Grey and Invisible Students

Introduction

Middle-ability students represent a significant and critical mass of learners who may be known as 'emerging' learners, 'grey' or 'invisible' students simply because they are hard to identify, do not conform to the rubric of well documented vulnerable learners, or are largely overlooked or missed by school data tracking systems. This is a key issue which is rarely addressed.

Headline figures about the middle-ability cohort are reported on nationally. RAISEonline also reported on and compared the percentages of middle-ability students, revealing that a significant number of young people are in the middle-ability cohort.

This resource suggests ways you can use existing data systems and staff knowledge to identify this cohort of students. You will then be able to track and monitor individual student progress so that targeted and focused interventions can take place. This will have an immediate impact upon your headline figures and will raise levels of attainment and achievement.

About the author

Richard is currently an Assistant Principal at a large secondary school in Kent and is also the SENco there. He has 19 years' teaching experience and has a diverse portfolio of experiences.

Richard was featured in a 2011 documentary for Channel 4 entitled '*A Life of Rhyme*' and he has also worked with Dr Lesley Back at Goldsmith's University.

Richard has a background in theology and spirituality and is currently working with Dr Robert Beckford on a new area of research related to theology and contemporary urban music and culture. In 2009, Richard was involved in the school-based restoration of a 103-year-old Romany wagon and in 2012 was also involved in the restoration of an old American jeep. This involved the inclusion of a recording studio to make literacy more attractive for disengaged students.

Richard has been leading CPD sessions on the grey and invisible student since 2007 and many of the ideas included in this publication are the results of the sessions he has conducted at the schools he has worked at.

As you work through this course, use the '**Notes**' feature to record your thoughts and ideas. You can then refer back to them at any time.

⏱ This course will take approximately two hours.

Understanding the problem

In many schools there is an issue with middle-ability students and their achievement and progress. It is clear that provisions exist for the gifted and academically able (although there are no longer any national initiatives to support these groups) and for SEN students. Yet for the average ability student there is nothing in terms of national strategy, support or interventions.

'Exams factory'

Historically, the underperformance of a silent but significant minority of students has received limited national coverage. They were mainly discussed in terms of how to move D grade students up to a C grade. This was traditionally a way of ensuring positive headline A*–C GCSE grades and thus reflect school progress.

This was quite a narrow approach to this cohort of students as they were viewed primarily as a way to impact upon the headline measures of the school. This approach fed into the 'exams factory' thesis. Most schools would deny this mode of operation but would in fact subscribe to it overtly and covertly.

There was little recognition of the spectrum of visibility and invisible learners at higher abilities than those on D/C grades, and interventions made little attempt to improve middle-ability students' sense of self as learners. Instead interventions would take the form of PIXL, PLCs, after-school revision classes and walking talking mocks etc. These interventions were solely about improving grades rather than the emotional and academic development of a cohort of learners.

This was prior to the implementation of the new numbered grading system and before the *Progress 8* measurements of attainment and progress.

Current work

If you search for literature about the middle-ability student or the grey and invisible student, you will find little of significance. There has been very little written about this group despite their importance and this alone is reason enough to pursue this enterprise.

'Stuck in the middle'

In May 2007, Hannah Frankel wrote a fascinating article entitled '*Stuck in the middle*' which was published in the TES.

This article acted as a catalyst for a lot of the thinking and thought processes for this course, since it reinforced the absence of literature about these students and a lack of a cohesive strategy aimed at targeting this significant group of students.

