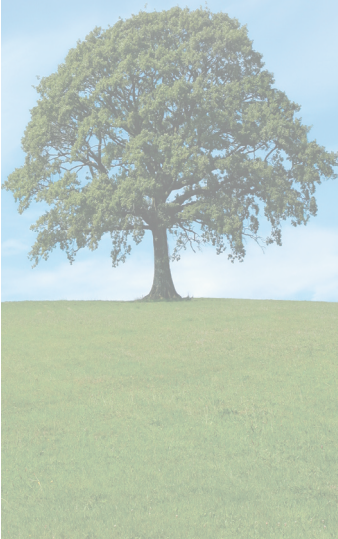




# How was it for you?

## Pupil perceptions of the secondary curriculum

For three years between 2008 and 2010, CUREE surveyed pupils in primary and secondary schools about their experiences of the curriculum. In 2010, over 4000 secondary pupils in 39 schools responded. In addition, we conducted three focus groups with pupils from whom we gathered deeper, more textured data to round out and help explain the survey analysis. This report summarises their views.



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# How was it for you?

## Student perceptions of the secondary curriculum

### Introduction

1. For three years between 2008 and 2010, CUREE surveyed students in primary and secondary schools about their experiences of the curriculum. In 2010, over 4000 secondary students in 39 schools responded. In addition, we conducted three focus groups with students from whom we gathered deeper, more textured data to round out and help explain the survey analysis. This report summarises their views.
2. The schools and the students in them were drawn from all regions of England and were broadly representative of schools generally in terms of locality, size, gender balance and performance (as measured by Contextual Value Added ratings). The schools were all co-educational and in the state sector. You can find more information about the sample and the process at the end of the report.

### The headlines

3. The results of this year's survey suggest the following headline points about the views of secondary students about their experience of school:
  - the majority of students felt positive about their school – and, against, most measures, even more so than in previous years' surveys.
  - over 60% felt that their teachers knew them well, understood how they learned and helped them understand what they needed to know;
  - group work was widely used; most students expected to have active and varied learning experiences and to mark their own and other students' work;
  - a majority of students said they were frequently challenged to achieve new things and were persistent when trying something new and difficult;
  - around half said that their teachers often made connections between subjects
  - maths was identified as the hardest subject, least connected with other subjects and least likely to feature group work or practical activities. But it was also considered the second most useful (after PE!) in life outside school. RE was rated the least useful and science the most practical;
  - About a quarter our sample said that they could influence what and how they learned, and more than half could choose who they worked with and whether they worked online;
  - most students felt well informed about health issues (healthy eating particularly) and around one-third felt they were not under pressure from school and around a half said the same about their parents;
4. However:
  - around 20% seemed to find lessons too easy;

- there was a correlation between difficulty and attainment. Though, superficially, we might expect lower attaining students to find lessons harder, this could be a sign of poor differentiation on the part of the teachers;
- Around 25% of students said that they gave up trying to solve something they didn't understand quite often (a few times a week);
- there were still 15% of secondary students reporting that they rarely or never experienced active or varied learning
- although nearly half thought their school work connected with the rest of their lives, 20% disagreed;
- about 25% of students didn't think they could influence how and what they were taught with mathematics being cited most often as the least flexible
- around 60% of students said that they were not well informed about stress;
- nearly three-quarters of students felt that the secondary school put them under more pressure than primary;
- conversely, a significant minority (30%) of students felt no pressure at all from school and half felt the same about pressure from parents. This suggests that they were insufficiently challenged by either.

