

# VOCEA MEA CONTEAZĂ

## MY VOICE MATTERS CAMPAIGN

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*Abstract.* Campania VOCEA MEA CONTEAZĂ / MY VOICE MATTERS derulată în Marea Britanie își propune să ajute studenții și minorii să exprime problemele cu care se confruntă în viața lor de zi cu zi și în familie. După ample cercetări în acest domeniu, specialiștii în sănătate mintală au tras concluzia că copiii pot dezvolta probleme psihice în urma unor evenimente traumatice, incidente nefericite și traume emoționale. Campania a fost promovată folosind hashtag-uri precum #myvoicematters și #dresstoexpress. În Marea Britanie, campania a fost dezvoltată în parteneriat cu Ministerul Sănătății NHS. Aceleași cuvinte cheie au fost folosite de UNICEF în martie 2015 în Bulgaria în timpul unei campanii sociale și informaționale menite să îmbunătățească participarea copiilor. Campania a vizat incluziunea minorilor, în special a grupurilor marginalizate din diferite medii etnice. Copiii au fost invitați să scrie sondaje online și să vorbească cu ușurință despre educație, sănătate, protecție socială, distracție și activități de agrement. Campania a fost reluată în Marea Britanie anul acesta, pentru a încuraja copiii să vorbească despre dificultățile întâmpinate. Pentru a-i ajuta să se exprime cu îndrăzneală și încredere, profesorii și specialiștii în sănătate mintală folosesc strategii diverse, precum sesiuni de discuții în cerc, cărți personalizate despre emoții, zone de reglementări, cutii de îngrijorare, ambasadori ai sănătății mintale (MHA), chestionare despre mine și sentimentele mele, zis și făcut și așa mai departe. Cadru didactic cu experiență de predare în Marea Britanie, încerc să fac vizibilă campania în școlile românești, împărtășind cunoștințele publicate de specialiștii britanici.

*Cuvinte cheie:* voce, sănătate mentală, elevi, școală, ADHD, depresie, violență domestică

This account of the campaign, *My Voice Matters*, is meant to give a model that can be followed to tackle mental health disorders that children face worldwide, including in Romania. The Policy Brief. Child and Adolescent Mental Health in Romania. Recommendations to improve their quality of life issued by UNICEF in September 2022 shows that Romanian teenagers are at risk for depression and anxiety. The research accuses insufficient statistical data and proposes ways to diversify mental health services for minors. They recommend the involvement of the local community, accurate mental health

training for specialists and affordable mental health services for children. The research states that "in Romania, about 22.000 children and adolescents are living with mental illness diagnoses and many others are facing various developmental, emotional or cognitive disorders"<sup>1</sup>. Romanian children face mental disorders such as conduct disorders, ADHD, anxiety, autism, depression, attachment disorders, school phobia, insomnia, inability to focus, eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. It is time to give Romanian children a voice and a chance to express the problems they face in their lives, especially the exposure to domestic violence. Their mental health impairments have to be taken seriously, acknowledged and treated accordingly.

Bagattini is convinced that "childhood is the most vulnerable period of human life"<sup>2</sup> and that is because, generally, children depend on adults to meet their needs and this is the main cause of their vulnerability. Children are refused autonomy and power of decision as they are considered incapable of knowing what is best for themselves as contrary to the state of vulnerability accepted in elderly people. Prinstein, Youngstrom, Mash and Barkley explain how the mental disorders are viewed as syndromes which can cause great disturbance in the cognitive, emotional and behavioral realm. In a wide list of mental disorders, they describe depressive disorders as "mood disturbances characterized by sad, empty or irritable mood, associated with somatic and cognitive changes and a decline in functioning"<sup>3</sup>. Even the menstruation can propel a disorder called premenstrual dysphoric disorder in teenage females which brings about lack of interest, difficulty to focus, lethargy, troubled sleep, unbalanced eating, pain and bloating.

Tacchi highlights the importance of the voice and the way it has to be valued, fully understanding "what voice and agency mean in the complexities of everyday life"<sup>4</sup> especially

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<sup>1</sup> Copăceanu, Mihai and Costache, Irina, Policy Brief. Child and Adolescent Mental Health in Romania. Recommendations to improve their quality of life, UNICEF, 2022, page 4.

<sup>2</sup> Bagattini, Alexander, Children well-being and vulnerability, Ethics and Social Welfare, volume 13, 2019, Issue 3, page 211-215.

<sup>3</sup> Prinstein Mitchell, Youngstrom EA, Mash EJ, Barkley, Russell A. Treatment of Disorders in Childhood and Adolescence, Guilford Press, New York, 2021, page 175.

<sup>4</sup> Tacchi, Jo, When and How Does Voice Matter? And How Do We Know? Core, Loughborough University Institute, 2016, 3204906, [www.core.ac.uk](http://www.core.ac.uk), page 117.

for disadvantaged groups of society. "Voice" is more than talking, it implies participation stemming from a basic human right to make others aware of certain issues.

Trying to make it visible in our schools, this article shares the insights published by Lynn Whitehead-Lewis, the mental health lead and school counselor at Catchgate Primary School, Durham and Sue Matthews, the mental health head at Blessed Hugh Faringdon Catholic School and Sixth Form. For this purpose, it refers to the way they are enabling pupils' voices within their schools to tackle mental health and wellbeing. Initially, they highlighted the need of the adults to be heard and listened to, chaining this wish to that of the children who want to be listened to their opinions, points of view and experiences most probably in the same way.