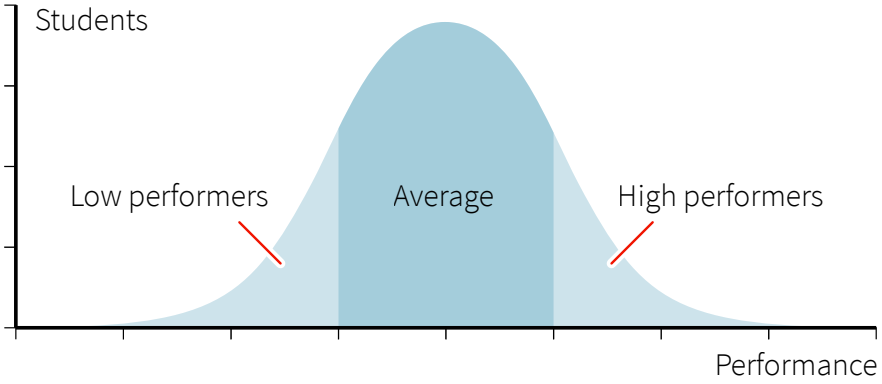
At the end of the article Frankel listed the services and resources to support other vulnerable learners and it was clear that for middle-ability students there was nothing. This absence was in stark contrast to the other significant groups and the support available for them.

RAISEonline

RAISEonline always identified the middle-ability student and would share the outcomes for this cohort in its documentation as a series of tables comparing their performance within the school in relation to national expectations at similar schools. However, now RAISEonline has closed, there is no cohesive or coherent strategy nationally about how to address the issues that this cohort raises in terms of recognition and monitoring. The new ASP (Analyse School Performance) service will replace RAISEonline but is still under development.

Bell curve

The bell curve, also called the normal distribution, is a statistical model that can represent the performance of a group of people.



For various reasons this model is now discredited, particularly due to the difficulties with categorising every individual as a 'low', 'average' or 'high' performer, but as a basic way of viewing the distribution of students, it provides a useful starting point.

It is apparent that we have a small number of very able and gifted students at the top of the bell curve, a number of less able students at the bottom of the bell curve, and a large group of middle-ability young people in the middle who will be responsive to recognition and targeted interventions.

This is where the biggest marginal gain can be made in any school (particularly as the current system of *Progress 8* appears to favour the moderately less able *(Laurie Smith, 2015)*. With little input you can have a critical impact upon your final headline measures by working with a cohort of young people who up until this point have remained invisible, opaque or unidentified.

The Average Child

This poem by Michael Buscemi is written from the viewpoint of a child who might be seen as 'grey and invisible'.

I don't cause teachers trouble;
My grades have been okay.
I listen in my class.
I'm in school every day.
My teachers think I'm average;
My parents think so too.
I wish I didn't know that, though;
There's lots I'd like to do.
I'd like to build a rocket;
I read a book on how.
Or start a stamp collection...
But no use trying now.
'Cause, since I found I'm average,
I'm smart enough you see
To know there's nothing special
I should expect of me.
I'm part of that majority,
That hump part of the bell,
Who spends his life unnoticed
In an average kind of hell.

Michael Buscemi

Parallels at work

In the early 1970s, sociologists Bowles and Gintis (Schooling in Capitalist America 1972) came up with the idea of the 'Correspondence Principle' which suggests that there is a connection between the world of school and the world of work. The correspondences which exist are mainly about how there is a mirroring process between the two worlds and patterns established at school are replicated in working life. On the whole this works in a negative way.

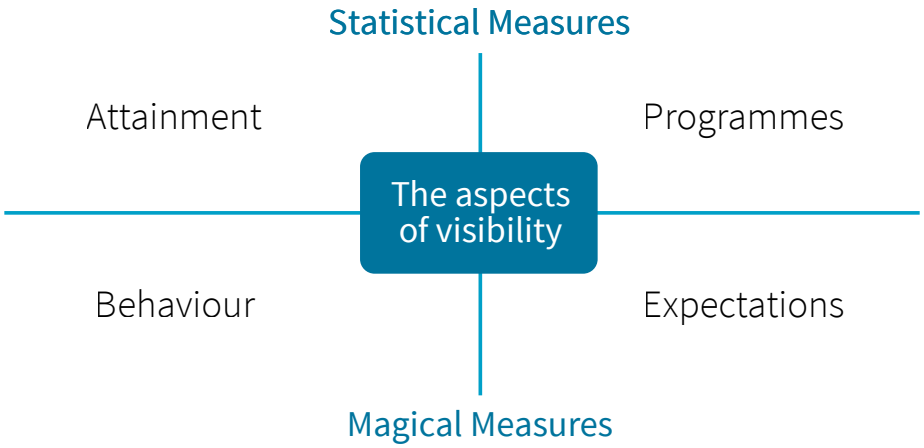
The work of Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric, has added an additional layer of mirroring to this process; he has devised the idea of a vitality curve which suggests that:

