

Curriculum planning in primary schools - 3

Curriculum priorities: some views on alcohol, glue-sniffing, and pollution

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The *Just A Tick* materials had received extensive field trials before being adopted as one of the data-gathering instruments in the national Primary Survey. However, the completion of a total of 30,000 questionnaires by teachers, parents, and children has vastly increased the status of the document and the scope of the data. This article concentrates on the results from 13 schools in just one LEA in the survey, and studies the responses to three of the 43 topics in the check-list.

The purpose of this article is to give the reader a 'preview' of the kind of results likely to be generated by the use of *Just A Tick*. It should be remembered that the *Just A Tick* topics questionnaire pack has been designed as a domestic enquiry instrument for use by individual schools wishing to review their curriculum content, whether independently or as a member of a group co-ordinated by an HEO or Education Adviser. Its use in the national Primary Schools Project parallels, on a larger scale, its use by a single school, and the analyses conducted below are similar to the ones that might be presented at a staff meeting.

It may be helpful, first of all, to clarify the content of the *Just A Tick* pack. It includes the following items:

1. An introductory document explaining the scope and purpose of the enquiry instrument.

2. A set of master questionnaires from which individual copies may be taken. These consist of the following:
 - (a) For *teachers* (separate questionnaires for infant/first (I/F) and junior/middle (J/M) schools).
 - (b) For *parents* (separate questionnaires for those with I/F or J/M children).
 - (c) For *children* - a single questionnaire is suitable for the age range 7-13.
3. A sample letter to be sent to parents, explaining what the enquiry is all about.
4. A guide to teachers, explaining how to supervise the children's questionnaire in the classroom.
5. A list of prompts for the teacher to use when going down the list of topics with the children.

After the completed questionnaires have been returned to the HEC Schools

Table 1. The 'Just A Tick' results for 38 infant/first and 62 junior/middle teachers. (Percentages)

Topic	Should include		Useful if time		Undecided		Unimportant		Outside School		Does harm	
	I/F	J/M	I/F	J/M	I/F	J/M	I/F	J/M	I/F	J/M	I/F	J/M
Drinking alcohol	0	11	5	26	0	14	84	45	3	3	8	0
Glue-sniffing	0	25	3	20	0	13	76	30	8	5	14	8
Pollution	29	63	34	29	3	3	29	5	5	0	0	0

Health Education Unit for processing, a computer-generated printout, in which tables display the responses to each topic in the list, is sent back to the school. The tables presented in this article were derived from the same kind of tables as those a school can expect to receive, and they give examples of teachers', parents', and children's responses to just three of the topics: No. 12 (*Drinking alcohol*), No. 13 (*Glue-sniffing*), and No. 42 (*Pollution*).

The teachers' responses

Table 1 summarises the responses from 38 teachers in I/F schools and 62 teachers in J/M schools. Altogether, 13 different schools were surveyed in this LEA by the national HEC Primary Schools Project. Elsewhere in this article the schools are identified by numbers, but here only the combined results are shown. Their views are highly significant, since we have a very large percentage of the ultimate curriculum 'deciders'.

The teachers' questionnaire allows six different responses to each of the 43 topics on the list. They have to indicate the topic's *Importance for inclusion in the school curriculum for infant/first [or junior/middle] children*, and the responses are chosen from

Should be included	} YES
Useful if time available	
Undecided	} NO
Not important in this age group	
Should be covered outside school	
Does more harm than good	

Drinking alcohol Only 5% of the I/F teachers considered that this was a

'useful' topic; 84% considered it 'unimportant', and 8% thought it would be 'harmful'. Among the J/M teachers, a total of 37% were positive for its inclusion, but 45% considered it unimportant for the 8-12 age group; could the 14% of 'undecided' staff be finding it difficult to reconcile the needs of 8-year-olds and 12-year-olds in a single answer?

