



Evidence for Excellence in Education

Notes



This short guide provides an introduction to focus groups for senior leaders, teaching staff and other school staff who are interested in carrying out research, with a view to improving practice.

# What are focus groups?

Focus groups are group interviews focused on specific topics. They are useful for brainstorming ideas and finding out what groups of people think. They can be used with learners, parents/carers, the community, school staff, governors and others.

#### Focus groups work well when:

- you need to find out people's opinions about a limited number of topics
- you need to consult a range of different people
- you are making important decisions which need to be shaped by key stakeholders
- you want to use the group dynamic to develop new ideas which may not be possible through one-to-one interviews or other research methods
- you want to gather the views of a range of people involved in a programme or intervention.

#### Focus groups work less well when:

- you need to explore confidential or sensitive matters
- you need to research a wide range of topics and/or consult a lot of people

- answers are needed very quickly, as focus groups can take time to set up
- you need to involve young children (e.g. learners in early years and reception).

# Why do focus groups?

#### Focus groups tend to appeal to schools because:

- they are relatively easy and cheap to set up within a school setting
- participants often enjoy focus groups because they feel empowered and can discuss things in their own words whilst 'bouncing ideas off' others in the group
- people with literacy, learning or other difficulties<sup>1</sup> can participate fully in focus groups whereas they may be less able to complete written exercises, like surveys
- they generate a lot of useful data from different people at the same time
- group dynamics can naturally help to identify a consensus and to focus on the most important topics
- they can help you to understand people's views and experiences.

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Careful considerations may need to be made when doing focus groups with people with learning difficulties however to ensure they are able to fully participate.

# What do focus groups involve?

Focus groups involve five main steps: developing the questions you want to ask; identifying the sample (your participants); conducting the group; drawing together and analysing the data; and reporting the findings.

As early as possible in this process, you should decide how you will ensure your project is ethical. (See www.nfer.ac.uk/ris for further information on ethics).

Figure 1 sets out the five steps in planning and implementing focus groups.

# Steps in conducting focus groups

Looking at each of the main steps in turn, we outline the key activities you will need to carry out. We also include some aspects for you to consider at each step.



# **Step 1: Develop your questions**

#### The questions should:

- be preceded by a short introduction which outlines who you are, the purpose of the focus group, and how the data will be used (e.g. to inform a new policy or improve practice)
- start off with an 'ice-breaker', e.g. 'tell us one thing about your school which you enjoy', or, 'please introduce yourself, telling us what school you are from and what year group you teach'
- be more general at first, and then become more specific, ending in a 'review' question which summarises the main points discussed (e.g. 'what are the most important points we have discussed today?', or 'what have you found out about [the topic] today?'
- be clear, concise and logically ordered.
- be no more than five to 10 in number for a focus group lasting one to one and a half hours. Within a school setting, you are unlikely to want to carry out focus groups with children and young people for longer than one hour.
- elicit a detailed response and not one word answers. You should ask 'open' questions (e.g. what, how, why and where questions) rather than 'closed' questions which will gain a short, 'yes' or 'no' answer. Possible examples are: 'What do you like about the gardening club?' rather than 'Do you like the gardening club?'.

#### Figure 1

#### Step 1

Develop your questions



#### Step 2

Identify your sample



#### Step 3

Conduct your group



#### Step 4

Draw together and analyse data



# Step 5

Report your findings

# Step 2: Identify your sample<sup>2</sup>

#### Your focus group should:

- ideally involve between 6-10 people. It is possible to run a focus group with four people but the scope of the discussion will be more limited than that with a larger group. It is unadvisable to run a focus group with more than 10 people.
- include all of the 'right' people who understand and can talk in depth about the topic(s).
- include people of a similar status or background to encourage free and uninhibited discussion e.g. it is unlikely you would want to do a focus group with new year 7 learners and year 11 learners at the same time. You would choose to do a group of year 7/8 learners and a separate group of year 10/11 learners.

#### Considerations:

Depending on who you are doing your research with, you can invite people to take part in a number of ways. For example, for parents or staff, you may choose email, telephone or by post. A combination of these is often more effective. For learners, putting up posters or talking about the research in assembly may be more effective.

- Allow enough time to contact and re-contact people. This is applicable to most research methods, not just focus groups. You will need to allow more time for this with parents/carers than you would with staff or learners.
- Contact more people than you need to take part. Some parents/carers, for example, may be unwilling to participate in your research; or some staff may be unavailable. It is good practice to draw up a 'reserve list', especially for parents/carers.
- Bear in mind that when you invite parents/carers, learners, staff or others to be involved in your research, it is a good idea to provide them with information about how they can contact you. They may have questions about the research which they want answering before they are prepared to commit.
- As with any event in a school, you will need to ensure you have considered access issues and/or any special requirements potential participants may have.
- Bear in mind the time of day you will run your focus group. For example, staff and some parents may be unlikely to participate during the day, however, they may also find it difficult (or unwilling) to in the evening or at weekends. Lunchtimes or immediately before or after school may be suitable times.

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A sample is a subset of people selected from an overall population, or group, to be involved in your research. For example, if you wanted to ask Year 10 learners how they found the process of choosing their optional subject, you would select a subset (or sample) of these and invite them to participate in a focus group.



