

A health-related behaviour investigation

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This article summarises a study of 4th-year pupils, using the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire, in a Devon school. It shows how the health education co-ordinator has extracted information of particular interest and relevance to the development of a health-education curriculum. A document like this would be suitable for circulation to other members of staff.

I was made aware of the availability of the Health Related Behaviour questionnaire whilst attending the Certificate in Health Education (Cert. H. Ed) course at St. Luke's College, Exeter. As co-ordinator of Health Education at a Devon Community College, the questionnaire seemed to be a very useful source of information on the pupils' behaviour and attitudes towards health issues. This would be invaluable in the development of a school policy on health education. Having consulted the Head Teacher, it was decided that the questionnaire would be administered to all of the 4th-year pupils, of which there were 133 present on the particular day in November, 1983. The questionnaire was followed up with interviews by researchers (from the Schools Health Education Unit), and teachers (attending the Certificate in Health Education course), who evaluated the responses of pupils in one class to the questions previously answered.

The results of the questionnaire were very interesting, and provided extensive information about the pupils' health behaviour and attitudes. These results were most informative, and some of the

findings are discussed in this article, with possible implications for a future health-education programme. Some of the tables to which these notes refer are printed on page 35.

Some interesting findings

The number of pupils who regularly ride bicycles, especially the boys (70% of them), is considerable. This highlights an obvious need for the inclusion of road safety and traffic education in the curriculum. Not surprising was the considerable amount of television being watched, although it might be interesting to compare these results with further research where the same questions are asked in the summer months. The tables also revealed that very little homework was done on the evening before the questionnaire was administered. It seems, perhaps not unexpectedly, that girls do a lot more work around the house. I was also interested to see that 58% of the pupils work for money during term time, with a high proportion of these (54%) doing paper-rounds. With more money in their pocket there is a greater choice of things to do and things to spend it on.

The analysis of sporting activity reveals generally a low interest in sport, especially as far as team games are concerned. This would suggest the need for pupils to be made aware of the value of sport to health and leisure. As far as personal hygiene is concerned, the frequency of bathing, hair washing and teeth cleaning is generally high, showing possibly that pupils (or parents) are health-conscious in this respect. The analysis of the quality and balance of the meals eaten on the previous day shows that only 40.5% of the pupils had an adequate (or more than adequate) diet. If this is a true reflection of the pupils' eating habits, some nutrition and diet education is required.

Smoking and drinking behaviour

Also of interest is the findings that 24% of boys and 45% of girls claim to smoke, although half of these indicated that they would like to stop; the high percentage of girl smokers is disturbing. The girls also appear to be more at ease with the opposite sex, claiming to have more close male friends, and are also likely to go to discos more frequently. This may be an indication of the fact that girls tend to mature more quickly than boys, as shown by their involvement in more adult activities and behaviour.

The pupils' response to the "alcohol" questions shows that many of the pupils drink alcohol and are possibly doing so on a regular basis, as 66% claim to have had an alcoholic drink in the past week. Some pupils said that they drink at home, others at parties, and a few in public houses. It would appear that parents and other adults are, to a certain degree, accepting that these young people should be allowed to drink alcohol, and therefore the health programme should take this into consideration. An attempt to discourage these young people from drinking alcohol may be counter-productive in such circumstances, but there is a definite need for some form of alcohol education to be included in the curriculum.

It is clear that an important area of health education which needs consideration is these so-called "adult" activities.

Topics such as drinking and sexual relationships need care in presentation to prevent allegations of encouraging experimentation in such activities, and yet it must be informative for the pupils – a very difficult path for teachers to tread. These are only some of the main findings and possible implications, and before I discuss how the information provided by the questionnaire is likely to be used, I would like to outline some interesting findings from some follow-up work.

Some further analyses

Having discussed the results of the questionnaire with a colleague,¹ it was felt that some research into correlations that might be found between certain data could provide further information. Again, the Schools Health Education Unit processed the data and returned the results, for which I am very grateful.

One finding suggested that the frequency of cleaning teeth correlated with having fewer fillings. This might be expected, but it is useful to have evidence to back up such assumptions. The results also show that there is a high correlation between smoking and confidence with friends of both sexes. This relationship between smoking and confidence with other people is interesting and further research might reveal more about the nature of this link.