In *Education and Health*, September 1985, the chart on page 79 shows that fewer than 20% of middle and secondary schools in a West Sussex survey considered that 'alcohol' education was in the curriculum for 11- and 12-year-olds. This is rather smaller than the percentage of teachers responding positively in the LEA represented in this part of the national study.

Glue-sniffing Some readers may be surprised that the 'harmful' group among the J/M teachers amounts to only 8%. In fact, 45% of this sample responded positively to the inclusion of 'glue-sniffing' in the curriculum, although this proportion is smaller than the 68% of parents in favour of its inclusion (see below). Could this mean that teachers of this age range see glue-sniffing as a more serious threat than alcohol? Fully 25% of the J/M teachers felt that solvent abuse 'should' be included in the curriculum.

Pollution The 63% of I/F teachers and the 92% of J/M teachers responding positively to the inclusion of this topic will probably come as no surprise, in view of its frequent appearance in classroom projects!

The parents' responses

To simplify Tables 2 and 3, the responses have been condensed into the categories

Table 2. The 'Just A Tick' results for 687 parents of children in 9 different infant/first schools. (Percentages)

School	Drinking alcohol			Glue-sniffing			Pollution			No. of families
	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No	
1	16	3	81	22	6	72	55	1	44	98
2	15	5	80	26	5	69	44	5	51	170
4	8	15	77	15	23	62	46	15	39	13
5	28	7	65	42	4	54	49	10	41	71
7	12	1	87	26	5	69	57	6	37	139
9	36	8	56	40	0	60	68	8	24	25
10	16	3	81	22	3	75	59	12	29	32
11	35	1	64	37	4	59	44	9	47	75
13	39	2	59	50	4	46	52	7	41	56
All schools	21	4	75	31	5	64	51	6	43	679

Table 3. The 'Just A Tick' results for 1,130 parents of children in 10 different junior/middle schools. (Percentages)

School	Drinking alcohol			Glue-sniffing			Pollution			No. of families
	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No	
1	46	6	48	63	7	30	80	2	18	115
3	44	3	53	65	8	27	74	5	21	301
4	38	12	50	62	12	26	70	9	21	23
6	55	6	39	77	3	20	73	10	17	94
8	50	6	44	70	5	25	76	4	20	200
9	46	5	49	57	10	33	83	5	12	41
10	39	6	55	64	3	33	77	13	10	31
11	58	0	32	78	2	20	67	9	24	78
12	53	5	42	72	7	21	72	8	20	115
13	50	4	46	62	5	33	66	8	26	108
All schools	50	4	45	68	6	26	74	6	20	1106

Yes, Unsure, and No, although on the questionnaire they have the same choice of answers as the teachers. The schools are identified by numbers; schools 1, 4, 9, 10, 11, and 13 contain both I/F and J/M age ranges.

There are 1,817 families represented in these tables, amounting to 69.7% of all the families associated with the 13 schools. This very high return underlines the tremendous potential of *Just A Tick* in fostering links between a school and the community it serves. All research projects have to allow, in their planning, for that problematical hazard known as 'unanticipated outcomes'; although it

was always an aim of *Just A Tick* to seek parental views, we had not anticipated the evident eagerness with which parents would respond, and the use to which this enthusiasm could be put by Heads and survey organisers. Rates of return of 80-90% are common, and at least one school has achieved a 100% response.¹ This high level of involvement is not confined to the traditionally articulate middle-class families; the organiser of one survey, within a London borough with a history of social unrest, found the reaction overwhelming, if not a little frightening!

An influential publication, the Court Report², observed that *there is over-*

whelming evidence that measures that do not involve parents achieve only short-term gains. In its declared aim of fostering informed curriculum planning, *Just A Tick* can be seen clearly to support this view.

