

Underachievement and disruptive behaviour

The psychometric solution

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P psychometric assessments have long been a recognised tool in the business world to help HR departments manage the recruitment process more effectively and to find the people with the most appropriate skill sets for the role they are recruiting for.

These assessments evaluate someone's abilities and aptitudes, as well as behaviour, to give a rounder, more detailed picture of their strengths and their potential than can be gauged from an interview alone.

But now psychometric assessments are being put to a very different use – as a way of re-engaging underachieving or disruptive students with education.

How can we improve the performance and behaviour of underachieving and disruptive students? **Sally Wells** describes how one school has turned to a tool normally used to select candidates for high-level jobs – psychometric assessments.



How did it begin?

The idea was borne from Sharon Ferguson, a parent with two children at St Benedict's, a Catholic upper school in Suffolk, who noticed the difference in how her daughters approached their schoolwork. As a consultant at Thomas International, a leading psychometric assessment company, with an extensive knowledge of these assessments, Sharon decided to profile her daughters.

The results showed that her younger daughter was as intelligent and talented as her older daughter. In fact, she processed information more quickly, which meant that she was bored and frustrated in lessons. The results of the assessment helped Sharon to understand her daughter's strengths and limitations which in turn, helped her understand and address the reasons for her disengagement.

A governor at St. Benedict's, Sharon approached the assistant head, Andy Watts, to suggest that the assessments could benefit the school and its pupils. The school had been working to help students reach their full potential, but were faced with disengagement or poor behaviour from some students. They decided to take action and implement the assessments to see if and how the students could benefit from them.

The school's main aims were to reduce external exclusions, internal inclusions, removals from class and negative referrals by empowering students to understand their own behaviour. The idea was that, by making the students more self-aware, they would take more personal responsibility for their behaviour.

Implementing the tests

Andy set about identifying students who might benefit from the assessments and 63 students from Year 10 were divided into two groups – those exhibiting 'challenging' behaviours and underachievers who were disengaged and 'drifting' through school.

Implementing the assessments needed to be as straightforward as possible in order to minimise disruption to staff and students. The students themselves were invited to take part and their parents or guardians received letters to formally request consent. All 63 students who were identified as potential participants proved keen to be involved.

Over the course of three months, staff and students underwent training and assessment. Initially six staff members, including the school's head of English, Year 10's head of year, the behaviour support manager and two Connexions advisors, took four days learning how to administer, interpret and give feedback on assessment results. By January, the students had completed several assessments, which took between a few minutes and an hour and were all completed during school hours.

Once this process was complete, staff from St. Benedict's and representatives from Thomas International discussed the results and assigned students to staff depending on their areas of expertise in order to enable one-to-one mentoring. To assist with this process, staff were given coaching sheets for each of the students, which showed details of their profile, their processing speeds and advice on how the teacher could adapt their teaching style to best suit the student.

An astonishing impact

Andy Watts, assistant head of St Benedict's was surprised at how quickly the assessments had an effect on the participants.

'Once the students received their feedback, their behaviour quickly changed. Helping students become more self-aware empowered them to manage their own behaviour better and enabled them to resolve issues and problems themselves.

'For example, one student's behaviour was transformed after receiving his assessment feedback. Previously aggressive in class, the student had spent a significant amount of time in the inclusion unit, but understanding the reasons behind his anger helped him modify his behaviour and calm himself down.'

'Another student who tended to be disruptive in maths and science classes struggled with the general intelligence assessment (GIA) number speed and accuracy test. This meant he had difficulty processing numerical concepts quickly. The student needed to slow down and give himself more time to assimilate numerical information. Once the student and his teachers understood the cause of his behaviour, they were able to deal with it more effectively, resulting in an improvement in his behaviour and his grades.'

Thomas International provided the school with a report for each student, detailing the results of the assessment and their significance. For example, the GIA report



provides an accurate and reliable predictor of a person's potential, their capacity to handle change, and their ability to take on greater mental challenges in their role.