- there are 20% at the top of the workforce who are the most productive and should be 'showered' with financial rewards and praise
- the 70% in the middle of the workforce work adequately and are the pillars of the business
- the 10% at the bottom of the workforce are the non-producers.

Welch has suggested that this middle group of workers should receive positive attention, coaching and training. In many ways this reflects and mirrors the idea of the middle ability and grey and invisible student, highlighting the fact that the middle ability students represent a critical mass of learners who with the right interventions can make accelerated progress. In many ways the 20-70-10 model does mirror the composition of the school population and also reflects the ideas contained within the now discredited bell curve model.

Visibility

This diagram shows aspects of visibility from both data and teacher-led points of view. On the one hand we have hard data about attainment which would come out in six-weekly (half-termly) segments. On the other hand, we have intuitive teacher-driven measures which are 'magical' because they are not hard data-led judgements but are based upon teachers' knowledge of the students themselves.



Attainment

As Education Acts continue to impose thresholds and market-type competition into the education system, the attentions of schools increasingly turns to the priorities of certain students over others to ascertain 'positive headline measures' and 'record-breaking' *Progress 8* scores.

Programmes

Schools increasingly have groups and programmes designed for students who are academically able, gifted in a particular subject area or have additional educational needs. Improvement in these groups leads to pupils becoming more visible.

Behaviour

Students become visible in school due to the manner in which they behave. Both those who are disruptive and those who are consistent contributors in class become visible and known to the teachers. Those who are the 'least troublesome' are often those that are most likely to be unknown to teachers.

Expectations

Visibility is dependent on upon teacher-pupil relations. Teachers make judgements about whether students are dependent/independent learners and whether they are capable of reaching or achieving beyond their projected grades.

This course will look at both data and teacher-led sources of information about middle-ability students and discuss how both sources can be used to identify and support this cohort.

Reflect

How can you use existing data systems in your school to identify this cohort of students?

What changes could you make to these systems in order to make this easier?

The benefits

The benefits of acting effectively to support middle-ability students include:

- better results
- improved student and parental engagement
- enhanced self-evaluation
- evidence for Ofsted
- raised levels of confidence and self-esteem for middle-ability students.

HM inspectors are interested in the middle-ability students as well. This is another significant move towards raising awareness regarding the middle-ability or grey and invisible student.

In effect *Progress 8* rewards progress by taking into account moderately and less able students rather than able ones. Schools therefore have a strong incentive to develop the teaching and learning of students assessed as moderately able.

School improvement

Middle-ability students have a crucial role in whole school improvement and impacting headline figures in terms of attainment.

If they are identified, monitored and tracked effectively, tailor-made interventions can be planned to ensure that these students make the progress they are capable of making. These learners constitute a critical mass who, if identified and nurtured sensitively, will raise levels of attainment within your school and will be the key to whole school improvement.

This identification will also reveal an enhanced level of data analysis and will also indicate to an inspection team that the school has sophisticated monitoring systems in place which enable all groups to make significant progress.

Parental engagement

The monitoring and tracking of emerging students will have a positive impact upon the parental body by making them feel that the school knows their child and is making every effort to ensure that they achieve and exceed their target grade through targeted interventions.

Student self-esteem

There would also be improved self-esteem for the students at the school and a stronger ethos with embedded ambition, aspiration and drive towards success and achievement. This would mean that a critical mass of learners who have inhabited a shadowy world of non-recognition would be fully identified and part of the opportunity structures that exist within all schools. It is a movement from shadow into light, part of the noble calling of a teacher to remove barriers to learning by ensuring that all students make progress regardless of their starting points or points of entry.

