



SSAT Journal 10

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ssat the schools, students
and teachers network

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Welcome

*Sue Williamson,
Chief Executive, SSAT*



The Autumn term is always a long and busy one, but usually produces some memorable occasions including school plays, Christmas concerts and open evenings. The start of the October half-term always sees the Teaching Awards ceremony, held in London and broadcast by the BBC. It is an immensely valuable celebration of the work of teachers. I am privileged to be a trustee and a judge of the lifetime achievement award. It is inspiring to see practitioners in their thirtieth (or later) year of teaching still being innovative, creative and enthusiastic, with a passion for working with young people. SSAT supports the Teaching Awards; indeed, we strongly believe that we should celebrate the teaching profession's achievements even more.

In September, I experienced for the first time an Ofsted inspection as a chair of governors. In my two years as chair of Melbourn Village College's governing board, the governors supported the senior leadership team in doing what was right for the young people in our context rather than prepare for Ofsted. This was particularly true in curriculum design, and there were concerns that this might not be acceptable to Ofsted. I was delighted that in the letter accompanying the report, the HMI wrote:

'Leaders, including governors, have worked hard to create an innovative curriculum that truly meets the needs of pupils. Your vision is clear and parents value the ways in which the school offers their chil-

dren a broad and rich curriculum alongside strong pastoral support.'

I see this strong focus on students in the articles in this edition of the journal, as well as the dedication of the teachers involved. At SSAT we are determined to celebrate the successes of schools, teachers and students as often as possible. Please share with us the work that you are doing to make the lives of the young people in your care. Thank you for all your hard work – please do not be modest, tell us about your work.

Enjoy this edition of the journal. ■



illuminating learning: 19 questions we should ask ourselves

*Graham Moore,
humanutopia*

What exactly are we trying to illuminate? What are we truly trying to understand? Why are we trying to understand, to what end, for what purpose? What difference will it make if we understand? Which questions do we ask in order to elicit the answers that will actually illuminate? It was once said that research proves what you want it to prove, so what exactly are we trying to prove with ‘illuminating learning’?

For me and all at humanutopia, our mission for the past 13 years has been to ask young people to be honest, brutally frank about their perceptions of school and their educational journey. We have tirelessly provided young people with a forum and platform from which to express their views and share their perspectives and experiences of school.

Our primary purpose was motivated by a deep desire to create decisive moments, in which the life of the young person changed course, because they truly and deeply understood their own behaviour and were then able to change if so desired.

Our secondary purpose was to disrupt. We wanted the voices of young people to be heard, we wanted to become advocates for their concerns, to highlight the inadequacies of our education system and shine a light on its frailties, inconsistencies and hypocrisies.

My desire in contributing to illuminating learning is that we are trying to gain a deep grasp of what the



journey through school feels like for a young person. In doing so, we as adults, decision makers and policy writers can improve this experience for all future children regardless of their background, heritage or culture.

So, what questions do we need to ask in order to gain this place of deep, empathic knowledge?

When asking these questions, it is difficult not to let it sound like an attack on teachers. Categorically I stress it isn't; these questions are aimed at our society and our education system. In Africa, it is said that 'it takes a whole community to raise a child.' I therefore urge you, the reader, to assess these questions from a systemic and societal standpoint, so that collectively we can be better informed about the perceptions of young people and subsequently create a much more relevant and accessible educational journey.

So, as a teacher, please review these questions from a personal standpoint and from a corporate perspective, ie on your school's behalf.

1. How do you respond if or when a child struggles in class?

A key performance indicator of the strength of an individual professional, and the sign of a good school, is just how they care for a young person who is struggling – academically, socially, domestically or otherwise. I rarely visit a school that doesn't safeguard young people in a highly effective manner, so I guess a more probing question may be, 'How do you know if a child is struggling?'

2. Does your school focus on strengths or weaknesses?

What is the main focal point of your school culture and your professional dialogue? Does it emphasise or encourage failure? Does the culture of your school and its lessons help students feel good and bounce back? Or do students feel demoralised and demotivated after setbacks?