Briefly, other correlations suggest that boy smokers are less likely to save and more likely to drink alcohol. Also, according to these results, boy smokers are more likely to have partners (girlfriends), which again brings our focus back on to social behaviour and health. Girl smokers tend to be less likely to watch television, which prompts the question – where do they smoke? These correlations provide interesting information about this particular group of pupils, and indicate that certain health-related behaviours are possibly associated with the social behaviours of these young people.

Using the results

The amount of information about the pupils and their health behaviour and

A HEALTH-RELATED BEHAVIOUR INVESTIGATION

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	Yes	No
Boys	70	30
Girls	23	77

"Do you regularly ride a bicycle?"

	None	Up to 1 ^h	Up to 2 ^h	Up to 3 ^h	Up to 4 ^h	Up to 5 ^h	Up to 6 ^h
Boys	7	22	14	10	20	13	14
Girls	9	21	17	21	17	6	8

"How much television did you watch last night?"

	None	Up to 1 ^h	Up to 2 ^h	Up to 3 ^h
Boys	78	17	4	1
Girls	60	38	2	0

"How much homework did you do last night?"

	Some-times	Most days	Every day
Boys	66	19	16
Girls	43	15	43

"Do you work around the house?"

	Baby-sitting	Shop	Manual	Paper round	Hotel/cafe	Farm/garden	Other
Boys	8	15	6	60	6	4	2
Girls	10	26	10	37	16	0	0

"If you work for money, describe the work."

	Once	2 or 3 times	4 or 5 times	6 or 7 times
Boys	32	38	22	8
Girls	9	57	19	15

"Last week, how many times did you have a bath or a shower?"

	Not at all	Once	Twice	3 times	4 times	More than 4 times
Boys	1	30	33	14	14	8
Girls	0	6	23	26	32	12

"Last week, how many times did you wash your hair with shampoo?"

	Not at all	Once	Twice	More than twice
Boys	9	42	45	4
Girls	2	28	57	13

"How many times did you clean your teeth yesterday?"

	Never started	Given up	Like to stop	Don't want to stop
Boys	52	23	13	12
Girls	28	28	21	23

"As a smoker, which label describes you best?"

	Very uneasy	A little uneasy	At ease
Boys	9	54	37
Girls	6	48	46

"How do you feel when meeting members of the opposite sex?"

	Yes	No
Boys	31	69
Girls	45	55

"Have you a regular girlfriend or boyfriend?"

	Not in 6 months	Within 6 months	Within 1 month	Within 2 weeks	Within 1 week
Boys	25	24	18	13	20
Girls	6	13	15	15	51

"When did you last go to a disco or dance?"

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Boys	33	35	17	4	5	2	0	4
Girls	36	38	11	2	9	2	0	2

"On how many days during the past week did you have at least one alcoholic drink?"

Summary tables, giving the 4th-year boys' and girls' responses to selected questions in the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire. The figures are expressed as percentages: 86 boys and 47 girls took part.

attitudes was considerable and has obviously provided a better understanding of their needs and experiences. This knowledge is not only available to help with the planning of a health curriculum; it is also a powerful justification for the inclusion of certain topics to back up policy decisions. For instance, the results support the inclusion of alcohol education in the secondary-school curriculum, and the evidence provided from the questionnaire suggests that the fourth year is not too early for it to be introduced.

So the questionnaire helps teachers to decide what needs to be included in a health-education programme, as well as the correct timing. The information is obviously useful for curriculum planning in other subjects, such as sport and home economics.

The pupils will benefit from such research in the long term because the health education provision can then be tailored to their particular needs; in the short term the results of the questionnaire can be employed to stimulate interest by using them as a focal point for discussion. The pupils seem to enjoy seeing the results, (naturally, since they are about themselves) and a colleague who teaches mathematics is going to take advantage of this by using the computer printout in his lessons.

Employing this questionnaire was, therefore, a most beneficial exercise. Moreover, the pupils enjoyed participating in this research and will benefit from the results in the future.

I would like to extend my thanks to Andrew Hammett for his thoughts and suggestions.