

How can you track individual pupils anonymously?

Angela Balding

Angela Balding is Survey Manager at the Schools Health Education Unit and leads the Unit's work with the Fit to Succeed project.

*Project reported in *Education and Health*, 19(1), pp.17-19, and also on the website: www.sheu.org.uk

In our Health-Related Behaviour Questionnaire surveys, we usually recommend the practice of surveying in Year Groups spaced two years apart: say, years 6, 8 and 10. This anticipates the possibility of doing another survey two years on,

when the pupils which were in year 6 will be in Year 8, and those in Year 8 will have moved on to Year 10. A further survey two years on will pick up the Year 6 pupils when they are in Year 10. This study of a cohort is enormously useful. It depends upon a representative sample being selected from the cohort on each occasion. Individual pupils are not identified, but to do so would further enhance the power of the research. This can be done in several ways.

Calendar	Year		
	2000	2002	2004
NC Year 6	✓	✓	✓
7		◻	◻
8	✓	✓	✓
9		◻	◻
10	✓	✓	✓

Self-supplied pupil code

The practice here is to ask pupils to come up with their own code, which they write on their scripts at each survey. For example, we might suggest they use part of a 'phone number (2996) or old car number plate (L269). We use this technique for our HRA service, where it is used to communicate feedback about scores to individual pupils, while retaining their anonymity. This certainly works in the short term, but has the disadvantage that over longer periods of time they will forget what code they chose.

Identification through stable survey items

David Foxcroft (Foxcroft & Lowe, 1993) in his study used the answers to questions that would be stable to match pupils – for example, their age in months, the number of older brothers, the type of housing, and so on. In his study, this uniquely identified most (85%) but not all of the individuals. A rate of 85% is certainly a very respectable outcome.

Additional specified information

A number of researchers request pieces of personal information which collectively produce a code for the respondent – for example, the third letter of their mother's name, their own eye colour, and so on. Again, this can uniquely identify the larger part of the sample, but perhaps not all. [The rate can be boosted a good deal by using postcodes.] The questions asked in this approach are often rather public, and may require careful handling in a presentation to pupils – even if the resulting database is most unlikely to come into the wrong hands, the pupils may be less trusting and so less forthcoming.

Pupil roll number

In schools these days, all pupils already have a unique identifier: their school roll number, which teachers have listed. Although this is more complex to administer, it was the most convenient in our *Fit to Succeed* study* for collecting and matching results from National Assessment tests ("SATs") which are already attached to roll numbers. The method adopted protected the identity of each boy or girl but enabled their results on separate occasions to be linked accurately.

If you are interested in using any of these approaches in your own surveys, you might like to contact me at the Unit.