The above mentioned specialists were previously part of another similar project in 2018 named Voice of the Pupil Trailblazer Project. This project developed a framework for engaging minors in conversation about mental health, willing to have their voices heard. Consequently, the number of the students requesting help increased. At the same time, the children showed signs of growing confidence, self-worth, a clearer sense of purpose, trust, and the sense of belonging.

They made sure the educational context offered enough means for children to be heard. For this reason, they involved them in the development of a wellbeing page, suggesting a wellbeing display board. Gradually, they developed a Mental Health Anti Stigma campaign in cooperation with Investing in Children. This training programme is currently in place in schools across the North East of Great Britain. "Putting your approach into practice can feel a little daunting. It doesn't have to be. As the mental health lead, I also took advantage of the £1,200 grant available from the DfE to fund quality assured senior mental health lead training. After completing the training, I feel we have a stable foundation on which to build a solid and effective platform for our pupil's voices" admits Whitehead, one of the specialists.

They also shaped various instruments and strategies to allow the voices of the pupils to be heard. Thus, they created suggestion boxes where every student can post a suggestion which is quickly analyzed by the School Council and acted upon based on 'you said, we did' approach.

The school council and team captains represent, lead, and ensure the children's voices matter.

The box based on the traffic light system means that a child can ask to talk to someone and depending on how urgent or important it is, they write it on the relevant colored paper.

Zones of regulation and worry boxes are ways for children to reach out in their classrooms.

Wellbeing Warriors (Year 5) and Young Champions (Year 6) are Peer Mentors and Wellbeing Ambassadors who help to articulate the voices of those who cannot be heard. They also turned a dog called Thea, their therapy dog, into the most amazing listener. Some of the Young Champions organized a debate about pupils' understanding of the importance of being heard.

Obviously, the approach to supporting mental health has greatly changed. For the children to feel they are given a voice and are listened to and understood, paper surveys were replaced with online content, absorbing questions from the Anna Freud Centre and "Me and my feelings questionnaire". They went on introducing "You said, we did" assemblies to show to their students that their young voices are heard and their concerns taken into account. Generally, students showed concern about rushed lunchtimes, so they've created a dedicated table for those who need more time, with plans to extend the option to eat outside in the summer. This change and its effect was reported in assembly. Children were also preoccupied about the hygiene in the toilets, so the adults allowed children to manage shared spaces more efficiently and carefully.

They used more strategies to enable pupil voices being heard inside and outside the classroom: Circle Time sessions provide a platform for pupils to express themselves and build emotional literacy.

Personalized emotions books, designed by pupils encourage private dialogues between pupils and teachers, provide a platform for tailored support, ensuring each child's unique emotional needs are addressed.

Zones of regulation to help children manage their emotions and prepare for optimal learning. By identifying and addressing their emotional state, pupils are empowered to choose personalized strategies to return to the "green zone" for enhanced focus and engagement.

Worry box in every classroom to ensure a safe space for pupils to express concerns, promoting a sense of openness and support.

Peer to peer support with the Year 6 pupils providing invaluable assistance to reception children during pupil voice surveys.

Mental health champions directed Google surveys and created a personalized Google site to meet their specific needs communicated weekly to the senior mental health board.

Sue Matthews, the mental health lead at Blessed Hugh Faringdon Catholic School and Sixth Form explains who are the Mental Health Ambassadors and what is their role. MHA are usually 12 years old children trained by the Education Mental Health Practitioner (EMHPs) in the linked Mental Health Support Team, watched by teaching assistants. MH Ambassadors work with kids that need early support, providing a valuable opportunity to speak to a colleague about troubling issues providing valuable CPD for staff and the chance for older students to offer support and carry the message in various departments of the school.

They also enable pupil voice through a student council that meets once a term with representatives from every year group who gather points from tutor groups to take to the council meeting. Twice per year, a pupil voice survey about the curriculum subjects is produced, a document that gives the possibility to comprehend the way students feel about learning and what is efficient for them. Following the report, the students are offered feedback using a “you said this, and we are doing that” approach.

Pupil voice can also inform subtle adjustment to the curriculum approach as it can make the difference between teachers teaching and pupils learning. Building trust and mutual understanding is vital, so feedback from pupils is integral. Where staff need help to build their confidence in this technique, they do whole school training – it is an open, interactive approach.

My Voice Matters campaign was developed in partnership with the NHS, an institution aware of the fact that more and more children and young people are experiencing mental health issues. Following extensive research, it was discovered that, according to the Children’s Society, the probability of 5-16-year-olds developing a mental health problem has increased drastically in the last couple of years.

Changes such as moving house, starting a new school, or a baby brother or sister can all be triggers for anxiety and worry, just as they can be for happiness and excitement. More than that, teenagers experience emotional turmoil when their bodies change during puberty, causing insecurities and propelling them to interrogate themselves about their shifting identity. It is considered that statistically in a class of around 30 students, five of them reported mental health problems. Even the pandemic produced a collective trauma which together with other traumatic events felt individually had a major impact on their mental

health. A mental charity was created, Place2Be which offered resources and tools used by the children to express their concerns and by the responsible adults to better understand them.

Resources are made specifically for – and with – children and young people to help others like them and can be found online [childrensmentalhealthweek.org.uk/families](https://childrensmentalhealthweek.org.uk/families).

For this purpose, the NHS offers opportunities for self-help support and guidance, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), counseling and family therapy which can be accessed face-to-face, online, on mobile apps or on the phone. Necessary medical treatments are obtainable together with talking therapies support in hospital, social care if needed, help with housing, various educational services, charities, and other services.

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My Voice Matters: Children Mental Health Week

<https://thegrovementalgroup.nhs.uk/2024/02/05/my-voice>