3. How are creativity and innovative thinking used on a daily basis in your classrooms?

It is now common knowledge that the right brain is key to creativity and innovation, so just how do you encourage students to create and innovate? How often do you encourage your staff and students to take risks and allow them to have extraordinary experiences of discovery in a normal day?



4. Is wellbeing at the heart of your school?

How do you and your colleagues ensure that the welfare, happiness, mental health and wellbeing of all stakeholders is at the very core of all discussions, meetings and actions during any given school day? If this isn't happening, what can you do to ensure this agenda becomes central to a school's daily heartbeat?

5. How is critical thinking used on a daily basis in your classrooms?

Einstein once said, 'Imagination is more important than knowledge.' So in a world that requires us all to solve problems of varying sizes on a frequent basis, shouldn't we be building our lesson structures around real and relevant problems? That would help to enable and empower students to use their imagination and unlock their creativity and innovative powers.

6. How do you train staff to identify and deal with the social challenges affecting students?

How do you make staff aware of the key social challenges facing young people? How do you get adults to remember how subtle peer pressure can be, or how to spot a subversive pecking order and its negative impact on a class or year group? How do you support staff to identify and address some of these highly destructive influences?

7. Do you measure how happy your students are at school?

A 10-year-old boy once asked me, 'Why don't Ofsted measure how happy we are in school?' I had no answer to match his insightful question. Why don't we? With the boom and plethora of online measuring and evaluation tools, it is far easier now to assess just how young people are feeling about many things, including school. Maybe understanding what makes young people happier could help us restructure our curriculum?

8. How are assessments designed to promote learning rather than simple measurement?

Many progressive staff and schools already build their assignments and lesson outcomes around trying to help students develop skills and experiences. They understand that if students feel they are growing from a lesson, there will be a natural upward correlation with their performance. Conversely, it is a fear of failure that causes many students to under-perform.

9. How exactly is learning personalised in your classrooms? In the school?

To what extent do you and your staff assess, know and respond to the individual learning styles and needs of each young person? What tools do you have to assess these important aspects of any educational journey? After the initial hype and response to learning styles and multiple intelligences, these wonderfully illuminating concepts seem to go largely unused in too many schools.

10. What learning models do you use (eg, project-based learning, mobile learning, game-based learning)?

All manner of exciting curriculum innovations are springing up across the globe. Whether it be a coding project from Khan Academy, the latest app like Quizlet to develop language skills, a highly acclaimed Finnish model where students run their local bakery, or the latest problem-solving project from Edutopia, there are hundreds of highly creative and relevant programmes now out there, made even more accessible online.

11. What are the more uncommon barriers to academic progress in your classrooms?

Do you and your staff really know and empathise with the most common barriers to progress? Do you really cater for dyslexia? Are your staff aware of how to spot signs of dyspraxia and how best to support the many young people who struggle with this largely unknown condition? What provision is in place for young people whose confidence is worryingly low and who are painfully shy? Do you have targeted workshops to rebuild their self-esteem?



12. Is your school a school of hope?

In Terry Wrigley's book *Schools of hope*, he suggests 'young people need schools which make each of them welcome, and which embody hope for a better future, an experience of democratic interaction, and a vision of social justice. In my vast experience of working with almost 260,000, my estimate is that 25% of young people leave school without real hope for their future after school.'

Have our schools been driven towards efficiency rather than genuine improvement? What really matters: new targets to meet? Higher maths grades perhaps? Or caring creative learners, a future, a sense of justice, the welfare of the planet and its people?

13. How do you cater for different learning styles?

Just how are the individual learning needs and styles of each student assessed, prescribed and monitored? Why not spend years 7 and 8 using project-based activities to observe and assess the tendencies of each student? Why not ask students to solve problems, collaborate and innovate in order to help them, and your staff, better understand their preferred needs and styles?

14. How do you listen to every student voice?

I still visit schools that employ what I believe to be a largely outdated vehicle for student voice, in which one member of a class or year group represents an entire cohort. True, at least the school is trying to give students a voice, but many others have a voice that never gets heard using this system. Lots of staff and schools now are taking brave steps to use social media and in-house platforms which give young people a forum on which to share their concerns and lesson experiences.