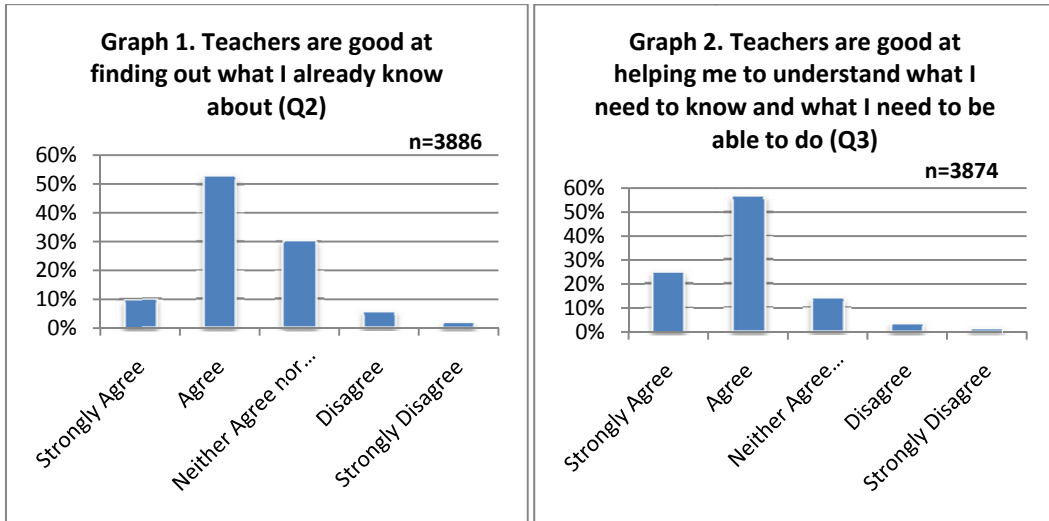
## Main findings

5. The concept of 'the curriculum' we were working with was an inclusive one; "the entire planned learning experience". Our survey questions asked about what students learned and how they were taught it; how much they could influence or choose their experiences; and how their school experiences related to home life. These themes are reported below in three groupings:
  - challenge and aspiration
  - influence, flexibility and choice, and
  - lifestyles and motivational influences.
6. The headline message is that most secondary students were broadly positive about their experiences as school but issues of interest or concern arose for a minority – sometimes a substantial minority. Most of this report examines those issues.

## Challenge and aspiration

### 7. The positives

- Most learners were generally positive about their curriculum experiences. The results in 2010, though generally consistent with previous years' surveys, show significant increases in learner 'approval' ratings in several areas (but note the caution about the changes in question format).
- Over 60% of secondary learners agreed or strongly agreed that their teachers understood their starting points, helped them to understand what they needed to know and be able to do (graphs 1 & 2).

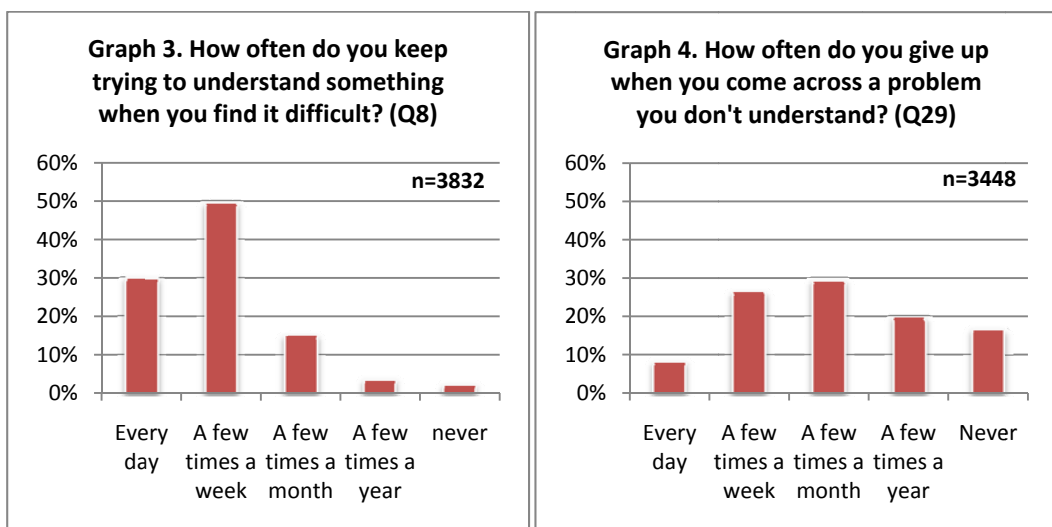


Note: the blue columns denote 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' responses, the red columns denote 'every day' to 'never' responses, and the purple columns denote responses to a range of statements.

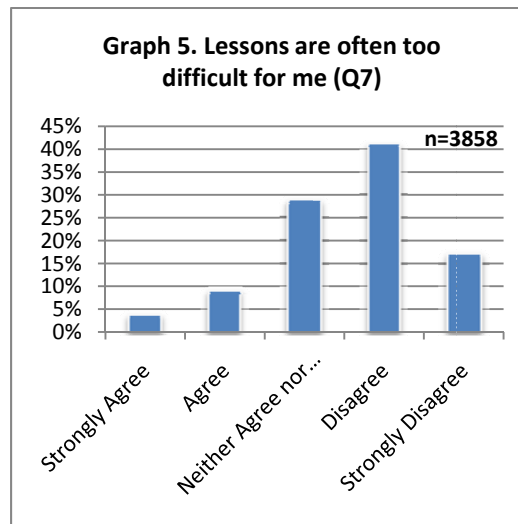
- The use of group work seems to be firmly embedded in curriculum delivery.
- Active and varied learning practices seem to be widespread.
- A substantial majority of learners said that they were frequently challenged to achieve new things in lessons.
- A similar proportion said that they were persistent in trying to understand something difficult.

