

Using research questionnaires with young people in schools: the influence of the social context

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Whilst there is an extensive literature on the use of self-completion questionnaires as a research tool, very little attention has been paid to the influence of the social context in determining the ways in which questionnaires are used in practice. This paper describes our experiences of working with 27 English, mixed sex, state schools to carry out a questionnaire survey with 4754 students aged 13–14 years. The survey was part of a randomized controlled trial of peer led sex education. Using data from the questionnaires and from researcher fieldnotes, we highlight ways in which aspects of the social context affected the administration of the questionnaire, students' participation in the survey and the quality of the data collected.

Introduction

Self-completion questionnaire surveys are very widely used as a data collection method in health service, educational and social science research (Bowling 1997, Lister-Sharp *et al.* 1999, Scott and Usher 1999). They are considered to be a cost effective method of collecting data from a large number of people in a relatively standardized way. In some situations, self-completion questionnaires may allow people to express views on issues about which they may not feel comfortable talking with an interviewer (Oakley *et al.* 1990, Boulton 1994).

Most of the research methods literature relating to the use of questionnaires focuses on issues relating to reliability and validity. The primary concern is with ways of designing questionnaires so as to maximize the accuracy of, and reducing bias in, the data collected. Attention to the length, layout, readability, language used, order of questions and content of questionnaires is advocated in order to improve the quality of the data obtained (Robson 1993, Johnson *et al.* 1994, Cohen and Manion 1998, Bryman 2001). Rather less attention is paid to the influence of the *social*

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context in determining the way in which questionnaires can be used as research tools. Whilst there are notable exceptions to this tradition (LeCompte and Goetz 1982, Scott 2000) such texts tend to view the social context as contributing to 'biases' in the data collected, perhaps by 'contamination' between respondents or by encouraging socially desirable responses (Johnson *et al.* 1994). Others have focused on ethical issues; for example, the influence of the social context on students' ability to provide informed consent to take part in research (Denscombe and Aubrook 1992).

This paper describes some of the ways in which aspects of the social context affected the administration of a self-completion questionnaire given to a large sample of British young people in state secondary schools in 1997. In describing the challenges we encountered, we hope to develop a more critical and reflexive approach to the use of questionnaires as a social research tool.

The RIPPLE study and sources of data used in this paper

The questionnaire discussed in the paper was used as part of the RIPPLE study (Randomized Intervention of Pupil Peer Led Sex Education). Details of the study, which is still in progress, have been published elsewhere (Strange *et al.* 2001). The study involves two cohorts of students in 27 mixed sex state secondary schools in central and southern England.

The schools were recruited in 1997. A baseline survey was carried out in autumn 1997 with the first cohort of year 9 students (aged 13–14 years) in 170 classes in the 27 schools ($N=4754$). The two main sources of data drawn on in this paper are the comments provided by some students at the end of the questionnaires, and researcher fieldnotes. These consisted of structured 'researcher perception sheets' (detailing students' privacy, the amount of time available for questionnaire completion, teachers' presence and questions asked or comments made), completed for 86 classes, and unstructured narratives describing the process of carrying out the survey which were written by researchers for 10 schools.

Developing and administering the baseline questionnaire

The questionnaire for the baseline survey, which was 17 pages long, was developed in consultation with students and piloted in four schools (Stephenson *et al.* 1998). It included demographic questions, questions about students' knowledge, attitudes and sexual behaviour, and drug and alcohol use, and questions asking for views about school and sex education. Most required yes/no responses, and many employed Likert type scales. There was a 'comments' box on the last page of the questionnaire with the instruction, 'If you have any comments that you would like to make please write them in the box below'.

The survey was intended to reach all students on the school roll. In all but one of the schools the questionnaire was completed in class groups. The questionnaires were labeled with a unique identifying code (ID) in order to

preserve confidentiality (students did not write their names on the questionnaires), and allow linkage of different questionnaires completed by the same students over the course of the study.

Before handing out the questionnaire the researcher or teacher explained the aims of the research, the students' right not to take part, the reasons why personal information was being sought, and the confidential nature of the questionnaire. The students were asked not to discuss the questionnaire until after everyone had finished, and were invited to ask questions and clarify issues if they wanted to.

A total of 4383 (93%) of the 4754 students enrolled in the schools in cohort one completed the baseline questionnaires; 81 were withdrawn from the study by parents/carers. Of the remaining 4673, 4173 (89%) completed the questionnaires in school and 210 (5%) by post. Comments were written at the end of the questionnaire by 17% of the students (21% of the girls and 14% of the boys).

