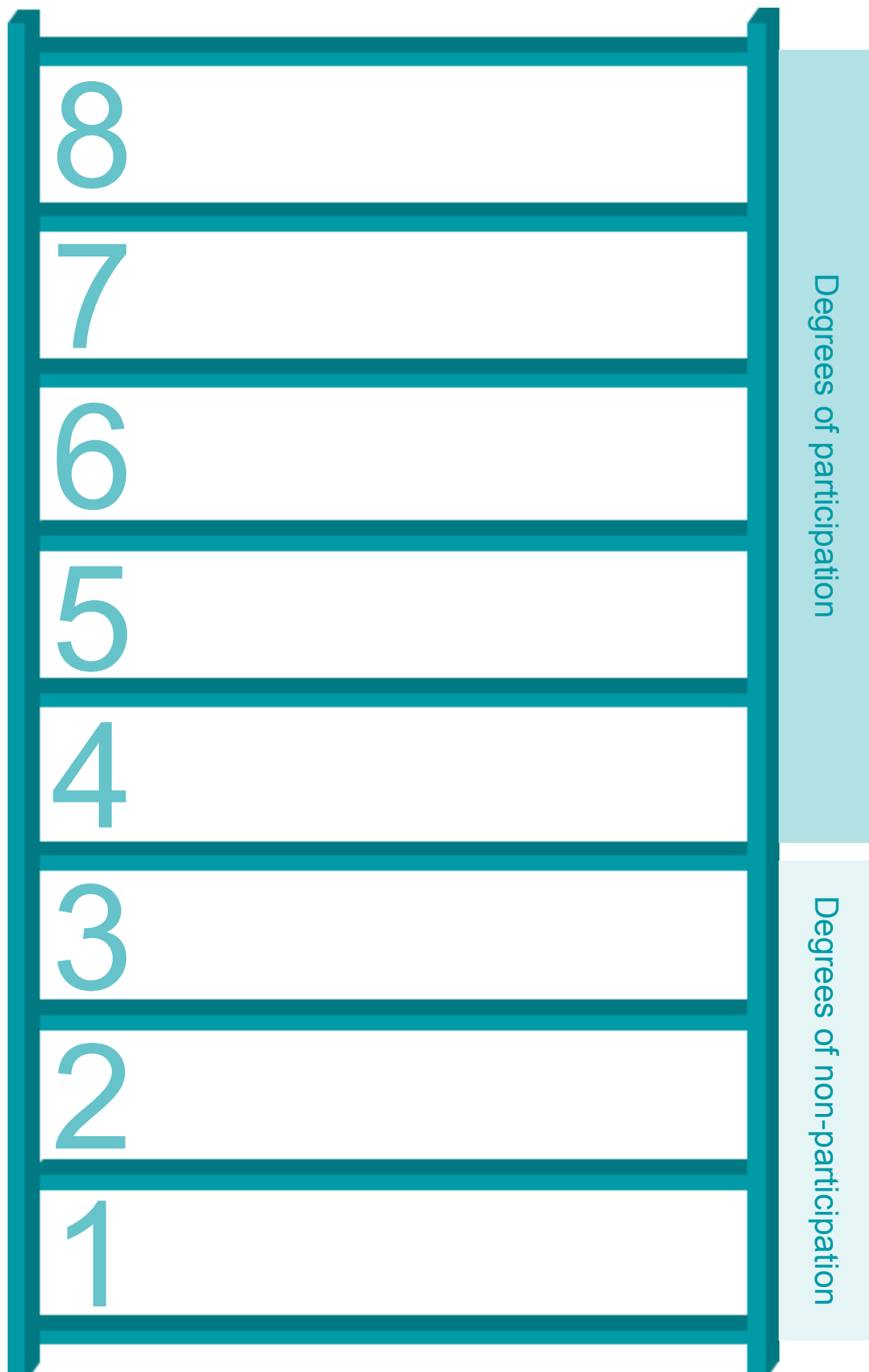
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<sup>1</sup>Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship*. Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

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## Examples of the ladder of participation and bullying prevention

