Tellus4 Evaluation

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Background

The Tellus survey was originally developed by Ofsted, with support from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), but full responsibility transferred to DCSF in 2009, with Tellus4. DCSF commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to administer Tellus4. A number of important changes were introduced to the design and delivery of Tellus4 to increase participation in, and support for, the survey by local authorities, schools and pupils. The changes made included:

- A dedicated Tellus website www.tellussurvey.org.uk
- Changing the survey live period from the summer to autumn term
- Improved access for disabled children and young people and children and young people with special educational needs (SEN)
- Giving local authorities and schools the option to add questions to personalise the survey to support their own priorities and self-evaluation
- The provision of materials so schools could deliver Tellus as part of the citizenship curriculum
- Providing schools with feedback about their own findings for the first time
- Giving local authorities and schools access to a web-based analytical tool to help with their analysis of their own data.

These and other changes to the management and delivery of Tellus4 brought about a considerable increase in participation. Over 250,000 pupils took part in Tellus4, an increase of around 100,000 from Tellus3. In addition, 5,322 pupils used the new alternative formats, and many of these children would not have been able to participate without such provision.

Tellus4 Evaluation and its objectives

This evaluation was undertaken as a small-scale, targeted piece of work aimed at providing insight into the delivery of the survey, rather than being a large, comprehensive evaluation examining all aspects of the survey.

Word of Mouth was commissioned by DCSF to evaluate the improvements made to Tellus4, and enhance understanding of the local authority and school experience of the Tellus4 survey.

The key objectives of this evaluation were to:

- assess the overall satisfaction level of local authorities, schools and children and young people with the survey and identify key lessons learnt including areas of best practice.
- evaluate the effectiveness of the supporting material and guidance provided in supporting a consistent mode of delivery in class.
- establish how successful the improvements to increase the accessibility of the survey have been, and in particular the use of the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) versions in addressing the needs of children and young people with special needs.

Research Methodology

In order to address the above objectives, Word of Mouth adopted a qualitative research approach, involving a mixture of school visits (incorporating both a face-to-face interview with the Tellus co-ordinator and a pupil group discussion within each school), telephone interviews with Tellus coordinators, and telephone interviews with local education authorities/Service Children's Education.

In total, interviews were conducted with 12 local authority/Service Children's Education link officers, 27 Tellus co-ordinators in participating schools, nine representatives from non-participating schools, and seven pupil discussion groups. Fieldwork was conducted in February-March 2010.

Main Findings

Overall satisfaction with Tellus4

Tellus co-ordinators in participating schools expressed high levels of satisfaction with the delivery of Tellus4, with no major problems reported. Local authority link officers were also very positive and felt that Tellus4 was a significant improvement on previous Tellus surveys.

It was difficult to assess overall satisfaction amongst pupils, as they generally had limited recall of the survey. Notwithstanding this caveat, most pupils had enjoyed taking part in the survey and many had found some of the questions "fun" to do. On the whole they had found it easy to complete, but a mixture of views were expressed on confidentiality.

Participation

The headteacher was generally the main person in schools who decided whether to take part in Tellus4, either alone or in consultation with another senior teacher. The availability of school-level results and ability to allow the 'pupil voice' to be heard were the main reasons given for participation. The importance of the 'pupil' voice was particularly strong in special schools and PRUs, who felt it was important that their pupils' views were considered alongside those from mainstream schools.

Some local authorities spoken to, played an important role in encouraging schools to take part, suggesting that, even with the prominent role played by NFER, the local authority can be an important influence on schools' participation.

The main reasons given by non-participating schools for not conducting the survey mostly related to lack of time, the staffing and resource implications, and the perceived burden on teachers, with several schools commenting on the number of external surveys they are asked to complete.

All local authorities saw the data that they would obtain from Tellus4 as the main benefit of their involvement in the survey, in particular because of the relevance of the survey to 'Every Child Matters' outcomes, with some wanting more of their schools to participate for a more complete or representative coverage of pupils in their authority.

Communication and support

Participating schools and local authorities were generally positive towards the communication and support they had received from NFER. Local authorities also gave positive feedback on the stakeholder workshops, which they saw as an important part of the consultation process, and were impressed with the management information tool, which allowed them to monitor their schools' progress efficiently.

Survey timing

Both local authorities and schools were mostly positive towards the autumn timing. Local authorities saw it as an improvement, as it gave them the figures they needed towards the end of the financial year. Schools felt that autumn was a better time than the summer, as there were no exam commitments. However, the timing of the survey was an issue for PRUs, because they tend to have small numbers of pupils in the autumn term, thereby impacting on the quality of the data for their setting.