Timetabling, the status of personal, social and health education (PSHE) and the influence of researchers vs teachers

The ease with which the questionnaire survey could be organized, the time available for students to complete the questionnaire and the likelihood of students being present to take part were all influenced by the way in which personal, social and health education (PSHE) was timetabled in the schools. In schools where one lesson a week is given over to PSHE, the contact teacher had more control over the curriculum and could more easily find a slot for the survey. In schools where PSHE is delivered on a single day when the normal timetable is suspended, the available days were restricted to one. In some schools, PSHE was delivered during an extended registration time, and this was vulnerable to disruption and was often not long enough for students to complete the questionnaire.

The marginal status of PSHE within the school curriculum had both advantages and disadvantages. Since PSHE is neither an academic subject nor liable to formal external assessment via examination, many school staff do not regard it as particularly important (Stears *et al.* 1995). This may have lowered the motivation of some teachers (particularly those with little knowledge of the research) to ensure that students completed the questionnaire, and it also increased the likelihood of students being absent from the lesson to take part in other activities. Some of the comments written by students in the questionnaires suggested that the timetabling of the baseline survey directly influenced their enthusiasm for taking part. For example, some indicated greater keenness for completing the questionnaire when they were not anxious about other academic work, or when they were missing a subject they disliked. One boy wrote, 'I am glad I did this questionnaire as I missed half of PE'.

Undertaking a survey of the entire year group in each school simultaneously meant that in a third of the 172 classes teachers had to substitute for researchers in presenting the questionnaires to students.

Although teachers were fully briefed by researchers, it was likely that some groups of students did not receive as much information about the rationale for the research as others whose questionnaires were administered by researchers. Teachers may also have been less able than researchers to answer questions about the research or particular questions about the questionnaire. As one girl wrote, 'It would have helped if we had had one of the actual researchers, we had to have our tutor which was a bit embarrassing and I didn't feel like asking him questions about the questionnaire'. Having no contact with the research team may also have increased students' concerns about the confidentiality of their responses. Support for this is found in table 1 which shows that students in groups with researchers present, compared to those in groups without researchers, were significantly more likely to write their postcode in the questionnaire and less likely to write comments indicating concerns about confidentiality or lack of understanding of the rationale for the research. Interestingly table 1 also shows that students were not more or less likely to finish the questionnaire if it was administered by a teacher or a researcher.

In a few cases, schools organized PSHE lessons across the week, and so classes of students completed the questionnaire at different times. In these cases some students were aware of the content of the questionnaire before they filled it in. The differing levels of engagement with the research on the part of contact teachers also had an influence. In some schools, contact teachers spent time preparing students and other staff for the researchers' visits to the school, whereas others did not. One researcher's fieldnotes read: 'I think that anticipation (for the survey) is quite high, perhaps this has been seeded by MH, expressively keen herself. The enthusiasm she brings to the work is evident from a memo she has written to tutors which wishes them good luck!'

Time allocated to the questionnaire ranged from 25–65 minutes. Table 2 shows that, unsurprisingly, this had a significant impact on rates of questionnaire completion.

Table 1. Questionnaire completion and comments by whether or not researchers administered the questionnaires.

	Researcher present	Researcher not present	Chi square
Students wrote postcode [†]	85.1% (2285) (<i>n</i> =2685)	81.5% (1122) (<i>n</i> =1377)	<i>P</i> <0.01
Comments indicating concerns about confidentiality	7.5% (36) (<i>n</i> =482)	15.3% (42) (<i>n</i> =240)	<i>P</i> <0.01
Comments indicating lack of understand aims of the research, rational for particular questions or critical of specific questions	7.3% (35) (<i>n</i> =482)	12% (33) (<i>n</i> =240)	<i>P</i> <0.05
Students finishing the questionnaire [‡]	92.9% (2685) (<i>n</i> =2891)	92.4% (1378) (<i>n</i> =1492)	N.S.

Notes: [†]As this question was at the end of the questionnaire, this analysis excludes all those people who did not finish the questionnaire (*n*=4062); [‡]Completion of questionnaire is defined as those completing qu41c.

Table 2. Factors influencing whether students were able to finish the questionnaire.

