

Some first findings from the Primary Topics survey

Teresa Code & Karyn Redman

HEC Schools Health Education Unit

University of Exeter

Later this year, the results from a questionnaire survey of almost 30,000 respondents in 11 different regions of the British Isles will be published. They will reveal the attitude of pupils, their parents, and related professionals to the inclusion of different 'health related' topics in the curriculum. The questionnaire enquiry method, known as *Just A Tick*, has already been used by schools to support curriculum development and to promote debate between school staff and members of the community they serve.

This article summarises just a few of the results from the use of the *Just A Tick* questionnaire enquiry instrument in the national Primary Curriculum survey. The aim of this project, under the direction of Trefor Williams (University of Southampton), is to produce a framework for a Health Education curriculum in infant and primary schools. An important component of the project is to discover the views of pupils, parents, teachers, and Health Care professionals with respect to the inclusion of different topics. The total numbers in the different groups (in 11 different regions in the British Isles) completing the Questionnaire were as follows:

Pupils	12,141
Parents	15,927
Teachers	1,054
Health Care professionals	261

Adult respondents completing the Questionnaire were asked to consider a range of topics and to state the *importance* they attached to including each one in the school curriculum. The topics were divided into two lists, with 22 on the

first page (List A) and 21 on the second (List B). The items in List A are shown in Table 1, while List B, as it appears in the Questionnaire, is reproduced on the cover. For each list, the *pupils* in selected Junior/Middle schools (age range 7-11 years) were asked to indicate how *interesting* they thought they would find each of these topics. At the bottom of each page *all* groups were also asked *Which do you consider to be the 3 most important topics from the list above?*

The '3 most important' topics

Some results from the 22 topics in List A are presented here, and Table 1 displays the percentage of respondents in all adult and pupil groups who placed each topic in the '3 most important' category. There are two sets of adult responses (parents, teachers, and Health Care professionals) representing both Infant/First and Junior/Middle age ranges, but pupils' responses come only from Junior/Middle schools, since the *Just A Tick* questionnaire was not designed for use by pupils under 7 years of age.

	ADULTS						PUPILS											
	Infant/First			Junior/Middle			Boys						Girls					
	Par	Tch	HCP	Par	Tch	HCP	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11
1. How my body works	17	15	22	28	44	37	29	24	21	18	24	24	17	17	18			
2. Staying well	9	17	15	9	22	21	13	12	13	14	14	12	13	15				
3. Immunisation (injections and drops)	3	1	4	4	0	4	4	3	2	3	5	3	3	4				
4. Illness and recovery	1	0	2	1	0	1	5	4	6	6	4	4	4	5				
5. Talking with doctors, nurses, dentists	13	20	13	7	5	8	6	4	4	3	5	7	4	3				
6. Care of hair, teeth, skin	22	32	28	13	18	17	16	12	14	12	20	22	18	18				
7. Care of eyes	3	2	0	2	2	0	22	22	19	16	19	17	14	8				
8. Care of feet	1	0	2	0	1	1	7	5	4	3	5	5	2	2				
9. How a baby is made (human reproduction)	7	0	2	23	15	16	8	12	17	23	21	21	29	37				
10. Menstruation (periods)	1	0	0	12	6	21	3	6	7	8	6	10	24	36				
11. Food and health	13	31	4	14	29	25	16	16	18	17	16	17	14	14				
12. Drinking alcohol	2	1	1	6	1	8	9	13	11	11	7	7	6	5				
13. Gluesniffing	11	0	3	30	6	11	13	15	16	16	14	11	13	13				
14. Smoking	7	1	4	17	8	28	18	20	19	19	20	19	22	14				
15. Physical fitness	8	7	1	13	9	6	8	10	17	23	6	8	9	11				
16. Understanding the needs of handicapped people	6	7	2	7	7	3	10	11	9	9	11	13	13	14				
17. Understanding the needs of old people	3	2	1	4	4	1	9	10	9	9	11	13	11	10				
18. Health and Social Services	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	2				
19. Safety at home	39	44	50	18	32	19	15	14	15	15	14	19	16	13				
20. Safety in traffic	75	80	70	45	46	36	18	19	14	12	13	14	10	7				
21. Water safety	39	25	34	20	20	14	28	27	24	23	19	21	18	14				
22. First Aid	5	0	0	12	5	3	25	30	31	31	28	28	29	31				
Sample sizes	5562	415	222	10208	639	236	821	551	1744	1831	551	1434	1628	1737				

Table 1. The percentage of all adult and pupil groups who included each of the 22 topics in List A among the '3 most important' in the list. (Par = parents, Tch = teachers, HCP = Health Care professionals.) Bold figures denote the three highest-scoring topics.

When looking at Table 1 it is important to remember that a low percentage figure does *not* necessarily mean that the topic is perceived as 'unimportant'. It may well mean only that in the view of many respondents there are at least three topics that are even more important.

Arising from this, it will be noticed that the lowest figures are found in the results from the adults' surveys, where there are many values of 0, 1, and 2. Such low values are not found on the right-hand side of the table, among the pupils' responses, indicating a more even spread of selections for the '3 most important' topics.

This suggests that the adult view is much clearer, with better agreement on the relative importance of health topics. It is not surprising that 7-11 year old children will have little experience and information through which to discriminate between some of the 22 topics in List A.

