

DOWNLOADING PROBLEMS

Terry Philpot looks at a computerised interactive system that engages children in their own assessments

Nine months ago 10-year-old Susie had negative feelings about school, her ability to learn, how she saw herself as a learner, her ability to prepare herself to learn, and her confidence in learning. Not surprisingly, she also had a poor attitude to attending school. Curiously, perhaps, she had a high regard for her teachers and saw herself as having a good work ethic.

There was a high risk of her becoming disaffected with school and learning.

When this came out in an assessment, Susie agreed with it. Her teacher was relieved at the findings. This had been her view but none of the professionals she had approached had listened to her. An educational psychologist became involved with her, professionals working with her met, and she was statemented. Three months later Susie was assessed again and all her scores had improved, some quite dramatically.

Susie's experience is one that indicates that the PASS (Pupil Attitudes to Self and School) assessment system can make a difference to children and young people with problems.

For Susie's was a different method of assessment and one now being used in 25 local education authorities. It gave her some power because is an interactive, computerised system where the child or young person answers 50 questions (something unlikely to be possible with a teacher or educational psychologist asking questions in a more traditional assessment) by choosing one of four options.

"Highs" and "lows" are identified across nine factors, which are related to standards based on 10,000 pupils and scores are based on percentiles.

Attitudes to be assessed range from "I am happy when I am at school: I feel safe" to "I

am bored at school"; "I can read well" to "Learning is difficult"; and "I am lonely at school" to "I would rather be somewhere else". Different attitudes do not follow from the previous option chosen but they allow for a literally instant assessment and analysis at the end.

The whole process only takes 10 to 20 minutes and one of its virtues is that the children see an immediate outcome, which they can question. They are asked if the computer got it right which allows them to suggest, say, that some of the individual scores could be higher, or are too generous or are about right. The factors can be grouped under school, self, motivation and learning.

Because there is no checklist in how to introduce a child to the system, the assessment can also provoke discussion further taking it past the issues raised on the screen.

"Children tend to feel more comfortable about talking in this way", believes Vivienne Clifford, senior educational psychologist, Harrow, "because of the rapport that the exercise allows you to build with them".

While it might be thought that children who have a poor view of themselves and how they perform might be plunged downward by a low-scoring assessment, Vivienne Clifford says that the children are often relieved because they see it is an assessment about what they think, not a way of scoring how they do at school.

The system was devised by a group of educational psychologists and is marketed commercially. Although the nine factors all concentrate on education, they highlight the axiom that poor pupil performance can mask emotional and mental health problems, disaffection, and problems at home. Children's belief that they can't learn or lack the confidence to do so can hid behind

a range of behaviours.

Or as Gladys de Groot, principal educational psychologist, Harrow, explains: "PASS was developed in the context of school and self-fulfilment but mental health emotional stability are good indicators in how you feel about school as other indicators like, say, IQ. If there are issues going on in the child's life then they will come out in any circumstances they find themselves in."

While the system can identify patterns across schools and with individual children, it is also flexible in that it can be used with groups of children. For example, Harrow has used it with one group of low achieving black boys and found a common denominator in their attitudes to teachers (or rather what they perceived as teachers' attitudes to them). And, like Hampshire, the London borough is also using PASS in a project with looked-after children.

Vivienne Clifford uses pass in a school for children with behavioural difficulties. "Some of whom won't go into a room with someone they don't know," she says, "But with this system they can 'talk' to the computer but then you see them gradually, physically start to turn to look at you."

But one of the most important things about PASS, thinks Gladys de Groot, is that "it's a way of giving children a voice about what we do to them with the best intentions. This can be especially so for children in special schools whose behaviour does not always allow them to express their views in the usual ways. What we are getting is from the child's point of view as opposed to the usual way when the teacher refers because of her concerns about the child."

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