Drinking alcohol Of the I/F parents, 75% considered this an unsuitable topic; this percentage fell to 45% for the J/M parents, of whom exactly 50% felt that it should be included in the curriculum, compared with 21% of the I/F parents. Looking at the individual I/F schools, only 12% in school 7 were in favour of its inclusion, but 39% in school 13 were positive. The range of positive responses from J/M parents is from 38% (school 4, but a rather small sample) up to 68% (school 11). It is interesting to observe that the level of support for the inclusion of this topic is low in both the I/F and J/M age ranges of school 4, and high in both age-ranges of school 11. This suggests that we are looking at two different communities with different priorities for 'health' issues.

Glue-sniffing Interestingly, more parents in both types of school favoured work on this topic than on alcohol – 31% for I/F schools, and as many as 68% for J/M schools, compared with 21% and 50% respectively for alcohol. (It is worth noting that the combined teachers' results are noticeably different!) This could reflect a common feeling of helplessness on the part of parents to deal with a drug habit of which they have little or no personal experience. 'Glue-sniffing' as a secondary-school topic has attracted widespread discussion, but it may come as a surprise to find so high a percentage of parents in the 8-12 age range in favour of its inclusion. If the percentage of schools in West Sussex including *Solvent abuse* as a curriculum topic is studied (*Education and Health*, September 1985, page 77), it is found that about 12% of primary schools in the survey included this topic at 10+.

Having studied the mean results, however, variations between the communities will be noticed. As many as 50% of the families attached to the I/F end of school

13 were in favour of the topic being included, whereas in school 10 75% thought that it should not be included. Again, we may be looking at values and concerns peculiar to these different localities. The variations between the J/M schools are less noticeable, and in all cases more than half the families were approving of the topic.

Pollution The I/F parents returned a rather lukewarm response to this topic, an average of 43% not being in favour of its inclusion; in school 2, as many as 51% thought it inappropriate. (This percentage of negative responses fell to 20%, on average, in the J/M group.) Is this an unexpected result for what seems to be one of the least controversial topics in the list – pollution, and the embracing topic 'conservation', loom large as a project area for all primary age groups? Does the range in positive responses, from 44% in school 2 and 11 to 68% in school 9 (I/F) and from 66% in school 13 to 83% in school 9 (J/M) reflect local circumstances? It will be noted that school 9 came 'top' in both age ranges.

The children's responses

These comments refer to the results from a total of 746 children's responses from the 10 J/M schools in the sample. They were all in the 9-11 age range, and the two year groups are shown separately in Tables 4 and 5.

The questions asked about each topic are different from those offered to teachers and parents. The children are asked *How interested would you be in these topics?*, and they may signal *Very interested, Quite interested, Not sure, or No!* In addition, the supervising teacher gives them a prompt to strengthen their concept of what the topic is about. These prompts, for the three topics under discussion, are:

Drinking alcohol *This would be about what alcohol does to the body and how it makes people behave.*

Glue-sniffing *This would be about how glue-sniffing affects your body, why people start, and how to stop people sniffing glue in the first place.*

Pollution This would be about how waste materials can spoil places we enjoy: for example, oil on beaches, sewage in rivers, factory smoke in the air.

The comment has been made that similar prompts should be included with the teachers' and the parents' questionnaires. However, it may also be argued that clarification of topic labels is part of the process of topic-selection, and that each school will have its own conception of what the label means in itself and of what it means in curriculum terms.

Drinking alcohol. In both year groups, the boys were more positive than the girls. However, the 10+ boys (67% positive) were not much more interested than the 64% of 9+ boys, whereas the girls indicating at least some interest rose from 40% to 56%. A group of 40% of girls at 9+ signalling 'No!' stands out. It should be emphasised, as it always must be when different age groups are being compared in a study of this kind, that we cannot assume that the group of 9+ children will necessarily make choices similar to those shown by the 10+ group when they are a year older; this is not a longitudinal study, where the same cohort is re-examined after an interval of time, but is a 'snapshot' of different year groups compared almost simultaneously.

Glue-sniffing Slightly more than half the children showed at least some interest in this topic; there was a slight increase of

interest in the older children, but overall the interest level was lower than for 'Alcohol' and 'Pollution'. With other young children in this age range, post-test interviews have shown that they were, in some cases, interpreting the 'interest' signal in a special way, giving a negative response to a topic considered naughty or wrong.

