

What do the pupils think of school?



Dr Glen Williams says: "Just listen to the children"

Schools are continually looking to evaluate why pupils become disenchanted with education. Now a Black Country firm has developed a system to help assess pupils' attitudes to learning. **Dr Glen Williams**, chairman of W3 Insights, says: Listen to the children

The education sector is full of buzzwords; they are endemic and can obscure the good work being done in schools.

It is easy for buzzwords to be picked up and lampooned by the media, or for a subject to be hijacked by either side of an argument for political expediency.

Education and its broad and disparate environs never fails to stir emotions; which of us avoided the attempt by Jamie Oliver to drive the standards of school meals ever higher up the agenda?

By creating a climate where buzzwords change weekly, term by term, an important voice is often overlooked – the pupils.

Beneath the headlines which schools and education provide on a regular basis is also the fact that schools are fundamentally all faced with the same problems – improving attendance, reducing disaffection, increasing attainment, and raising aspirations. As part of tackling these vital issues why is it that we don't ask the kids how to do it?

It's an obvious answer to a

difficult question, but one which has simply not yet been answered.

Let's take a step back and look in our own backyard. A group of Birmingham schools is about to embark on a project to look at the need for young people to develop an 'emotional robustness' in the school setting. The purpose of this work is to identify and support children and young people in developing resilience. This work will, in turn, be evaluated and help schools 'listen' to what their pupils are saying.

Which brings us neatly back to why we don't consult the pupils as part of a process to help solve some of the problems the education sector is facing.

The Government has a take on this – it is called "pupil voice." In recent years there has been no shortage of well-intentioned people helping youngsters find and use their voices in schools.

If pupils are to fulfil the potential their contributions could make, they should take an active, constructive part in the education process. This should not just be confined to the environments in which they learn, but extends to broader questions of learning so that they feel an integral cog in a partnership which looks at a whole range of issues in and around school.

Pupil voice is important – it is the thoughts, beliefs and reflections of pupils, linking them directly with all the things that truly matter in schools.

And it can take many forms – school councils, inviting comment on a particular initiative or project within school, or policy and practices within the classroom.

I would contend there needs to be a robust and rigorous method of tapping in to the

"pure gold dust" of information available simply by listening to what children say. From our base in the heart of Black Country, W3 Insights has spent the last ten years researching and developing a system called PASS (Pupil Attitude to Self and School).

This system, based on an idea we had several years ago, directly engages pupils through a web-based process or via software on a PC, to measure tangibly their attitudes to learning, to themselves and to their surroundings. We obviously hoped all those years ago that

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idea would take off. To think that PASS is now used in 90 of England's 130 Local Education Authorities and has made a difference to the lives of more than 150,000 children adds credence to the fact that listening to pupils not only vastly benefits them – it's a huge plus for the school too.

We are finding out that there are things that lie beneath the surface that are core to learning but are much more about pupils' views of themselves.

These are not views that change on a day-to-day basis – they change when something really important happens to

the child. This is the crux of it – how can you measure the attitudes of young people and teenagers when so many influences and pressures from the outside world constantly impose themselves upon them? What our research has shown is that there are levels below the "headline" attitudes, which are much more central and consistent, which have a major link to life chances and longer term success.

These are links which are about pupils feeling good about themselves within a school setting. At the extreme these can be related to ASBO-type behaviours and are certainly linked to citizenship and societal problems, because the schools which help kids feel integrated set those children on a smoother path to adulthood. Research has shown they are much less likely to commit criminal acts, take drugs or gamble; therefore, by assessing attitudes of pupils throughout their school life, schools are actually extending their influence into the community.

The output is a win for the pupil, a win for the school and potentially help for society.

What a system like PASS does is to identify very precisely how an individual child's attitudes and motivations compare with their own age group across the whole UK.

Data obtained from engaging with pupils can be used to re-engage those who don't want to be at school, to directly put programmes in place to make youngsters more successful in exams, based on things that seemingly have nothing to do with the curriculum; for example, self-worth as a learner.

We can identify for schools, pupils who have "gone off the boil" in their heads and pick them up before they stop

attending. Teachers recognise changes in attitudes precede changes in behaviour.

Elements of the education system are reactive.

Ambulance chasing non-attenders and the "truancy bus" idea is a case in point. Questioning pupils' attitudes to attendance gives teachers a handle on these problems as much as 12 months before they happen in order that they can implement some preventative measures to keep them in school.

As I said earlier, data extracted from these exercises is gold dust – and it is. It can be used in terms of submissions in school inspections as pupil voice information is an increasingly integral part of the questions schools are asked by Ofsted.

Schools are not only asked what pupils think about learning in the school but often the killer follow-up question is: "How do you know?"

Themes and buzzwords have their place as rallying calls to focus professional effort and attention sometimes, but they also have their limitations – answers the schools need to provide must be believable and comprehensive.

By fully recognising that every child's voice is important and allowing pupils an avenue to articulate what's going on within, schools can provide a sensible, recognised measure of their learner climate specific to that school.

By adopting a parochial approach to listening to pupils, whilst remaining "plugged in" to national benchmarks, the gap between what young people say and who is willing to listen can truly be bridged.

And with that, we can have teachers of satisfied children rather than teachers of subjects.