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Changing behaviour: a big ask?

Glen Williams looks at how surveying pupils' attitudes can help improve behaviour in schools

While they are by no means new concerns in education circles, the issues of pupil behaviour and attendance at school have frequently hit the headlines over the past few months and, at times, they have made for quite grim reading.

A recent poll carried out by the Guardian Teacher Network showed that 59 per cent of teachers believe that student behaviour has deteriorated during their teaching career, and half of the 52 per cent who said they have considered leaving the profession cited student behaviour as one of the main reasons.

The latest government figures indicate just how widespread truancy

is, with 7.2 per cent, or 450,000 children, in England falling into the persistently absent category over the autumn term of 2010 and the spring term of 2011. These children missed 15 per cent of their lessons, the equivalent of a month's worth of classes over a year.

Set all this against a background of the summer riots and soaring figures for young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) – at the last count, NEETs stood at 18.4 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds, or nearly one million individuals – and it's unsurprising that the pressure to find effective ways to improve behaviour and keep children engaged in their education has been turned up of late.

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Actions and consequences

The Government has already taken steps that emphasise the priority of the behavioural climate of learning. Firstly, Ofsted's new framework will concentrate on behaviour as one of the four key inspection criteria from January 2012, and school inspectors could carry out "no-warning" visits at schools where behaviour is seen as a weakness.

Secondly, Charlie Taylor, the Government's expert advisor on behaviour, has recently published some simple checklists that schools can adopt or adapt. These are designed to serve as reminders of what is expected from children and thus help teachers maintain discipline in school. His suggestions – including praising the behaviour you want to see more of and making sure all adults in the room know how to respond to sensitive pupils with special needs – are intentionally simple, but ensure many of the small, but essential, things do not go overlooked.

The majority of schools and teachers already recognise that keeping young



people well motivated and interested in their learning is crucial, as once a child has become sufficiently disengaged from education to be disruptive, re-engagement becomes progressively more difficult.

The consequences are well documented; if a child ends up as NEET, this will cost taxpayers up to £300,000 per child over their lifetime for the extra services and support they will need. The cost to the young person themselves is harder to put a monetary figure on, but it is far greater, as it includes increased risks of mental or physical health problems, homelessness, serious drug-use and long-term insecure and lower paid employment.

Yet, even when schools are proactive in tracking and monitoring behaviour, some problems remain. So what can teachers do to identify specific attitudes and mindsets that might be preventing young people from reaching their potential? At a time when many schools have more limited financial means and resources, how can we be sure that any interventions put in place are actually working?

Attitudes linked to behaviour

To effectively address behavioural issues within schools, it is essential to analyse any underlying contributory factors, and attitudinal surveys can provide a much-needed gateway. Attitudes are not to be confused with tastes, which can be subject to weekly fads. Core attitudes are stable, only altering when something major happens, and these judgements can significantly affect a pupil's experience of education and their overall achievement.

Having an insight into pupil attitudes, individually or as a group, in an educational context can help teachers step in before serious issues manifest themselves, and tailor interventions that

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meet the exact requirements. It is quick and simple to re-measure at a later date to ensure effectiveness, and regular re-assessing of these attitudes helps to build a picture of a pupil's strengths and weaknesses and his/her likely future behaviour.

For these reasons, the rich data that attitudinal surveying provides is increasingly being used, alongside more traditional "harder" assessment data, by schools and local authorities wanting to get to grips with any self-imposed obstacles that might be preventing children from aspiring to achieve. For example, in Manchester, more than 50 of the city's schools now survey every child annually, aiming to boost the 4As – attendance, achievement, attitudes and aspirations.

Attitudes affect attainment

Attitudinal surveys measure core attitudes via short psychometric questions, specifically correlated with educational attainment. This includes a measurement of pupils' aspiration, motivation to do schoolwork, their views of their own knowledge and skills about learning processes, self worth as learners and feelings about school.

Some surveys incorporate sampling and benchmarking of students from pupil referral units (PRUs), students with moderate learning difficulties and those with specific learning and emotional difficulties as part of the standardisation process. This makes the measures more accessible and appropriate for use in a range of educational settings, from

Key core attitudes for learners

Feelings about school (sometimes referred to as "school connectedness"). Can indicate feelings of social exclusion and also, potentially, risk of bullying.

Perceived learning capability. Offers a snapshot of a learner's unfolding impressions of self-efficacy and can reveal early warning signs of demoralisation and disaffection.