15. What is the rank order of priorities of students at your school?

Have you ever gone to the trouble of trying to find out just what are students' priorities in life and school? I ask every single group of students I work with to identify and share their most important priorities in life: their feedback is both humbling and illuminating. Much can be learned by asking young people what they really care about, and what they worry about most.



16. Do students survive or thrive at your school?

Surely this is one of the most fundamental questions we can ask of ourselves and our school: just what are you setting your students up for – a life of mediocrity or, even worse, anonymity? Or do you and your staff provide young people with the opportunity to live a life of excellence and self-realisation?

17. How do you know you're really making an impact on each and every young person?

John Hattie's work on attribution has highlighted the need to help young people redefine the factors they can control to improve performance, rather than embracing things they have little or no control over. The same can be said of a teacher's influence: what can a teacher do to positively influence the behaviour and attitude of a young person? And how can they assess this impact and influence?

18. How do you know what your students' daily diet is? Has anyone on SLT shadowed a student for a whole day?

Just what do you and your staff do to monitor, evaluate and report on the journey of any given student? How do you go about observing, subjectively from a student's standpoint, but then objectively assessing what can be done to improve and embellish the experience of their journey through school? How can you measure and share these profound observations with your colleagues?



19. What are you not asking but should be?

By way of summary, I have saved my favourite question to last. How can you truly illuminate the learning of students at your school? In order to truly understand, empathise with and improve provision for your young people, what questions are you not asking which really you ought to be, every day, every week, every month, every year?

I sincerely hope you can use at least one of these thought-provoking questions to begin an authentic and powerful process. A process through which you truly engage and understand the wonderful young people that grace every school and every lesson, with the vision and deep commitment to improve their educational journeys and the overall impact on their future.



15 steps to transformation

*Katie Scott,
Portslade Aldridge Community Academy*

Your first headship being the fourth appointee as principal in three years is quite a challenge, as Katie Scott explains

When I was appointed principal to Portslade Aldridge Community Academy for September 2015 I was the fourth appointee in three years. Consequently the governing body were extremely cautious, and rightly so. My assessment process included being observed in my existing school.

The academy, in one of the more socially disadvantaged areas of Brighton, had opened in 2013 and by the time of my appointment

the last substantive principal had been removed in the kind of deal none of us ever want: the academy had been served a financial notice to improve; attendance was the worst in the city and the school was only 40% full. Crucially, another RI from Ofsted would almost certainly put the school in special measures, which ultimately would have made recruitment of both students and staff even more challenging, if not impossible.

The reputation locally was one of poor educational outcomes and poor behaviour. As a first headship these added up to a significant risk. I didn't think then

that there were any silver bullets for school improvement, and I still don't. But what I did see was young people and teachers who had enormous potential and deserved better.

Two years on, Ofsted has judged us 'good'. More importantly, our progress 8 score of 0.31 is the strongest in the city (with exception of a Catholic school which has a non-restricted catchment area) and above average nationally. In terms of our attainment, maths is 2nd in the city and above the national average (significantly above Fischer Family Trust - FFT5). English attainment is also above the national





average. By the end of my first year as head the LA had recognised us as having the most improved attendance rates in the city (second overall). Most people who have known the school over a period of time describe it as having been 'transformed'. Our year 7 intake doubled this year, and I am confident we will fill our PAN for the first time in the school's history in September 2018.

How was this achieved?

When asked how so much has been achieved in short a time, there is no single answer. There has been an eye on the school's long term sustainable improvement, while rapidly addressing the progress deficits that resulted from RI teaching over time. Doing one without the other always means that a group of children in the school is effectively written off, and that simply isn't and wasn't acceptable. I have therefore asked a great deal of my staff.