Finally, by identifying the invisible students, both historic and current underperformance can be addressed with low-cost interventions, delivering better outcomes for these students and improving the value-added P8 scores for the academic institution undertaking this work.

Reflect

How can you help ensure that this recognition of grey and invisible students becomes embedded in the culture of the school?

Filtering and identifying

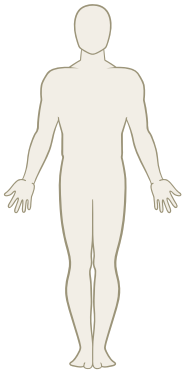
It is more than likely that teaching staff will already be aware of the presence of middle-ability students within the classes that they teach and there will be consensus about the defining characteristics of these learners. However, they may be unsure how to meet the needs of this group. Often this is because so much time is spent on engaging disaffected students and streching the academically able.

It is important that staff members are able to use existing systems to identify and track this significant group whilst still ensuring that other key vulnerable groups make progress. All schools are different in the way they track and monitor students – some may use SIMS or other data-management systems and some may not. However, the principle is applicable to any system. All schools can identify and track key groups including middle-ability students with very little extra input.

Gathering experiences

Combining staff experiences can help you gain a picture of the grey and invisible student.

Silhouette activity



An interesting activity which I have completed with all staff members is to give out a piece of paper with a silhouette on it. I ask teachers to write down the characteristics of the students they teach to see if they conform to the idea of invisibility. These characteristics could then be compared to capture an emerging picture of underachievement, supplementing quantitative data with rich descriptions of experience.

In practice

What are the characteristics of students you feel are invisible in the classes that you teach?

What could you do to make these students less invisible and more visible?

Using the silhouette provided, begin to plot these characteristics of invisibility with another colleague and compare with other colleagues what you identified.

(Silhouette document available separately)

Begin to identify individual students you feel could fall into this group and discuss why you think this.

In addition to this the pastoral team and form tutors may well be able to suggest students who are grey and invisible within your school.

Using data

By analysing students using data, schools can establish a more sophisticated way of identifying middle-ability students and then map patterns and trends.

Using data enables action to be taken at whole school-level through quality-based classroom teaching, whole school improvement through CPD and quality Inset, and through selective and non-selective schools in clusters sharing their best practice.

KS3 entry

RAISEonline has made the point on countless occasions that there are a large amount of students who are middle ability on entry from KS2 and who fall beneath the radar for most of their academic careers at secondary school. This will be a useful starting point in determining whether there is an issue at your school with middle-ability students.

Chunking

One method of identifying middle-ability students in an incoming Year 7 class is chunking.

	KS2 English	KS2 Maths	KS2 Science	KS2 APS	Ability on entry
ADAMS, Anthony	4B	4B	4	27	Apply
BARKER, Lucy	4B	4B	4	27	Apply
BROOKS, Ava	4A	4B	4	28	Apply
FOSTER, Mia	4C	5B	4	29	Analyse
GEORGE, Sophia	4B	4B	4	27	Apply
HARVEY, Ethan	4C	3B	4	23	Understand
HART, Edward	4B	4C	5	26	Apply
LANE, Elsie	4A	3C	4	24	Understand
LAWSON, Rosie	4B	5C	4	29	Analyse
MILLS, Daniel	4B	4B	4	27	Apply
PEARCE, Finley	5B	4B	4	30	Analyse
SMITH, Adam	4A	4C	4	27	Apply
WEST, Layla	4A	4C	4	27	Apply
YOUNG, Chloe	4B	4B	3	27	Apply

The KS2 average point scores are used to calculate student ability on entry. Students in each class can then be categorised according to their level of Understand, Apply or Analyse. This uses Bloom's Taxonomy to split your students into ability ranges so it is easier to differentiate and to make this an exact science.