## 8. The issues

- Around 50% of learners reported that they kept trying to understand something when they found it difficult a few times a week and 15% of learners reported that they never gave up trying to solve something they didn't understand. But around 25% of learners gave up when they came across a problem they didn't understand a few times a week (graphs 3&4).

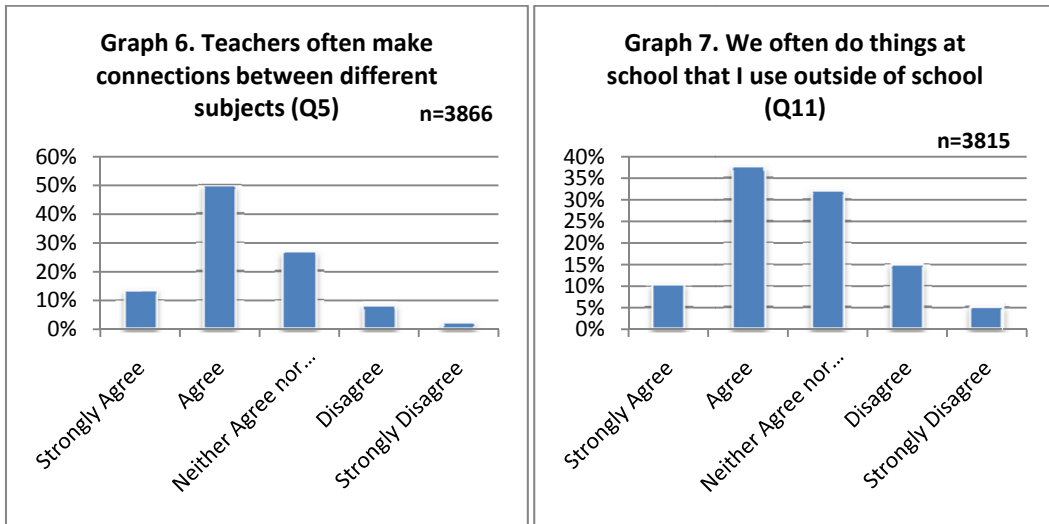


- Whilst there was a generally positive picture about active and varied learning practices, there remained over 15% of learners who said these practices happened rarely or never.
- When exploring learner responses to challenge we found that a small proportion of learners (around 15%) said that they found lessons too difficult. Around a quarter said they found them neither too hard nor too easy, but a significant proportion (around 20%) *strongly disagreed* that lessons were often too difficult for them. This may suggest that they found lessons too easy, although it could just mean they found lessons appropriately difficult (graph 5).



- There is an apparent correlation between learners' assessment of difficulty and their self-reported attainment levels – those reporting higher attainment were less likely to say that they found lessons too difficult. This result is superficially plausible and, if true, might indicate poor differentiation by some teachers – otherwise all learners, regardless of attainment, would find their lessons equally challenging. Note that the attainment information is self-reported and would, in most cases, be based on internal formative assessment. The results should be interpreted cautiously.
- Secondary learners, when responding to questions about their experience of the curriculum at subject level, commented most frequently on the core subjects but others also made an appearance:
  - Mathematics was identified as least likely to feature group work or practical activities. It was also rated as the hardest subject and the one least likely to be connected with other subjects. But, it was also considered the second (after PE) most useful in life out of school.
  - RE was seen as the least useful subject.
  - English was seen as the subject most connected with other subjects and the subject most taught from books.
  - Drama was seen as the easiest subject, closely followed by PE.
  - Science was seen as the most practical subject.