Inclusion of whole years

The evaluation found that, in general, smaller schools were more likely to include the whole year group, with larger schools citing logistical difficulties in allowing a large number of pupils to conduct the survey. Schools that did include the whole year group thought that this was fairer (as all pupils were allowed to have their say) or easier (as they did not need to decide which classes should be included). Some schools that did select classes said that they did not always follow the guidance provided to select which classes to participate.

Delivery models used in schools

With a very small number of exceptions, the survey was seen primarily as an administrative task. It was delivered in a way that was seen as most efficient and that fitted in best with practical constraints, such as whether ICT support was required by the class teacher or whether the level of ICT support/access in the school meant a whole class did the survey in one session or in stages with smaller groups.

In most cases, schools said they had a dedicated Tellus4 co-ordinator, but in some schools there was no clear co-ordinator role, and typically the headteacher or deputy head would delegate the administration of the survey to individual class teachers, sometimes shortly before the survey had to be conducted; this could impact on teachers' ability to incorporate curriculum materials and use the SEND versions.

Only a few of the schools interviewed integrated the survey into PHSE or Citizenship lessons, or planned lessons around the survey. These respondents found the materials "user-friendly", useful and well designed. However, some respondents said they would consider using the materials in the future and could see a potential benefit of doing so.

Survey set-up and practical issues

Most respondents in participating schools found the survey easy to set up, with no major administrative or technical problems reported, and this was given as one of the main reasons for satisfaction with the survey.

Most respondents from participating schools used the Tellus school support pack, and found it useful and easy to use. A small number of respondents said that the hard copy of the support pack initially looked quite intimidating, as it contained a lot of information, while in some schools the hard copy materials were not always passed on to the relevant teacher(s) as part of the delegation process.

The majority of participating school respondents did not feel there were any issues of confidentiality for their pupils, but some doubted whether pupils understood that teachers wouldn't see the answers, and therefore felt that some pupils may not have been completely honest with their responses.

Several pupils felt that an on-line survey was more confidential than filling in a paper questionnaire, but others expressed concern over confidentiality; as a result they felt awkward when completing the survey or felt that they could not answer all the questions honestly. This was a particular issue for questions on alcohol and smoking.

Survey questionnaire

Local authorities were positive towards the survey questionnaire, on the basis that it gave them the data they needed for performance indicators, although there was the odd concern about questions being changed (affecting trends). Nearly all respondents in participating schools said that the questionnaire content was relevant to pupils and to the school as a whole. However, there were comments that some of the questions (e.g. on smoking and alcohol) were less appropriate for younger pupils, and this view was echoed by some of the pupils that were interviewed.

While some participating schools were happy with the design of the questionnaire, there were a number of comments about the questionnaire being too long or containing long questions. Some pupils (at both mainstream and special schools) confirmed that they sometimes needed help to understand what the questions meant, and to identify appropriate answers.

All local authorities interviewed in the evaluation had taken the option to add their own questions and most felt that this was an important feature. The participating schools included in the evaluation were split between those that added their own questions and those that didn't. Most schools who added their own questions said this was a useful and important feature, allowing them to reflect the school's own/current agenda. Where schools didn't add questions, this was usually because of time constraints or because it was additional work. Some local authorities and schools who added two extra questions said they would have liked to have added more than two.

SEND versions

The SEND versions were generally less used in mainstream schools and in the PRUs interviewed, and there was no evidence of SEND versions being 'tried out' by pupils who were able to access the questionnaire in the standard format.

Of the six special schools included in the evaluation, a couple did not use the alternative formats, because they either did not have time to look into the suitability of the different formats, or because pupils had one-to-one support with the survey, and the SEND formats were not seen as adding to this level of support. The others used either the symbol or BSL versions and they were seen as straightforward to set up and "worked fine".

The symbol version was seen as crucial to pupils' participation in one special school, and a couple of other special schools felt that it improved access to the survey for some pupils. However, some of the special schools included in the evaluation felt that their pupils had problems with cognitive capacity, and the SEND formats did not really address this issue. Most of the special schools gave pupils one-to-one support when they were completing the survey, irrespective of the version used.

Feedback of results and analysis

Most respondents at participating schools said that the school-level feedback was important to them, and in a couple of cases that this was crucial to their participation in Tellus4. Participating schools were most likely to say that the results would be used to provide input into planning documents, or to allow them to address current issues in the schools.

The majority of the local authority respondents said that they would use the analysis tool and one authority said they would encourage their schools to use it too. Most authorities found the idea of an analysis tool appealing but had not been able to test its usefulness.

The evaluation fieldwork was conducted in February and March 2010, and at this point schools had not received school-level analysis for the survey. This was a source of frustration for some respondents, who felt that the gap between the fieldwork and school-level results was too long. Local authority interviews were also conducted before authority-level data became available. Some authorities felt the survey results should be released earlier to enable them to feed it into their end-of-year reports.

Additional Information
The full report (DCSF) can be accessed at www.education.gov.uk/research
Further information about this research can be obtained from
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