

Do you know how all of your pupils feel about school? Not just those who volunteer for everything or who attract your attention for the wrong reasons. **Brian Lightman** explains how St Cyres School in Penarth found the PASS pupil attitude survey a powerful tool in understanding the answers.

The truth is out there...

How confident are children in your school about their ability to learn? How developed are their learning skills and what is their attitude towards their teachers?

What is their work ethic and their response to the demands of the curriculum?

Anyone who is serious about school improvement wants to know the answers and has done so long before personalising learning and student voice came into common parlance.

However, it is very easy to get feedback from those who offer it most readily – the children who always chat to you on dinner duty, the year and school councils, the children who are in your office again because they are in some sort of trouble.

Even when structured progress interviews are built in to the school calendar it is very difficult indeed to get a genuine overview and not to be influenced by the mix of pupils you meet in the course of the day.

The shy ones, the poor attenders, the children who go through five years of secondary education without engaging in more than a cursory conversation with their teachers – these are the ones whose views are often missed.

At St Cyres School, a mixed comprehensive with 1,560 pupils of all abilities from a wide range of backgrounds, we decided to complement our relatively well-established self evaluation processes with a whole school survey of pupil attitudes.

Logistics

The logistics of this were ambitious and we were nervous. Every pupil in Years 7-11 was to complete an online survey taking about 15 minutes, technology permitting. Where there wasn't access to the computer network they would complete a paper version.

All of the results would be submitted to the publishers of the PASS survey (Pupil Attitudes to Self and School) and a report returned within days.

The survey consisted of 50 questions which asked pupils' level of agreement with statements relating to nine factors (see Table 1), which were founded on a rigorous research base.

The report would analyse the responses in great »



Brian Lightman is head of St Cyres School in Penarth, a mixed comprehensive of about 1,500 pupils.

Table 1 - Summary of Factors Used in PASS Survey

| FACTOR | DESCRIPTION |
|--------|---|
| 1 | Feelings about school e.g. "I am happy when I am at school." |
| 2 | Perceived learning capability: How positive and successful students feel in their specific capabilities as learners e.g. "I can read well." |
| 3 | Self-regard: The impact of learning on their self-concept more generally e.g. "Learning is difficult." |
| 4 | Approach to learning situations: How prepared they feel to meet a particular learning situation, including metacognitive and study skills e.g. "I know how to be a good learner." |
| 5 | Attitude to teachers e.g. "I like my teachers." |
| 6 | Attitude to work: General work ethic/motivation and associated feelings e.g. "Working hard in school will help me in the future." |
| 7 | Confidence in learning: Perseverance when presented with challenging tasks and problem-solving e.g. "I enjoy doing hard school work." |
| 8 | Attitude to attendance at school e.g. "I'd rather be somewhere else than in school." |
| 9 | Attitude to work demands made upon them by the curriculum and its delivery: Specific motivation to undertake and complete work set in school e.g. "I am bored at school." |

» detail using a large and reliable standardised sample from a large number of other schools.

We prepared the pupils for the survey by telling them in assembly time and school council meetings why we were using it.

It was important to present it as something which would be a useful conversation topic for all of us and could help us to make our school a better place. Confidentiality was emphasised.

Suffice it to say that the application of the survey proved remarkably easy in spite of limited ICT facilities and the complexities of a split site. My view would be that if we managed it any school could.

The pupils took the survey very seriously and enjoyed completing the online questionnaire. Learning support assistants gave technical help to the children with special needs.

Only two pupils made mistakes like forgetting to submit their surnames and the system enabled us to identify them later.

Using the data

The results surpassed our wildest expectations and instigated a debate across the whole staff. It was one of the most powerful I can remember in terms of school improvement.

The data influenced our school development plan, our understanding

of individual pupils and the trends within different year groups.

The data arrived as a detailed report analysing the results by year group, gender, and ethnicity.

We received also a fascinating risk assessment of each pupil showing their percentile score according to each factor and indicating which pupils are most likely to have problems at school (Table 2).

All of this data was provided on CD as well as in printed form and we placed it on our intranet for staff to view. Many were glued to it for hours.