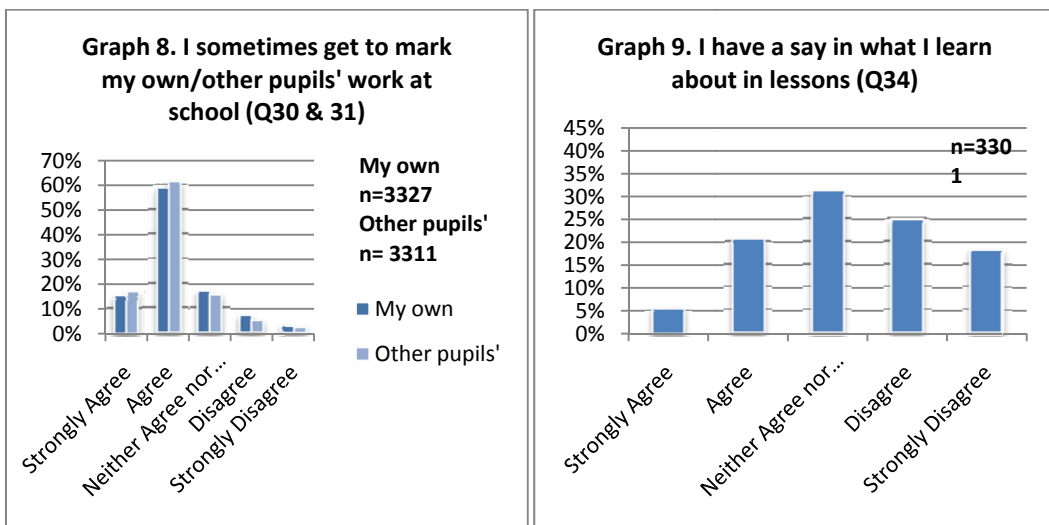
- Around half the learners agreed that their teachers often made connections between different subjects (graph 6).
- Learners were less positive about the relationship between school work and life outside school. Nearly 20% of learners said this was not a feature of their experience (graph 7).

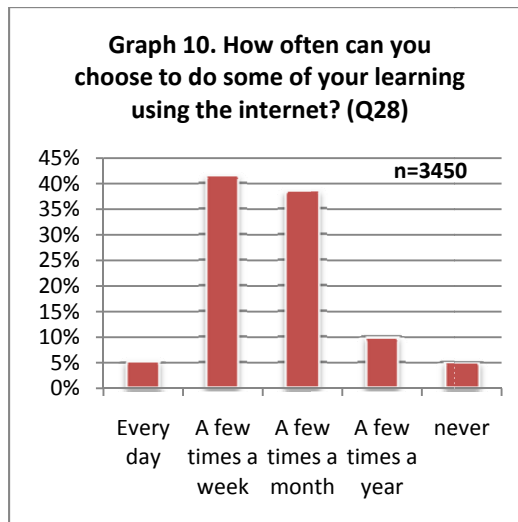


## Influence, flexibility and choice

### 9. The positives

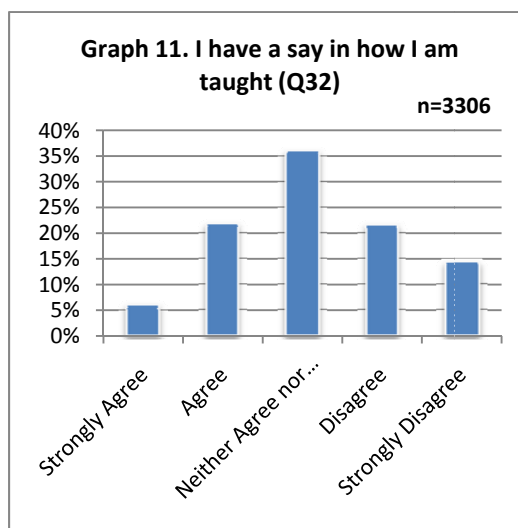
- Our data suggest that that peer and self-marking is now widespread in secondary schools (graph 8).
- Around a quarter of learners expect to be able to influence how they are taught and what they learn. More than half expect to choose who they work with in lessons and to do some of their learning online and/or via the internet (graph 9).
- More than half of secondary learners say they frequently use the internet for learning (graph 10).