Students can be categorised by their average point scores in the following way:

- APS 23 plus – low ability – Understand
- APS 26/27 plus – middle ability – Apply
- APS 29 upwards – high ability – Analyse

Characteristics

You may be able to use your school's existing data tracking system (eg SIMS) to identify grey and invisible students. Some key characteristics of grey and invisible students to filter by are:

- 100 percent attendance
- Cat score of 95 or above
- Zero sanctions
- Not on SEND register
- Not Gifted or Talented on register
- KS2 average point score on entry of 26-29

On average, it is likely to indicate that between 8-10% of your student body could be grey and invisible students based upon no behaviour points, no SEN, not gifted, talented or academically able, with attendance between 95%-100% and with an APS (average point score) of 26 (26-29) at KS2 on entry in to your school.

In addition to this, CAT/CSAS scores greater than 95 could also be considered but could be adjusted accordingly. Zero sanctions, 100 percentage attendance and a positive attitude to learning score are yet more possible characteristics.

If SIMS is used at your school you should be able to generate a customised report or apply these filters to identify the cohort of students you want to scrutinise.

This data filtering will generate a core group of students who can be looked at in terms of their visibility or invisibility. You could then refine the group further with additional layers such as gender, average point scores and progress across different subjects. Triangulated patterns appearing at this level will offer a useful starting point for discussion, debate and intervention.

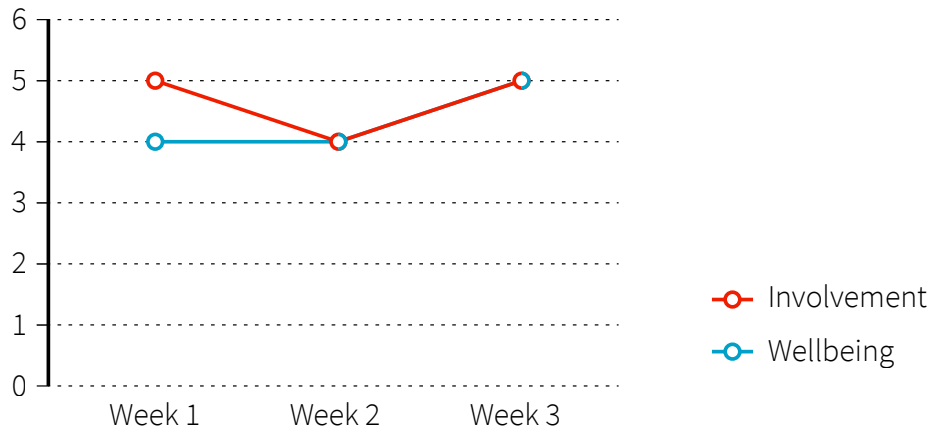
Leuven scale

The Leuven scale allows the teacher to measure the wellbeing and engagement of students in their classes. It is possible to graph the results from thes scale as a way of monitoring individual student engagement and enjoyment of their lessons. This would be particularly useful for identifying middle-ability and invisible students and measuring their levels of participation in key curriculum areas.

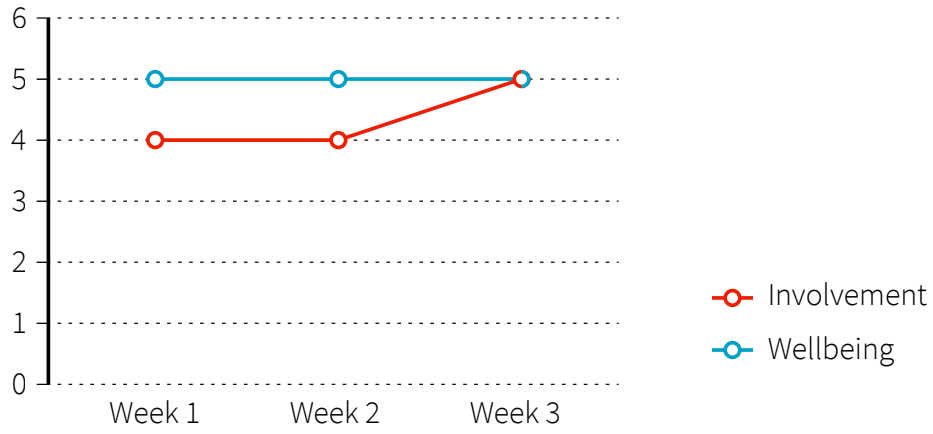
(Leuven scale document available separately)