	Time available to complete the questionnaire†		English main language at home		Sex of student		Housing tenure	
	Less than 30 mins	More than 30 mins	No	Yes	Boys	Girls	Rented/temporary/care or foster home	Privately owned
Nos of students finishing the questionnaire	90.8% (334) (<i>n</i> =368)	96.2% (1072) (<i>n</i> =1114)	40.5% (15) (<i>n</i> =37)	93.8% (3895) (<i>n</i> =4154)	90.5% (2020) (<i>n</i> =2232)	94.9% (2042) (<i>n</i> =2151)	91.3% (944) (<i>n</i> =1034)	94.2% (2572) (<i>n</i> =2731)
Chi square	<i>P</i> <0.001		<i>P</i> <0.001		<i>P</i> <0.01		<i>P</i> <0.05	

Notes: †Analysis for this question was based on data from sub sample (*n*=1482) of students for whom information regarding time available to complete questionnaires was recorded.

Time constraints especially affected those with literacy or reading difficulties. For example, in one school a researcher noted that, 'Two pupils needed all the questions read to them—difficult to support these and answer questions from others, two didn't complete in the time given'. The relationship between educational achievement and social class (Hatcher 2000) meant that problems with literacy resulted in a disproportionately greater loss of data from lower social class students. Table 2 shows that those living in rented accommodation were less likely than those living in privately owned accommodation to complete the questionnaires. It also indicates that students who reported having English as their main language at home were significantly more likely than those whose main language was not English to finish the questionnaires. Ensuring that the views and experiences of these students were included in the data collected required researchers to work creatively with schools to find ways of providing appropriate support. In some schools, teachers identified those students likely to have difficulties with the questionnaire before the session and researchers and teachers tried to ensure that they received appropriate support. Often the only support available when students required (parts of) the questionnaire translated into the appropriate language, was from other students in the class. This, of course, had implications for the confidentiality of these students' responses and made it more likely that their responses would be influenced by others.

Absentee rates for these year 9 students, in the schools participating in the RIPPLE study, averaged 11% and ranged from 0% to 21% of the roll. This is higher than the national average of 9%, reported by the DfES, for all students in maintained secondary schools in England during 1997 (DfES 1998). Researchers' field notes suggest that this is partly explained by the numbers of students missing to other commitments (e.g. sports activities, music lessons, completing course work, temporary exclusions). These absent students are likely to include those most at risk in terms of sexual health (the focus of the RIPPLE study). Depending on the school, between 0 and 94% of those classed as absentees did eventually complete questionnaires, and a crucial factor here was teachers' enthusiasm for, and engagement with, the study. Packs containing a questionnaire, information sheets and a pre-paid envelope were made up for absentee students and left with staff. Subsequently, researchers wrote letters to school staff reminding them which students had not completed a questionnaire. In one school the researcher was able to negotiate with the contact teacher an opportunity to return to the school to supervise another session with students who had been absent the first time round.

Finally lessons, and students' opportunity to complete the questionnaire, were sometimes disrupted by extraneous and unforeseen events. On more than one occasion a survey was disrupted by a fire alarm necessitating the evacuation of the entire school. On one notable occasion an entire group got up from their desks to watch student colleagues being returned to school from a trip in an army helicopter that landed on the playing fields.

Working with students in the classroom and the influence of classroom norms

In order to maximize questionnaire acceptability and completion, the research team was keen to develop the kind of rapport with students that was distinct from traditional teacher–student relationships. To this end, we tried to identify ourselves clearly as ‘outsiders’ in relation to the school culture by, for example, giving our first names to students, attempting to be non-directive in their approach and trying to avoid enforcing discipline. But, as Epstein (1998) has noted, it can be difficult for an adult in the school setting to resist being positioned as another teacher by both students and teachers. In the RIPPLE study, for example, teachers sometimes disciplined students for talking during the time allocated to the questionnaire or demanded they ‘show respect for the visitors’. It was then difficult not to appear to be contradicting the teacher when attempting to ‘relax’ the relationships between the students and ourselves. Personal characteristics of the researchers themselves may also have had an influence over the way in which the students perceived the research and were able to engage with it. For example, in discussing with each other our experiences with the students, we became aware of the influence of gender on the nature of our interactions with the students. Boys, particularly, seemed to expect to be able to involve researchers in joking, which male researchers found easier to cope with than female researchers (partly because boys tended not to make male researchers the butt of their jokes). One of the female researchers occasionally experienced boys making jokes with friends that involved trying to sexualize her. In these cases issuing a challenge—a personal response—made positive engagement with these students difficult (Walkerdine 1990).