## 10. The issues

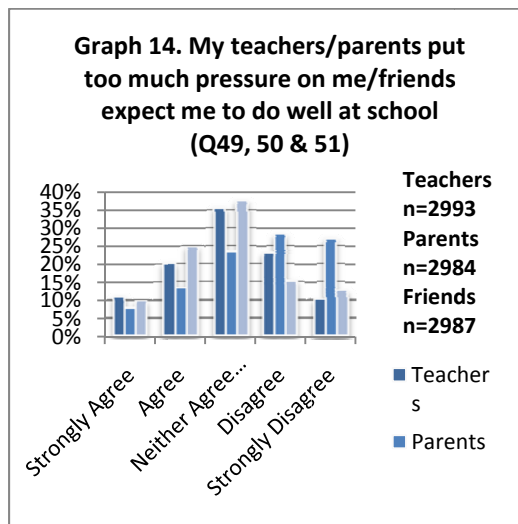
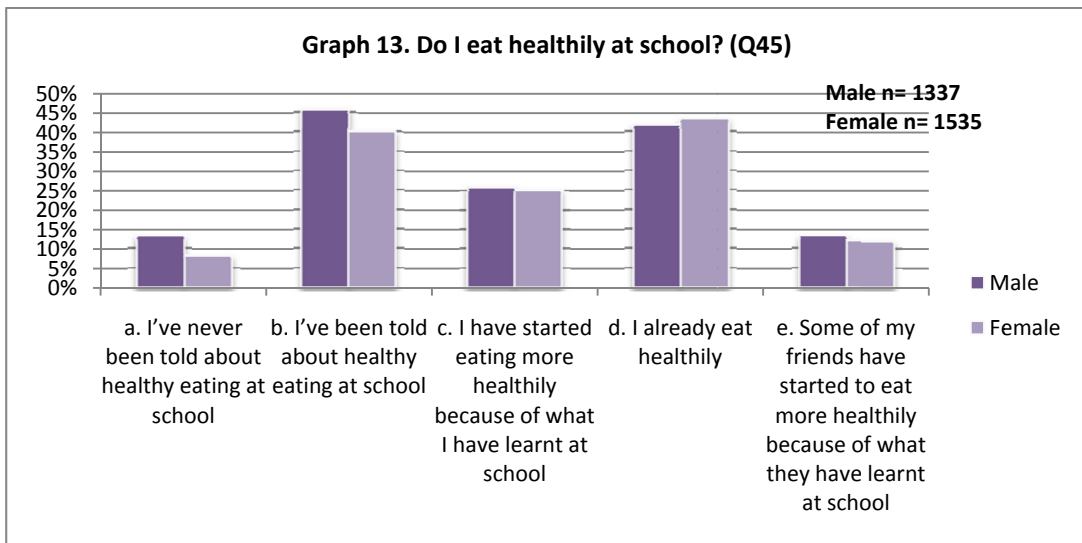
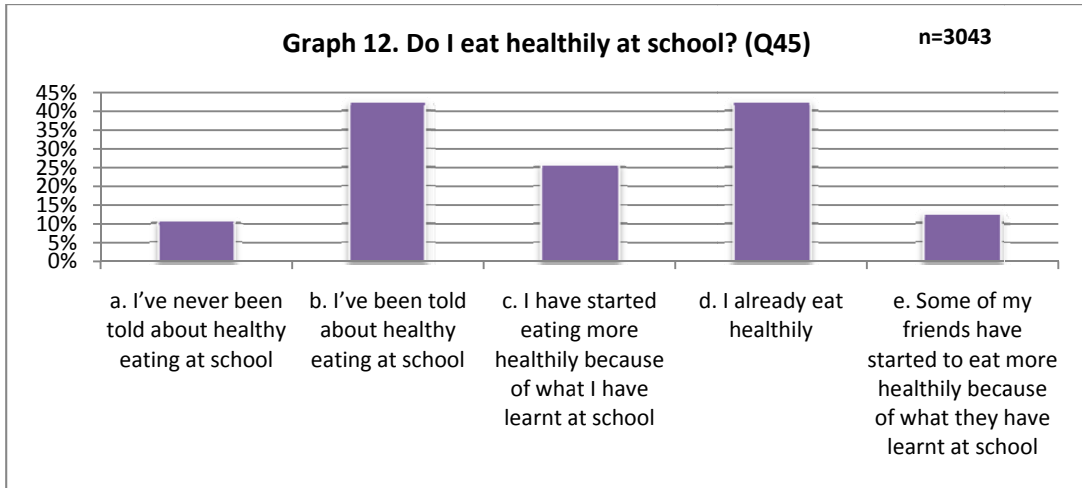
- A quarter of learners disagree that they are able to influence what and how they are taught (graph 11).
- While there was no consistent correlation between a subject and positive learner views on choice, mathematics was most often cited as offering the fewest opportunities for learner influence and choice.