Self regard. Equivalent to self-esteem but more focussed narrowly on learning and therefore has a greater correlation with achievement. Preparedness for learning. Do pupils have the tools to do the learning job?

Attitudes to teachers. A student's perception of the relationships they have with the adults they work with in school.

General work ethic. The motivation to succeed in life is about purpose and direction, not just at school but also beyond.

Confidence in learning. A measure of perseverance in the face of challenge. Do students see themselves as giving up at the first hurdle or do they see themselves as having "stickability"?

Attitudes to attendance. Highly correlated to and predictive of an individual's actual attendance.

Response to curriculum demands. A second motivational measure, focussing more narrowly on motivation to undertake and complete tasks set within the school's curriculum.

mainstream schools to highly specialist provision, where they can add valuable information in therapeutic interventions and reintegration planning.

Assessing pupils' attitudes can profoundly help to reduce a number of negative outcomes that lead to an increased risk of disengagement. For example, do children believe they have the ability to succeed? How do they perceive their relationship to their

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teachers? Do they feel “connected” to the school?

Preparedness for learning – whether or not pupils have the skills they need to learn within the classroom setting – is highly correlated with learning and behavioural difficulties. Identifying a mismatch here explains the poor behaviour, and also indicates how best to target it, for example, via study support. In one case, a primary school found a weakness in how well prepared their pupils were for learning and put appropriate interventions in place. In a two year period, its exclusion rate dropped dramatically from 20 short-term exclusions to none as a result.

Whatever the issue, once a problem is identified, school leaders can focus their efforts on finding a solution. It could be to raise learner self-worth and confidence in girls, or it could be ensuring that year groups have the time management and study skills they need. It could be a bigger, more complex challenge, such as increasing pupils’ aspirations, particularly in families or regions where long-term deprivation has become the norm amongst adults.

Case study Raising aspirations and improving attendance

One of Rhondda Cynon Taf’s (RCT) objectives in their current Building the Future Together project was to increase aspirations for their young people. The Welsh borough began looking at prevention tactics to reduce the number of NEETs and improve future employability prospects. As an area of significant socio-economic disadvantage, they used attitudinal surveys across all 19 secondary schools in the area to build a more detailed picture of what may be contributing to disengagement.

Some of the results were surprising, says Martyn Silezin, Schools Data Officer at RCT: “Many of the young people who scored poorly were already known to us, but we couldn’t have guessed that the most disaffected and disruptive pupils have a strong belief in their own ability to learn but a lack of belief in the system to help them. Knowing this immediately focuses our efforts in the right direction.”

In situations where attendance is an issue, attitudinal surveys can accurately forecast what the real situation is likely to be 12 months down the line. If a school can identify which children are most likely to stop coming to school altogether before it happens, appropriate supportive measures to prevent this becoming a reality can be put in place.

RCT are already looking at their data to decrease truancy. “We know high attendance is crucial to prevent disengagement or involvement in anti-social activities”, says Mr Silezin, “but it’s also the hardest thing to crack. RCT is about two per cent below the average in Wales, so we are using attitudinal survey results to predict those at risk of playing truant in advance of it actually happening.”

Targeted support

Without analysing core attitudes, fundamental factors influencing a child’s ability to achieve can go un-checked, and staff-pupil relationships can be rooted more in suppositions about poor behaviour rather than objective evidence.

However, if a teacher knows the underlying causes of why a pupil is disengaging – are they struggling with the study skills they need to access the curriculum? Is low learner self-worth crippling their ability to participate? – s/he can intervene appropriately at an early stage and help improve overall outcomes for the child. The needs of

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previously invisible groups – those who have attitudinal barriers to overcome but do not overtly misbehave in class – or fragile learners, as they are sometimes known, can also be identified and supported.

When schools only have limited resources at their disposal, using attitudinal surveys means that support and resources can be prioritised to where there is greatest need and where they will help most. Subject teachers can gain a deeper understanding of the mindsets affecting their pupils, headteachers can gain an insight into the parameters of their school’s effectiveness and pupils will benefit from interventions that are personalised more appropriately to their needs.

When it comes to raising standards, the focus on decreasing truancy, improving behaviour and closing the attainment gap will always be paramount. While there is no quick fix for such a complex problem, quantifiable evidence about the attitudes of young people towards their learning environment could help fill in some of the gaps. **SEN**

Further information

Dr Glen Williams is a chartered psychologist at W3 Insights:
www.gi-assessment.co.uk/pass