

Changing attitudes, improving outcomes

With NEETs figures stubbornly high and budgets tighter than ever, how can local authorities keep children engaged and achieving at school? **Dr Glen Williams** thinks measuring pupils' attitudes could offer valuable insights.

Developing effective ways to improve young people's life chances and deal with the rising number of NEETs in the UK – currently standing at 1.16 million – represents a real challenge on a local as well as national level. The Government has recently committed £1bn to its youth contract plan, finding work placements for at least 410,000 18-24 year olds over the next three years. Certainly, once young people have become NEET, having the right policies in place to help them re-enter education or employment is crucially important.

The other side of the coin is pre-empting future issues during a child's formative years in compulsory education. For local authorities, this can be easier said than done. Not only must any measures be demonstrably cost-effective, resources must be targeted to those schools most in need. Furthermore, milestones must be met, and impact needs to be monitored and benchmarked to ensure all children are making sufficient progress.

Using data to inform discussion on performance and prioritisation is already commonplace. Now, however, around 100 local authorities have found they can fulfil a great many more of their objectives by supplementing traditional assessments, focusing directly on attainment and the curriculum, with 'softer' measures of learner attitudes.

Good progress

St Helens Council in Merseyside, a small local authority in an area of severe deprivation, high unemployment and elevated rates of teenage pregnancy, is one such place. Classed as a 'persistent absence' local authority in 2007, the council is well aware that pupils who regularly miss classes are less likely to make good progress in school and are at greater risk of negative outcomes, including limited and unstable employment opportunities, youth crime, or drug and alcohol abuse.

Addressing attitudes to attendance and improving overall outcomes for young people are therefore key priorities for the borough. "Attitudinal surveys help us gain an insight

into any emotional obstacles the children might have," says Helen Ashton, a cross-phase behavioural specialist who works with many schools in the area. "To work effectively with schools, we need to understand these."

Why the attitude?

In a school setting, a pupil's attitudes to learning can influence their whole experience of education, and have significant effects on their overall levels of attainment. Attainment is boosted by good attendance at school and supported by high aspirations, so logically these all need to be key objectives as part of a NEETs reduction plan.

Attitudinal surveys are designed to measure nine dimensions, empirically linked with educational attainment, as well as behavioural and emotional outcomes, that will only change when something significant happens to the pupil. These include 'attitude to attendance' and 'preparedness for learning', a measure that correlates highly with pupils at risk of behavioural difficulties.

'Feelings about school' is a measure frequently used to evaluate anti-bullying programmes but also examines how connected a child feels to their learning environment. Independent research has shown that feeling this sense of 'connectedness' can decisively reduce the risk of later youth criminality, drug-taking and other forms of anti-social behaviour.

Scores and results

Attitudinal surveys measure the 'hard to measure', giving an insight into emotional barriers, motivations and mindsets that may affect a child's ability to achieve.

In the case of attendance a low attitude score can highlight a potential problem before a child starts actually missing classes, giving that school a chance to intervene at an early stage and reduce the likelihood of subsequent truancy.

St Helens Council had been aware that some children were starting secondary school with a range of behavioural problems and poor social skills, so they focused on attitudes in Years 5 and 6. Ashton said: "We immediately saw a pattern of low scores in some pupils' self-regard, confidence in learning and attitudes to attendance, particularly for girls. This confirmed our fear that negative feelings were starting early."

Knowing where the key issues lie when it comes to factors that directly contribute to educational success or failure means local authorities can pinpoint where to prioritise their efforts. At a time when budgets are tight, this is a cost effective way of picking up children who are attitudinally going off the boil before the worst happens and reducing the risk of them becoming another statistic.

For example, are disruptive pupils confident of their own ability but lacking belief in the education system to help them? Are Year 7s finding the transition to secondary school difficult, leading to behaviour or attendance issues or, as in the case of St Helens, are negative attitudes starting even earlier?





Benchmarking

Once the surveys have been completed, they can be collated to look at the needs of individual pupils, or explore cohort patterns like year group, gender and ethnicity. They can also be looked at in terms of strategic priorities of individual schools or scaled up to incorporate school cluster and entire local authority perspectives. The results help local authorities build a detailed picture of where interventions might be beneficial, help streamline resource allocation, improve provision mapping and – importantly in these times of austerity – aid more efficient prioritisation of spending.

Benchmarking progress over time evidences the impact of intervention and can allow local authorities to self-evaluate on specific themes, such as raising attainment in boys.

St Helens was able to put in place a com-

prehensive intervention programme, particularly focusing on activities for girls, but also dealing with all children’s basic needs for learning and reinforcing the message that the school values and cares for them. When they re-evaluated several months later, they were pleased with the results. “Many of the factors, such as feelings about school, had significantly improved and attitudes towards attendance were better,” confirms Ashton.

Joined-up approach

Fully engaging children in education in order to reduce the personal, social and economic costs of becoming NEET is not an easy ask. Complex problems often require multi-agency working, including the collaboration of educational psychologists, school improvement officers, behavioural specialists, social workers and other support staff. Building an effective team can

take time and therefore money – both of which are often in short supply.

However, using data from attitudinal survey results can speed up or even bypass many of the issues associated with the ‘forming, storming, norming and performing’ stages of team-building, allowing everyone to focus on the needs of the child, speak with a common pupil-centred voice and move more quickly to action.

Positive impact

When the miserable economic and social consequences of being out of work or education are so well-known, and the well-documented, self-perpetuating cycle of deprivation which can be an element of NEETs is so resistant to change, it’s clear that preventative early intervention is a necessity.

Integrating a measure of attitude alongside attainment and other cognitive assessments can help underpin a local authority’s understanding of the root causes that need to be dealt with. Highly-accessible and transparent results can inform collaborative and cost-effective projects across schools, and demonstrably differentiate which interventions are working best.

In brief, measuring attitudes can fill in some of the blanks that are crucially needed to make serious and permanent in-roads into improved life chances for all young people.

Dr Glen Williams is a chartered psychologist at W3 Insights, part of GL Assessment, and has developed the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) attitudinal survey.



Dr Glen Williams

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