## Lifestyles and motivational influences

### 11. The positives

- Learners said they were well informed about healthy eating (graphs 12&13).
- Around one third of secondary learners feel little or no pressure from teachers and an even larger proportion (nearly half) felt the same about pressure from home (graph 14). No correlation was found between self-reported attainment and perceptions of pressure.

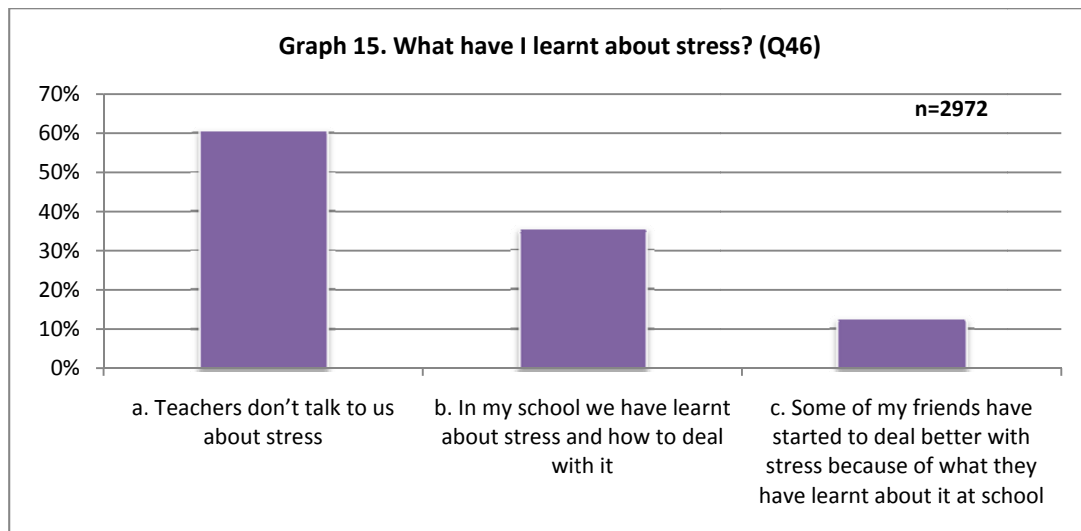


## 12. The issues

- Learners said they were less well informed about dealing with stress (graph 15).



- Nearly half of secondary learners feel that their teachers expected more of them than their primary teachers had and nearly three-quarters of them felt under more pressure in the secondary system.
- In focus groups, learners said they expected, and thought it quite normal, to be under pressure from their teachers and parents/carers but they were critical of the form the pressure from teachers sometimes took. The amount and usefulness of homework was singled out for criticism, as was preparation for tests.



### Key facts about the 2010 sample and process

- This was an online survey of primary and secondary learners conducted in January and February 2010<sup>1</sup>. We achieved around 4100 responses from 39 secondary schools. The surveyed schools were drawn from all regions of England and were broadly representative in terms of locality, size (but with a slight skew towards larger schools) and performance (as measured by Contextual Value Added ratings). All of our sample schools were drawn from the state sector and were co-educational. The respondents were broadly representative of the school population in England in terms of gender, but appeared to have a larger proportion of those identifying themselves as other than White British than across the school system as a whole<sup>2</sup>.
- In addition to the surveys, we conducted three focus groups. The focus groups allowed us to explore the issues raised in the survey more qualitatively, to add depth and 'colour' to the survey responses. We also gathered responses from some young people who could not have participated in a survey – specifically those excluded or at risk of exclusion. Though this last group probably included a number of young people who would be considered 'vulnerable' (e.g. travellers, cared for children), the survey methods did not generally yield sufficient appropriate data to target or analyse results for vulnerable groups. Generally, though the focus groups included members drawn from the full range of age, geographic distribution, gender and ethnicity of the target school population, they were not in any numerical sense

<sup>1</sup> CUREE and University of Wolverhampton (2010) *QCDA Building the evidence base student data – final report*

<sup>2</sup> A substantial number of respondents withheld ethnicity information.

'representative' of that population. For this reason, and the fact that the total sample size was very small, focus group data have been used to illuminate, extend and explain survey data rather than subjected to quantitative analysis themselves.

- All graphs are displayed as percentages which enables us to show the results on a common scale. This is particularly significant when comparing different data sets, for example primary and secondary, which have different numbers of respondents. The number of respondents for each question is also clearly shown on the graph (as 'n= xxx'). Blue is used on the graphs to denote 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' responses, red denotes 'every day' to 'never' responses and purple is used to denote responses to a range of statements.