Every school is unique and therefore what works in one circumstance won't necessarily be effective somewhere else. How-

ever, as someone who likes a list, here are 15 of the key actions that I believe had an impact:

- » A focus on doing the basics well: a consistent approach to key aspects of teaching and learning that support all teachers, from those training with us to the members of the leadership team who are on duty every break time. An example of this is a standard first slide in school registration, which has a task for students to complete in silence while the register is taken.
- » Being decisive and setting high expectations from the outset. The school bell during my interview days had been startlingly loud. From day one, the bells were removed completely. I told the staff we would expect students to look at clocks and be responsible, rather than having a loud bell. I also banned phones inside the building. Both were met with incredulity from some. We did it as a team, it worked. Demonstrating the art of the possible in some small way allows people to begin to imagine what other previously unimagined goals might be achievable.
- » A review of target setting to ensure that we expect the absolute best from all students. This involved battling some expectations, within and beyond the school, of 'good enough' being good enough.
- » Holding staff to account through performance management. We are developing this further: departments now have collective targets, so everyone has even more of a vested interest in ensuring maximum progress from year 7 onwards.
- » A concerted effort to transform grey corridors into art galleries of colour that display students' creative work in as professional way as we could afford, to show how proud we are of their work.



- » Developing a culture of public rewards. The first end of term assembly had many students refusing to come to collect their certificates (no actual rewards were given). Now, all students come up to have their achievements and progress recognised.
- » Leading by example: all SLT members being prepared to teach and go on school trips (including outward bound ones) and participate.
- » Introduction of innovative features into the curriculum. Once a fortnight we have a mixed-age choice curriculum with a wide range of activities to choose from. This allows time for intervention for year 11 and an engaging offer amidst an ever narrowing timetable.
- » Being prepared to make difficult decisions for the right reasons, even when some of those around you would prefer to opt for the

path of least resistance, be they staff or parents.

- » The inevitable showdown with key parents whose expectations and ambitions for their children did not match ours. This was time consuming and, at times, hard. However, reputations are built on key battles: knowing which ones to fight and where to hold your line are invaluable, even if it does result in making the national press. Standards are standards.
- » Recognising people's strengths and weaknesses and ensuring the line management models are shaped by people's needs rather than a one-size-fits-all model.
- » Not being afraid to have difficult conversations, or hear difficult messages.
- » Thanking staff, and meaning it.

- » Reflecting on my journey from deputy head to headteacher and forgiving myself for not getting it right all the time. Being prepared to apologise to the staff when something hasn't worked out (especially when it wasn't my fault - ultimately I am accountable).

Reputations are built on key battles: knowing which ones to fight and where to hold your line are invaluable, even if it does result in making the national press

- » Several well-worn narratives that were often repeated: 'If it is not good enough for your child, it is not good enough for "our" children' has been my mantra for a long time, and it has served me well.

Lucky breaks

Despite some extremely challenging circumstances, there were also what I consider to be lucky breaks. A staff body that were willing to give me a chance (they had every reason to believe I wouldn't be there long); individuals who made choices about whether they wanted to be part of the team that was going to make a success of the school, quickly and professionally; a union rep within school that does the job for all the right reasons; the ability to appoint my own deputy at the end of year one, who 'got' what I was trying to achieve and was able to deliver as rapidly as I required; and appointing my own PA at the end of year two. Most importantly, the academy has an amazing group of young people who have cast off the previous reputation and embraced the ambition of being the best school we can be, and be proud of it.

We continue to face challenges, which school doesn't? The adjustments of being part of a MAT as opposed to a stand-alone academy; the continuing challenges of an inherited financial situation that will take time to rectify despite two restructures; and the day-to-day circumstances of students and staff that are some of the most challenging yet rewarding aspects of the job. All this in the context of navigating the rapidly changing landscape of qualifications and accountability measures.



Considering your first headship?

My advice to anyone considering a first headship is: know why you are doing it; choose the school as much as they choose you; be prepared to work hard and know that rapid school transformation is possible – but as with all things, it comes at a cost.

Choosing the right time to undertake this challenge is crucial. Look after your immediate team, so they can look after the staff, so they in turn can teach the students as effectively as possible each and every lesson. Recognise that time is our most precious resource and creating it wherever possible, as well as supporting people in developing more effective ways of using theirs, is crucial. But also be realistic: teaching is a job that requires time to do well.

Once in post, experience teaches you very quickly who tells

you what you want to hear, who is awkward whatever the request, and who will offer you fair challenge when you deserve and need it. Ego is a dangerous business in school leadership and no-one has time for vanity projects. Do things for the right reasons. Knowing when to push for that extra impact or progress, and when to say, 'this is good enough for today; it can be perfect tomorrow', comes in time.

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