



Building a brighter future with the Cognitive Abilities Test and PASS

A three year project, *Building the Future Together*, is currently underway in Rhondda Cynon Taf to improve the life chances and career opportunities for the thousands of young people who live in the borough. A combination of the Cognitive Abilities Test and the PASS attitudinal survey is helping to pinpoint where interventions will have the most impact.

“Ensuring adequate basic skills and raising aspirations are both fundamental to increasing the long-term job prospects for our young people. Testing cognitive abilities together with student attitudes gives us the information we need to stimulate more positive attitudes to education across the local authority and to identify any areas that require appropriate interventions,” says Martyn Silezin, schools data officer at Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC (RCT).

Project part financed by the European Social Fund through the Welsh Government, *Building the Future Together* seeks to tackle the disengagement of 11-19 year olds across all 19 secondary schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf - an area of significant socio-economic disadvantage. The aim is to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) and improve future employability.

Martyn, a psychology graduate with 30 years teaching experience, was recruited to the project to look at how data could be used to spot where literacy and numeracy interventions were needed, and then to measure the impact of putting these interventions in place.

He explains: “The first part of the project was to conduct a student review to identify those at risk of leaving school without the qualifications or confidence to move into further education or work. With around 24,000 young people to screen, it was clear I needed reliable tools that would provide robust information.”

“From my time as an Assistant Headteacher I was already familiar with the *Cognitive Abilities Test* and knew the information it would yield was exactly what was required for this project. After extensive research, I discovered that using these scores in conjunction with the *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School* attitudinal survey would provide extremely useful insights into pupil motivations and build a more detailed picture.”

The *Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT)* is the UK’s most widely used test of reasoning abilities, measuring numerical, non-verbal and verbal reasoning as well as an element of spatial ability. The data can be used to identify pupils’ strengths, needs and learning preferences, as well as provide indicators of academic potential at key stages, including GCSEs and A-levels.

Martyn says: “We started by testing with *CAT* in Years 7 and 9. Interestingly, we discovered that some schools thought they had better cohorts than they did. We also uncovered various pupils who were masking poor numeracy skills by being linguistically very able. It’s so important we ascertain this in the early stages – the further they fall behind, the harder it is to catch up.”

Attitudes and motivations

Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) is a survey that gauges pupils’ attitudes to themselves as learners and to their schools. It assesses nine core factors, including task persistence, preparedness for learning and attendance attitudes, proven to be closely aligned with academic outcome. It also allows early identification of ‘at risk’ pupils, sometimes in advance of these attitudes translating into behaviour outcomes.

Martyn comments: “*PASS* provides an insight into pupils’ mindsets that would otherwise be difficult to glean. The nine factors fit exactly with the data we are interested in and help us drill down into any specific barriers to learning. Attendance is always the hardest thing to crack, but we know it’s crucial to prevent disengagement or involvement in anti-social activities. Our area is about 2% below the average in Wales, so the fact that *PASS* results can predict those at risk of playing truant in advance of it actually happening is excellent.”

“Once we surveyed the children, it turned out that many who scored poorly were already known to us. The biggest surprise was that the most disaffected and disruptive pupils have a strong belief in their own ability to learn but lack of belief in the system to help them. Knowing this immediately focuses our efforts in the right direction.”

Plan for improvement

Part of Martyn’s remit for Building the Future Together is to monitor progress and prove the distance travelled, so he approves of the digital versions of *CAT* and *PASS*. “Both assessments can be completed online, an attractive aspect for us as we can collect the information electronically – which will form a baseline for future testing – and benefit from real-time returns.”

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“We’re developing a database on what the major issues are and which interventions work most effectively. At the start of the project, there were 241 different interventions in place but nothing to cohesively match the right pupil to the right intervention. Now, the insights we are getting concentrate our attentions. For example, we’re finding out where to invest in one-to-one support or when to use our extensive after-school provision of activities designed to engage young people’s interest.”

With so many young people involved in the project, RCT has implemented a system of youth coaches and key workers to co-ordinate work taking place in each of the 19

secondary schools. “Our key workers aren’t trained teachers, so the data from *CAT* and *PASS* gives them an easily readable list to work from. For simplicity, we compile spreadsheets with colour-coded results, and this aids with prioritising who will benefit most from support.”

Martyn continues, “The data we are collecting brings to light any obstacles preventing children from fulfilling potential. If they are not displaying overtly disruptive behaviour, they can sometimes stay hidden. For example, there was one boy who seemed happy and cheerful in class and who scored highly with *CAT*, but the *PASS* results revealed he was actually very unhappy in terms of self-confidence and contentment with the curriculum. Finding this type of thing out kick-starts an action plan to get young people back on track before the problems become insurmountable.”

Benefits

- RCT can more easily identify young people who are at risk of underachieving or becoming disengaged with education
- Data is benchmarked to reveal trends that need addressing by area and by school
- Helps focus more clearly on which pupils should be prioritised for support
- Enables better matching of the right intervention to the right individual
- Allows the borough to measure the impact of interventions

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