Andy adds: 'These reports provided a common language between educationalists and students, allowing students to talk in real terms about themselves, rather than in "teacher speak". This enabled a more realistic dialogue between the parties than would previously have been possible.'

The assessment process took seven months in total, ending just as the Year 10 students were about to take to GCSEs. At this point, St Benedict's evaluated the results and found that there had been a reduction of over 90 per cent in external exclusions, internal exclusions, removals from class and negative referrals (see figure 1). In addition, among students with poor attendance records, attendance improved.

The most impressive result however, was the improvement in GCSE results, with a ten per cent increase in passes, making St Benedict's the top performing school in Suffolk.

Figure 1

Measure	Number pre-pilot	Number post-pilot
External exclusions	11	1
Internal exclusions	56	2
Removal from class	47	3
Negative referrals	321	22
Positive referrals	1	28

Getting staff on board

There were initially challenges in the implementation of the assessments. For example, it was important that the staff administering the assessments were fully trained and that they understood what the assessments are designed for.

They also needed to ensure that the results were properly communicated to students to ensure that the feedback wasn't seen as positive or negative, particularly with assessments such as the GIA assessment. The GIA assessment measures 'mental horsepower' and processing speed, so if a student gets a low score in this category, both students and teachers need to be aware that it's not a case of 'good' or 'bad' results and doesn't indicate whether a student is 'clever' or 'not clever', just that it indicates a different pace of learning.

While most staff at St Benedict's were keen to adopt the assessments, the school did find that younger teachers who were familiar with the concept of psychometric assessments were more open to the idea of using new techniques. This meant that they not only welcomed the opportunity to implement the assessments, but were also instrumental in championing the use of the assessments to older teachers.

Since the assessments were adopted, even the most sceptical teachers are now promoting the techniques and are recommending them to other schools.

How else has St. Benedict's benefited?

As well as addressing behavioural issues, the assessments also benefited St Benedict's in complementing the careers services they offer.

An Ofsted report recently concluded that despite their best intentions, schools are struggling to provide effective careers advice to students so are increasingly turning to tools such as psychometric assessments to provide more in-depth advice.

Students are crying out for careers advice that they can actually use, in practical terms, to help them understand where to turn next. Psychometric assessment builds self-awareness, enables students to understand where their strengths lie and identifies the types of work for which they are best suited. Using assessments really targets each individual student's needs and provides tailored advice for every student.

Practical careers advice is useful to any student whether just starting secondary school and wanting to understand where their abilities lie, making decisions about what GCSE subjects to focus on, deciding whether to continue in education after 16 or wanting to pinpoint a direction after university.

Andy Watts adds: 'After profiling, the students had a much more positive attitude not only towards their work but also towards the staff. They really saw their GCSEs



and A levels as a way forward rather than an end in themselves...The biggest impact the assessments have had on our students is that it gives them an individual idea of themselves and an idea of how to go forward.

'The assessments had several benefits for our students. Helping them to understand their strengths and weaknesses gave them an opportunity to really consider which professions they are naturally suited to. This in turn helped them to research professions that they hadn't previously considered.

'One of the most positive outcomes was that by finding out and researching the professions that could be of interest, they could identify which areas of their education needed more work. As an example, one of our students was keen to pursue a career as a self-employed plumber. Feedback from the assessments made him recognise that in order to be successful in his chosen career, his maths skills needed work, and on the back of this feedback, he was able to see the benefits of applying himself to an area he had previously struggled with.'



Implications for teacher recruitment

St Benedict's School is just one of the schools which have benefited from using assessments to help their students, but unsurprisingly, schools have also benefited from the ability to use these tools when trying to recruit teachers.