Examples

Student 1, Year 9:



Student 2, Year 8:



In practice

Log into your data system and see if the data substantiates your instincts identified in the silhouette activity. Filter out students based upon CAT score, 95 or above, 100% attendance, zero sanctions, make sure that these students are neither SEND or Gifted and Talented because this implies visibility, and see what you get in terms of student lists.

Is this useful or helpful?

Does the data reinforce the identification process that you went through yourself? Have you identified a cohort of students you are familiar with but for whom there is very little help or support at the moment?

Spectrum of visibility

Grey and invisible students do not form a homogeneous group and therefore do not conform to some of the existing group profiles which are already well identified within schools.

The spectrum of visibility helps explain why teachers may still perceive certain students to be 'invisible' when they do not appear so in the data.

For example, a student belonging to 'Gifted in a particular area' isn't guaranteed visibility. If this student happens to be largely middle ability, quiet and considered an 'independent' learner, they may still lack visibility, hence the term 'opaque'.

The notion of visibility as a spectrum does not seek to undermine the invisible student. Instead, it seeks to highlight that whilst statistically studying educational attainment and schooling programmes is likely to produce a large number of invisible students, some students who are filtered out at this process are still invisible due to their behaviour and teacher perceptions.

Viewing visibility as a spectrum as opposed to a dichotomous relationship between visible/invisible can also explain why students may feel invisible in some subjects areas but more visible in others.

Activity

Educational attainment

Make notes on the educational attainment characteristics you think apply to visible, opaque and invisible students.

Student behaviour

Make notes on the behavioural characteristics you think apply to visible, opaque and invisible students.

Teacher perceptions

Make notes on the characteristics of visible, opaque and invisible students which you think teachers would perceive.

Reflect

How can you use different types of data to make this work more complete, thorough and meaningful?

Changing practice

Changing practice is all about changing what you do as a teacher or as a tutor on an everyday basis so that you can ensure that students feel acknowledged for what they do. Changes can be simple but effective at the level of the individual, the institution and across clusters.

Magical measures

Using teachers' knowledge of their students and the data as a starting point, interventions called 'magical measures' can be utilised *('The Complexities of Visibility', McEvoy 2012)*.

Magical measures are based upon student/teacher relationships, the teacher's ability to understand the significance of the student's classroom-based experiences and how this impacts upon their self-understanding as learners.

Magical measures could involve the teacher subtly adjusting what they are doing to acknowledge the students they are working with, involve them and make them feel heard. It could be the fact that the teacher has a good rapport with these students and is able to work with them to get the best out of them. These are all 'magical measures' which can be difficult to quantify.

Knowing names

It is probably true to say that by the end of the first fortnight of term, you will know the names of the students who are problematic or difficult or who require extra support. We are all data rich in this way but we may not be data smart. It would be good to acknowledge students who you may not know the names of because of the fact that they do nothing wrong. This again is a quick marginal gain that is doable and achievable.

Acknowledgement

In lessons simply recognising that a student has answered a question well or has completed a piece of work well will be sufficient. If there is a departmental policy of sending a postcard home, this could also be done as well. You might find it helpful to make a list of your quieter students and note down what you do to acknowledge each of them. This can help keep a record of what works.

It is all about increasing students' visibility for the right reasons.

Climate for learning

To talk about a classroom which has a positive climate for learning is to talk about an empathetic classroom. For example, as a teacher I am able to create a warm, safe and empathetic ethos to support children's emotional well-being. This is from the Mainstream Core Standards (MCS). These standards equate to teaching standards 5 and 7 and are not SEN specific.