Pollution This proved the most widely-favoured of the three topics studied here. In the 9+ group, 64% of the boys and 57% of the girls were positive, and in the 10+ group the figures were 67% and 65% respectively. The number registering a 'No!' vote is the smallest of the three topics.

The three groups compared

It is important to recognise that the answers offered by the children are not the same as those for the adults. They signal their *interest*, whereas the adults indicate the *importance* they attach to the topic. If it is considered acceptable to short-circuit this conceptual difficulty by simplifying the sets of responses into *Yes*, *Not sure*, and *No*, then a set of approximately comparable values for the J/M component of all three groups may be obtained (Table 6).

This summary table shows some interesting differences in choices, and encapsulates the possible problems facing a school considering the introduction of a new declared curriculum topic, or seeking to

Table 4. The 'Just A Tick' results for 352 children aged 9-10. (Percentages)

Topic	Very interested		Quite interested		Not sure		No!	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Drinking alcohol	42	23	22	17	17	20	19	40
Glue-sniffing	36	30	20	18	13	19	31	33
Pollution	44	34	20	23	21	29	16	14

Table 5. The 'Just A Tick' results for 394 children aged 10-11. (Percentages)

Topic	Very interested		Quite interested		Not sure		No!	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Drinking alcohol	39	29	28	27	12	23	22	21
Glue-sniffing	36	39	15	25	19	17	30	20
Pollution	44	40	23	25	19	21	15	14

Table 6. The levels of interest or importance attached to the three selected 'Just A Tick'

Respondents	Drinking alcohol			Glue-sniffing			Pollution		
	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No
Teachers (J/M)	37	14	49	45	13	42	92	3	5
Parents (J/M)	50	5	45	68	6	26	74	6	20
Children (9-11)	58	17	25	55	17	28	64	22	15

topics by 62 teachers and 1,130 parents attached to 10 junior/middle schools, and 746 children in the age range 9-11. (Percentages)

change emphases or timing within an existing curriculum topic, if it happens to be one arousing conflicting feelings in staff, parents, and pupils.

Alcohol The children's 'Yes' response was higher than the 'Yes' response from the adults. The teachers were the least ready to consider it an appropriate curriculum topic; the parents were equally divided between considering it suitable and unsuitable. Thus, the 'average' school in this regional sample would be registering an appreciable difference in views.

Glue-sniffing In all cases, the 'Yes' vote exceeded the 'No': by only a small amount for the teachers, but substantially so for the parents. This time, the children came between the adult groups in their rating of interest in the topic. The parents seemed to be registering considerable concern about this topic; perhaps the teachers had reservations about their ability to handle it?

Pollution The massive 94% 'Yes' from teachers does, we suggest, reflect its suitability for topic work! Interestingly, the children were the least positive of the three groups, although only 15% registered a negative interest. The parents came midway, but with a higher negative vote than the other groups.

Summary

It is not hard to imagine the impact that such a set of tables, for each of the 43 topics in the *Just A Tick* list, could have in the staff-room, and the debate that their study would promote. Each set will reflect, in some detail, the attitudes within the three interlocking communities which go to make up a school; and in the follow-up work these differences may be explored and either resolved or reconciled. It is our hope that individual schools, and also groups of schools, will be encouraged by this report to make use of the *Just A Tick* questionnaire enquiry pack. It is our firm intention to offer a data-processing service, together with full support for those needing help with interpretation of the data. The primary *Just A Tick* materials are available from the HEC Schools Health Education Unit at a cost of £2.00; a version suitable for use in secondary schools has also been trialled, and will soon be ready for distribution.

References

1. Lane, Bernard, A head teacher's view. *Education and Health* 1983, 1, 5, 88.
2. *Fit for the Future* (The Court Report). HMSO, 1976, p. 24.

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