Accuracy

The power of this data was extraordinary. We were amazed that a paper survey could be so accurate in pinpointing almost all of those pupils who have been challenging or would prove later to have major difficulties in school.

Not only did the survey identify existing problems but has proved extremely accurate in discovering potential problems.

One teacher identified a bullying problem as a direct result of looking at the risk assessment and noting a trend which worried her enough to investigate it with a pupil.

We have used this data in student interviews and in meetings with parents. Our youth support worker has been able to tackle issues

Table 2 - Identifying Pupils at Risk (Traffic Lights)

| | Year | Feelings about school | Perceived learning capability | Self regard | Preparations for learning | Attitudes to teachers | General work ethic | Learner confidence | Attendance attitudes | Response to curriculum | |
|---|---------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|------|
|  | Molly | 7 | 79.4 | 63.5 | 69.9 | 75.0 | 100 | 77.6 | 80.4 | 46.6 | 73.0 |
|  | John | 7 | 91.3 | 95.7 | 78.7 | 46.0 | 100 | 56.7 | 27.5 | 94.3 | 73.0 |
|  | Gemma | 7 | 71.6 | 72.4 | 78.1 | 84.2 | 16.3 | 96.5 | 72.1 | 58.8 | 73.0 |
|  | Joe | 7 | 79.4 | 90.7 | 15.2 | 55.0 | 89.3 | 56.7 | 51.9 | 46.6 | 11.2 |
|  | Karen | 7 | 63.4 | 20.5 | 29.8 | 22.6 | 37.7 | 18.2 | 20.5 | 58.8 | 46.9 |
|  | Katie | 7 | 27.1 | 54.2 | 23.8 | 36.4 | 89.3 | 89.7 | 63.1 | 15.2 | 20.0 |
|  | Lee | 7 | 3.2 | 4.8 | 2.3 | 7.6 | 0.8 | 34.2 | 4.4 | 3.9 | 2.4 |
|  | Laura | 7 | 31.2 | 20.5 | 23.8 | 55.0 | 37.7 | 77.6 | 14.4 | 58.8 | 32.7 |
|  | Michael | 7 | 38.5 | 24.5 | 69.9 | 46.0 | 37.1 | 10.8 | 35.0 | 26.8 | 61.2 |
|  | Mary | 7 | 27.1 | 20.5 | 60.5 | 22.6 | 89.3 | 18.2 | 6.0 | 46.6 | 46.9 |

TABLE EXPLAINED

These are percentile scores. If a pupil scores 66, it means that 66 per cent of pupils of the same year group would score less positively than this. A score at the 99 per cent level is a very positive result. A score of 50 per cent is therefore average – half the pupils would score higher and half lower.

of self-esteem and confidence with targeted individuals.

We have discussed the data in staff meetings, working groups and the school council – which provided some really valuable perceptions and interpretations.

We even based a task on it for candidates for an assistant headship.

As we have worked with the data our confidence in its reliability and accuracy has grown and we intend to incorporate the survey into our annual calendar in order to identify trends and developments.

We are absolutely convinced that this data will enable us to be more proactive and undertake effective preventative work. Our colleagues in feeder schools are interested in applying the survey in Year 5 to assist with this.

Going forward

Our current view is that we will probably want to conduct the whole school online survey annually or biennially but will have a stand-alone copy of the software to use with absentees and new mid-year admissions to the school.

At macro-level the data has been equally powerful. It has posed questions, which were worth asking and it helped us to focus our priorities.

The survey identified clear issues about confidence in learning and self-regard in Years 9 and 11 and a particular lack of self-confidence in girls. These same children tended to display negative attitudes to teachers.

By working on their self-regard, we hope to be able to tackle potential disaffection and underachievement and raise their self-confidence.

The survey did not only identify problems. It did a great deal to show us what we are doing right and how positive the ethos is in many parts of the school.

It showed us where we should focus our efforts in the next stage of our development.

The knowledge we gained from this process has strongly influenced the redrafting of our school development plan.

It has strengthened our resolve to improve further our systems of praise and rewards and has given a strong focus to a review of the Key Stage 4 curriculum.

My personal opinion is that it has told us far more than an external inspection could have done and been far more challenging. I strongly recommend it. SA

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