The climate for learning is all about how a teacher sets up an appropriate environment for the students and how it is positive, warm and welcoming. It is a positive mindset environment in which all students can feel that they can achieve their full potential. The teacher is encouraging and supportive which draws the best out of the students.

There is also a sense of mutual understanding and rapport in the classroom throughout the lesson. This will encourage all learners to take part in the lesson, be it answering a question, sharing an answer they have written or taking part in the starter or plenary of a lesson.

Scenario

In one of your classes that you teach, there are a group of students who you feel are middle ability or grey and invisible learners. These students have a positive work ethic, are keen to do well, never receive sanctions and have very good attendance. These students always complete the work that is expected of them and always do their homework. They are below the radar and you struggle to recall their names at times because you are under pressure to ensure that the SEND students in your class receive support and to allow for stretch and challenge for your more able and gifted students.

However, you feel that you are not catering for the needs of your middle-ability students at all. It starts to bother you since you want to make sure that these students receive the recognition that they deserve.

Does this sound like a familiar scenario? How would you address this issue now after working through this course on grey and invisible students?

Reflect

How can you persuade your colleagues to change their thinking about this issue, given existing pressures to ensure that other well identified groups make above expected progress?

Measuring impact

Reporting and measuring the impact of interventions to do with grey and invisible students demonstrates an appreciation of the issues and establishes a climate for greater student progress and attainment. For the first time middle-ability students will be on the radar and will be identified, tracked and monitored. This will be a minimum investment for a large return, yielding improved results and outcomes for this specific group of students.

Examples

Many of the ways of measuring impact can be very simple. One method could revolve around termly student voicing. Once a group of grey and invisible students have been identified, they could be approached for their opinions and feedback, which could then be communicated to staff. This is very effective.

Another method is by analysing student progress and attainment before and after the interventions have taken place. This could be part of termly data reporting; it could also be part of a student voice survey based upon impressionistic data related to students' own impressions of their progress now that they are more visible to staff.

Progress 8

Schools are increasingly being measured by the progress being made by students rather than by levels of attainment. It is becoming clear that the *Progress 8* measures appear to favour the middle ability student *(Laurie Smith, 2015)*. Lower ability and middle ability students benefit more from this new system than the gifted and talented and academically less able, because the latter have a higher bar to achieve in order to evidence progress.

Raising a student's expected performance from grade 2 to 3 has equal value for *Attainment 8* to raising it from grade 7 to 8, but *Progress 8* means that moderately and less able students will usually make greater progress than able ones. This can be demonstrated by comparing the *Progress 8* scores of an able and a less able student.

Examples

Able student

A student who enters Year 7 with the highest KS2 fine level score of 5.8 (ie close to Level 6 in Reading and Mathematics) has an expected Attainment 8 score of 76.32. This predicts an average GCSE grade of 7.63.

If the student attains grade 7 in all eight subjects, their *Progress 8* will be −6.32. Only if the student attains five grade 8s and three grade 7s will they attain a modest positive *Progress 8* score (+0.68). If they attain grade 8 in all eight subjects, their *Progress 8* will be +3.68.

Less able student

A student who enters Year 7 with a KS2 fine level score of 2.9 has an expected Attainment 8 score of 21.78. This predicts an average GCSE grade of 2.18.

If this student attains grade 3 in all 8 subjects, their *Progress 8* score will be +8.22 – far higher than the student attaining grade 8 in all subjects (+3.68).

We can therefore see that *Progress 8* shows greater progress made by middle and lower ability students than by higher ability students.

The outcome of these marginal gains would be substantial and would result in improved headline figures for your school, greater degree of parental engagement, improved student and teacher relationships as a result, and a decrease in student disengagement.

Reflect

How can you track the impact of interventions you have carried out, in terms of:

- Hard measures of progress
- More impressionistic measures such as raised student self-esteem?

Silhouette activity