

mean more issues are brought forward organically, once some results are achieved.

When?

An open forum to debate the agenda set by the council is vital in ensuring that action points created are truly representative of the pupil body. All pupils should have the opportunity to comment on the points raised and offer potential solutions where possible. From a practical viewpoint, focusing on year groups may be a more effective way to elicit contributions from students than trying to do the whole school in one go, as the younger pupils may be reticent to contribute fully in a potentially intimidating whole school environment.

That said, I have seen the whole school model work very effectively in a Quaker school, helped, of course, by the culture of democracy and tolerance which underpins such institutions. Devoting some year group assembly time to this is also likely to be helpful, as a lunchtime session will not encourage a strong turnout with so much else going on. If we take Student Voice seriously, we can surely spare some 'official' time.

What then?

Many issues (eg suggested rule changes) will need discussion by the relevant staff/SMT. It is important to note that the

answer may not always be 'yes', but that the relevant member of staff must feed back to the council and year groups as to the reasons why a particular decision was taken. That said, my view would be for the school to start from the viewpoint of 'yes' as the default, with a 'no' requiring strong reasons. Other issues may be more minor, such as Freddy's printer. Awarding the council a budget would empower pupils to take swift action on smaller issues, allowing for quick wins for all concerned.

Student Voice is an area that has so much potential to be a power for good in schools, not only in solving issues, but also in building engagement, leadership and ownership of the school's performance amongst pupils. It also has a direct benefit on all the school's stakeholders and can promote more positive working relationships between staff and pupils as a whole. Apart from anything else, I think most of us would agree that we're beyond the era of children being seen but not heard! But don't take my word for it – why not ask the pupils?

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Through the looking glass

Discovering how students view learning and school is the key to developing their academic potential, says Matthew Savage

With a diverse mix of cultures, customs and languages enriching our daily school life, one of an international school's biggest strengths is celebrating difference amongst our students. Like all schools that welcome students from around the globe, our goal remains the same no matter the nationality or languages spoken – we want all children to progress to the best of their ability during their time with us.

It's key to our success that every child feels that each lesson has been designed specifically to meet their needs. We call this approach The Mona Lisa Effect, in homage to the way you feel Mona Lisa's eyes look only at you when you walk past. However, when you are teaching a modified version of the English National Curriculum to a cohort who can have wildly different levels of English language acquisition, this strategy needs careful planning.

We start by doing everything we can to understand our students and to see life and learning here through their eyes.

Enhancing teacher judgement

In an international school like ours, we need to be hyper-aware of cultural nuances that have the potential to mask signals teachers would otherwise pick up. With children from Thailand, for example, there can be a strong degree of cultural diffidence and deference to the teaching profession. This can lead to reluctance in some pupils to question teachers

if they do not understand something, which is not ideal for accelerating learning.

To mitigate this and glean a deeper understanding of our pupils, we pair teacher judgement with a number of other assessment tools. One of the tools we use to identify students' individual strengths, weaknesses and learning styles is cognitive abilities testing. The results provide us with a picture of a student's capabilities so that we can set realistic but challenging targets, monitor progression and help them to learn in the way that works best for them.

Attitudes are key

As a complement to the cognitive abilities data, we carry out the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) survey across the whole school. This attitudinal survey from GL Education looks at nine attitudinal factors, from a student's feelings about school to how they perceive their own learning ability. Research behind the survey has shown that if a child does not feel confident and happy about school, it greatly affects their ability to progress academically.

It can be incredibly difficult to see through the mask of 'teenagehood', particularly given the range of cultural backgrounds at our school, but this assessment offered a way through. By uncovering any issues we hoped to be able to identify and address any underlying concerns, so that a child

Listening and talking

was free to maximise their academic progress. Without doubt, the results of this survey have been an eye-opener to us all.

Building confidence and ambition

To begin with, we discovered that students' natural deference to authority was far more deeply entrenched than we had realised, with students taking the view that teachers are superior and learners are inferior.

Such a stance can be quite detrimental to learning – students can become averse to taking risks because they are over concerned about getting something wrong and, also, reluctant to challenge or enter into debates with their teachers.

To counteract this hierarchical structure, we are, for example, transforming the Student Voice programme we run in the school to encourage students to be more outspoken and openly opinionated, and not to accept everything they are told at face value. We hope this will alter the way students see themselves and give them the freedom to ask questions and to challenge the 'system', eventually helping them to develop into more bold, confident and ambitious individuals.

Overcoming obstacles

As an international school with fewer than 10% native English speaking children, we already had an awareness that a lack of confidence in their English ability could conceivably hinder

even our most able students. As it turned out, the survey revealed that many of these students had a low opinion of their perceived learning capabilities and, as a result, worryingly poor self-regard.

Examining these findings in conjunction with the cognitive abilities test results showed us that some of our very able students do not actually consider themselves able at all, because they are making false assumptions about the correlation between their grasp of English and their cognitive abilities.

In fact, this phenomenon proved to be so extensive that we have dramatically intensified our English as an additional language (EAL) programme, including for our 'invisible' EAL learners, in order to reduce the impact of poor language proficiency on our students' attainment.

Securing success

It's no exaggeration to say that the attitudinal survey in particular has been one of the most exciting educational discoveries I have shared. Being able to glean such useful insights from the student surveys has meant that we are all looking much more closely at the attitudes and progress of individual students, and this has sparked some very worthwhile conversations that we would not have otherwise had.

Our next step is to explore the ownership of this data and to

The student's view.





Learning through their eyes.

determine to what extent we should share it with students and parents. I believe that the more students understand their own data profile, the more they should be able to navigate and steer their own learning journey – and with such autonomy has to come happier and more successful students. It is certainly an interesting road ahead.

I asked James Neil of GL Education for a brief overview of how to use assessment to build a comprehensive profile for each child, with a view to removing potential learning obstacles from their path. He writes:

Personalised learning – to the extent every child feels as though the lesson has been designed especially for them – clearly has extremely positive repercussions for progress and achievement. Here are my tips if you'd like to use assessments to discover individual students' potential and remove any barriers in their way:

Get all levels of management on board. Make sure the senior leadership team are involved in decisions about how assessment data will be used. You'll then have the backing you need to implement interventions when issues are identified.

Decide what data you need and identify a baseline. Bring in some form of cognitive abilities testing to identify the developed abilities of your students. From this you might see that the quiet, bright boy getting on

with things at the back of the class actually has huge untapped potential, or that the EAL girl you thought was disinterested would make much better progress with some language proficiency intervention.

Feed the data into lesson plans. For example, once you know you have a cohort with a large number of spatial learners, you can take a more visual approach in lessons with images, charts and diagrams.

Explore attitudes to learning. A child can appear cheerful in class and score well in a cognitive abilities test, but if their self-confidence is waning, it's only a matter of time before they stop feeling motivated to achieve. Use an attitudinal survey to help you understand how students see themselves as learners.

Involve students and parents. Working together cannot be underestimated, so share information to break down any barriers to learning and improve progress

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