As with most organisations, CVs, qualifications, interviews and references are important, but don't tell the whole story. When recruiting teachers, finding the right fit for the school is essential, particularly when you consider the Education Select Committee's report which concluded that 'a year's exposure to a high-performing teacher has a lasting impact on pupils, building confidence, earnings and wellbeing later in life'¹. Additionally, the 'evidence is clear that outstanding teachers at all phases can have a profound, positive impact on pupils' performance, which in turn leads to better outcomes in further education, pay, wellbeing and for society at large.'

As schools find themselves under greater pressure to recruit effective and well-matched teachers while also maintaining their budgets, it makes sense that headteachers are increasingly turning to tools more commonly used in the business world to help improve the efficiency and accuracy of the recruitment process.

The challenge for school heads is to make the right recruitment decisions and identify teachers who will not only fit in with and enhance the values of their particular school but who will also be adept at continuing to further their own development, maintain motivation and remain innovative and 'fresh' during a long career. Finding the candidate who will be an ideal fit for the role is a tall order for any recruiter. Psychometric assessments give headteachers the tools to identify candidates who will be an ideal fit, not just for the role, but also for the school and the rest of the staff, and reduce the element of 'guess work' involved in recruitment.

Assessments don't replace interviews, references, CVs and relevant qualifications, but they do streamline and focus what is already being done by providing information that can't be ascertained through other methods.

For example, emotionally intelligent teachers inspire loyalty and their classes and students tend to be well motivated with high morale. Traditional recruitment

techniques however won't pick up emotional intelligence, but a tool such as Thomas Education's TEIQue can help. TEIQue will tell you which applicants have high levels of self-awareness, can adapt their behaviours to suit the situation and have the potential to create deep loyalty and engagement to give you a far fuller and more rounded picture of an individual than previously possible.

The challenges that headteachers are faced with when recruiting teachers is that teachers have to work with pupils from all backgrounds, with different abilities, expectations, personal challenges and learning styles, which is a difficult task. While qualifications are essential, they don't indicate a person's ability to motivate pupils, adapt to change and build strong relationships, which in a teaching environment, are just as important as technical skills.

Even when staff are assessed through a series of interviews and teaching trials, psychometric assessments can help reveal how an individual will behave in a real-life work situation, particularly when under pressure, giving a deeper insight than the surface qualities a candidate displays on the day of interview.

Future developments

Thomas International launched Thomas Education in 2012. We now work with fifteen schools across the UK to release student potential and maximise staff performance using our psychometric assessments.

In Suffolk, the Local Education Authority (LEA) were so impressed with the results from St Benedict's that they are now funding the trial of these methods in two other Suffolk schools over a two year period to replicate the success and carry out an independent evaluation. These further schemes are entirely funded by the LEA.

Our website features **a number of case studies** detailing the ways we're already working with teaching staff and young people to better understand behaviour and improve both student and teacher performance.

Psychometric assessments, when properly administered, can be of huge benefit to schools, helping them to work more effectively with challenging students, complement and improve their existing careers development programme and help them recruit the best staff – and if the students benefit, so do we all.

Sally Wells is Managing Director of Thomas Education. She is passionate about helping young people establish successful careers and was pivotal in passing the benefits of psychometric assessments to the field of education.

References

1. Education Committee (2012) Great teachers: attracting, training and retaining the best. Available at: <www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmeduc/1515/151502.htm> [Accessed 17/03/2014].

Knowledge trails

- 1) **Myself as a learner** – How we think about ourselves is what matters when it comes to being effective learners. Bob Burden introduces a scale to measure pupils' self-awareness and motivation.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/slt_myself_as_a_learner
- 2) **Heads and schools: Finding the perfect match** – What can schools do to find new headteachers who have the right credentials? Crispin Andrews reports.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/education-teacher-recruitment-agency
- 3) **Personality tests can help you choose** – Senior leadership appointments are fundamental to a school's success, says Richard Churches, and 'personality instruments' can help to make sure the right people are recruited for key posts.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/personality-tests