# Step 3: Conducting your group

#### **Considerations:**

#### Managing your focus group:

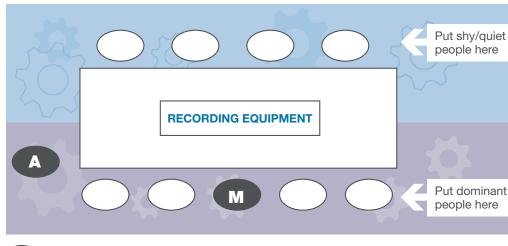
- You will need an impartial and experienced person (known as the 'moderator') to lead the group. The moderator should explain the purpose of the group, ask the questions, keep the participants on track and on time, invite all participants to contribute and summarise the discussion at key points.
- Ideally, the moderator should be supported by someone else (the 'assistant'). The assistant helps the group to run smoothly by welcoming participants, taking notes (including noting down who is speaking), offering refreshments, helping with time keeping, and supporting the moderator.
- As people become more experienced at running focus groups, it is possible to moderate alone. In these circumstances, it is advisable to audio record the discussion (only with all participants' permission).

# The venue and participants:

- The venue should be neutral, convenient for participants and comfortable. Before participants arrive make seating arrangements accordingly, as shown in Figure 2.
- Try to make participants feel at ease. Welcome them

- upon arrival and provide refreshments where possible. Use this time to chat informally and use this interaction to check whether they are likely to be shy or dominant.
- Make name cards or name badges for each participant. Ask them to write their name on them and place them on the desk in front of them.
   This will not only help the moderator but also the other participants, especially if they do not know one another.

Figure 2: Focus group seating plan



- A Assistant
- M Moderator



# **Step 4: Draw together and analyse your data**

- When you have completed your focus group, listen to the recording and check the assistant's notes against it for accuracy.
- Group the data under the questions asked and draw out the key points.
- Think about what the data is telling you about the topics discussed. It may help to talk through your interpretation with the moderator and / or assistant.
- For further information about data analysis, see www.nfer.ac.uk/ris.

# Step 5: Report your findings

- Plan carefully before you start writing your report. Consider who the audience(s) will be. You may need to create more than one version of a document for different audiences (for example, the messages you pull out for staff may be very different than those you want to target at parents/carers or pupils). Also, think about format – would a presentation or video report be more effective than a printed report?
- Structure your report clearly, using headings, subheadings and summaries where needed.
- Include an introduction at the start of the report which states the purpose of the document and

- makes the reader want to read on. Summarise your findings into a short conclusion section at the end.
- Use the active voice, e.g. 'I found', 'we investigated', which helps to aim your report directly at the reader.
- Use 'plain English', avoiding jargon and abbreviations.
- Write in short, clear sentences.
- Ensure your report is not too long, people will not read a lengthy document. If your report is long, it is advisable to write a short summary at the start.
- Consider using diagrams or figures to set out complicated information.



Notes



#### **Resource considerations**

While focus groups enable researchers to collect information from a range of people in one sitting, there are some resource implications. These include:

- The time it can take to identify possible participants and to contact (and re-contact) them.
- The time it can take to type up your focus group notes (this can take up to ten times as long as the focus group meeting for a full transcription, although it is usually less).
- You need to consider whether you will have a
  moderator and assistant for each focus group. Bear
  in mind that if you do not have an assistant, and your
  participants do not want you to record your focus
  group, the quality of your notes are likely to be of
  poorer quality.
- The equipment you will need includes a quiet room of suitable size, chairs and possibly a table, audio recording equipment and refreshments (optional).

# **Sharing your research**

You could share your research in the following ways:

- giving presentations to pupils, teachers, governors and parents
- writing an article for the school newsletter and/or colleagues in other schools

- writing for a practitioner journal or trade press
- send your report to your focus group participants (it is good practice to do so)
- writing an entry for an online publication, e.g. a blog or website.

Further information is available from NFER's 'How to' guides at www.nfer.ac.uk/ris.

#### Research ideas

Here are some ideas for how you could use focus groups in the school setting.

- Generating ideas for how the school can become more eco-friendly in future.
- Gathering governor, staff, parent/carer and/or learner opinions on how well a new policy (e.g. admissions, inclusion) is working.
- Getting feedback on what the community wants from a new school e.g. buildings; outreach; courses; leisure facilities; access to wider support services.
- Identifying what issues affect the transition from primary to secondary school and how the school (and its feeder schools) can address them.
- Generating solutions to promote communication between the school and home environments.

 Exploring the accessibility of new classroom materials for learners with special educational needs (SEN) and additional learning needs (ALN).

#### Other useful resources

We hope that this short guide to using focus groups has whetted your appetite for carrying out vour own research. NFER has published a series of 'How to' guides for practitioners who want to carry out their own research, helping you put your ideas into practice. NFER have research books and training days available as well as free guidance on topics to research and methods of research. Why not get recognition for your achievements in research in your school, college or early years setting by applying for the NFER Research Mark? Visit www.nfer.ac.uk/ris for more information.

# **Use focus groups** – get the most from them

'How to' Guides

The NFER 'How to' guides are a quick and easy way to digest different aspects of research.

Written by NFER researchers, these guides will help practitioners run research projects in education. From definitions and benefits, through to potential pitfalls, they will ensure the research is based on professional guidance.







The material in this guide has been re-purposed from Sharp, C. (2011). 'Using focus groups.' In: Lawson, A. (Ed) Research Tool-kit: the How-to-Guide from practical research for education (Volume 2). Slough: NFER.





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