In order to reduce the likelihood that students’ responses to the questionnaire were influenced by those around them and to increase the confidentiality of students’ responses and the possibility that people would finish the questionnaire, we were keen for students to complete the questionnaire on their own. However, encouraging students to complete the questionnaires without talking to other students was challenging. Some students found it very difficult, or did not want, to complete the questionnaire on their own. Some asked each other for clarification of the meaning of particular words or questions. Some, usually boys, found it very difficult to settle to complete the questionnaire and joked with friends by reading particular questions out loud, teasing each other, and making often homophobic and sexist comments to the group. Table 2 shows that boys were less likely than girls to finish the questionnaires.

These responses can be understood in terms of classroom norms about learning and the ways gender and sexuality are played out therein. Students are likely to have viewed the questionnaire as a form of schoolwork (Denscombe and Aubrook 1992). In the contemporary classroom context, learning and support between students is encouraged as good practice (Petty 1998). Students habitually turn to each other for help before trying to get the attention of an often busy teacher. In terms of gender and sexuality, research on the behaviour of young men in classrooms had led to

the suggestion that they may use humour as a form of resistance to the dominant (authoritarian) school culture (Walker and Kushers 1999). Others have noted how this resistance involves a type of posturing which functions to consolidate heterosexual masculinities (Dubberley 1993, Kehily and Nayak 1997). This behaviour may be exaggerated in response to a questionnaire on sexual issues, because this precisely highlights the necessity to 'perform' and consolidate masculinity (Morgan 1992). In terms of the questionnaire data collected in the RIPPLE study, the concern was that such behaviour might, by highlighting particular (conformist) models of gender and sexual identity, have an oppressive effect on some students and influence their responses to particular questions (e.g. questions asking students the extent to which they felt they knew about and whether they would like more information about particular topics including 'how people have sex' and 'gay and lesbian relationships').

Researchers developed a number of strategies to encourage students to work alone and quietly on the questionnaire. They appealed to students' altruistic motives, stressed their willingness to answer questions about the questionnaire, and sometimes asked students to spread out physically within the classroom while completing the questionnaires. However, students were generally resistant to this latter strategy. We were also concerned that, in trying to assert this form of 'control' over students, we were mimicking the power differentials between teachers and students, and thus possibly encouraging students' disengagement from the research (Woods 1976). Being asked 'to move' (and to work 'in silence') is associated with discourses of punishment and control. Further, by falling in with the request to treat their responses as secret, students could feel that they were implying to peers that they had something to hide. In one case where an entire year group of about 180 students filled in the questionnaires together in a hall seated at desks arranged for an external examination, collective resistance and a reluctance to complete the questionnaire was particularly evident, especially amongst boys.

Students' responses in the questionnaires are likely to have been influenced by their understanding of the aims of the research and their perception of the meaning of particular questions. Of the comments written by students at the end of the questionnaires, 6% were about the effects on them of filling it in. Some of these suggest that, rather than being a tool with which to collect 'objective' information, the questionnaire was acting as an 'educational' intervention and may thus have contributed to the construction of the views it was being used to access (Boulton 1994). For example one student wrote 'I think some of these questions made me understand more about sex and when not to do it'. This suggests that by completing the questionnaire the student was discouraged from having sex. Other students' comments were more general (e.g. 'this test made me realize my feelings') but indicated that the questionnaire influenced the way that they felt about issues related to sex and/or relationships. The tendency for students to view research taking place in schools as being 'educational' and the impact of this on the quality of the data collected has been identified by others (Edwards and Allred 1999).

Conclusions

There are numerous ways in which the ideal standardized, even somewhat mechanical, process of survey administration is effectively compromised by the demands and constraints of many types of social context. This paper has highlighted a number of ways in which the social context of schools affected the administration of a questionnaire survey, and the quality of the data collected, in a large study of peer-delivered sex education. We have discussed the influence of a number of structural, practical and interactional factors: school timetables; school size; the length of available lessons; space available in classrooms; teachers' enthusiasm for the research; the relationships between researchers/teachers and students; and the way in which both students' responses and researchers' roles are constrained by the dominant cultural norms of the classroom. It is the particular interaction between the setting (the school/classroom), the participants (young people) and the subject matter (sex) that resulted in students responding to the questionnaire in particular ways.

Some aspects of the context discussed in this paper are particular to the RIPPLE study and to school-based research. However, the paper also makes some more general points about the use of questionnaires as a research tool. Careful planning, to ensure adequate time, space and support for those being asked to complete questionnaires, is likely to increase responses and the quality of data obtained. Providing full, clear and honest information is important in enabling participants to appreciate the aims of the research, and also to understand how confidentiality will be assured.

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