Another point is that for the pupils the selection of the '3 most important' topics follows the different concept of having to consider each topic by their *interest* in it, whereas the adults have already been considering the topics' importance in the first part of the task, albeit with respect to inclusion in the school curriculum.

The following points refer to just four of the 22 topics shown in Table 1. More extensive analyses will appear in our forthcoming monograph.

Topic 1: How my body works This rates relatively high scores from pupils of all ages, which match the adult responses in the Junior/Middle age range. A smaller percentage of adults in the Infant/First age range include this topic in the 'top 3', but it is still among the highest-scoring topics.

Topic 9: Human reproduction The responses to this topic follow a similar pattern to those for Topic 1 (*How my body works*), but more girls than boys consider it to be very important, always placing it in the top three topics in List A. Its perceived importance seems to increase with the age of the pupils.

Topic 20: Safety in traffic A high percentage of all adult groups have rated this topic as highly important and indeed it is the No.1 topic on the list for all except the Junior/Middle Health Care professionals.

Interestingly, the percentage response figures for Infant/First curricula are much more concentrated on this topic than those for Junior/Middle curricula, suggesting much more unanimity of view amongst Infant/First adults in relation to this topic.

The percentage of pupils placing this topic in the 'top 3' is not so high as the percentage of adult groups. The boys are slightly more positive than the girls, and for both sexes the importance falls with increasing age.

Clearly there is a difference between the adults' and children's responses to this topic.

Topic 22: First Aid This is the only topic in List A which is selected so positively by both girls and boys in every Junior/Middle year group that it ranks among the first three for all ages. However, there is very little support from any adult group. Clearly the responses of the pupils are at variance with those of the adults.

The Health Care professionals' results

The Health Care professionals' questionnaire (shown on the cover) mirrors the questionnaires for the other adult groups (parents and teachers) as far as the topic list is concerned. Thus, they were asked to give their views on the 43 topics as to their importance for inclusion in the school curriculum in the same way that the parents and teachers were invited to do. They were also given the option of completing questionnaires appropriate for both the Infant/First and Junior/Middle age ranges, and most of them did so, as follows:

- 195 completed one questionnaire for each age range
- 64 completed single questionnaires (25 Infant/First, 39 Junior/Middle)

The questionnaires were completed by professionals from a wide health-care field, ranging from school nurses and GPs to Road Safety and Environmental Health Officers and Health Education Officers. In all, they could be subdivided into seven groups:

	Infant/ First	Junior/ Middle
1. General Practitioners	61	60
2. Senior Clinical/ Medical Officers	10	10
3. Dentists	37	39
4. Health Visitors	41	41
5. School Nurses	49	56
6. Road Safety/Environmental Health Officers	4	
7. Health Education Officers	15	15

When studying the results, it should be borne in mind that the sample sizes vary widely between the different professional groups. Two paediatricians also completed questionnaires for each age group, while nine respondents did not identify their professional status.

For the purposes of this analysis, only the first and most positive column of the questionnaire, *Should be included*, will be considered, but additional commentary on the other columns will be given in the project report.

Table 2 shows a grouping of the 22 topics in List A according to the percentage of all Health Care professionals including them in the *Should be included* column of the questionnaire. At first glance it can be seen that the topics in the Infant/First age group seem to be more weighted towards the lower end of the scale than the Junior/Middle topics. In fact, only nine of the 22 topics in the Infant/First list appear above the 50% level compared with 18 topics in the Junior/Middle list.

Comparing the Health Care professionals' evaluation of the 22 topics for the different age ranges, there is some agreement between what is appropriate for 5-7 year olds and 7-11 year olds, but there are also a large number of discrepancies, which deserve closer inspection. Only three topics suggest similar

perceived relevance for both age groups, and these are *Care of hair, teeth, skin, Water safety*, and *Talking with doctors, nurses, dentists*. However, some other topics are also in fairly close agreement – in particular 'safety' topics, the 'caring' for self, and *Food and health*. At the lower end of the scale, there seems to be agreement that *Health and Social Services* is not appropriate for either age group.

Among the topics with large differences in the perceived importance for the different age groups are *Menstruation* and *How a baby is made*, which are very low for Infant/First pupils and very high for Junior/Middle pupils. Another group of topics showing large differences are the 'self-abuse' topics such as *Drinking alcohol*, *Glue-sniffing*, and particularly *Smoking*, which have been chosen as more appropriate for Junior/Middle pupils.

Considering that the results reflect the views of Health Care professionals, it is worth noting that 'medical' topics such as *Illness and recovery*, *Immunisation*, and *Health and Social Services* are lower down the scale, especially for Infant/First pupils, where all three fall below the 30% level. Conversely, the topic *Care of hair, teeth, skin* is considered to be very important to include in the curriculum of both age groups.

A cautionary note

Attention has been drawn in previous articles to the importance of applying caution in the interpretation of this data. Despite extensive pilot work developing the content of the questionnaires, their vocabulary, their presentation on paper and their presentation in the classroom, as well as additional prompts to clarify the meaning of the topics for pupils and guidelines for head teachers and staff, LEA advisers, and parents, there is certain to be variation in responses attributable to at least two sources.

The first source of variation is the one sought, which is due to variations in people's feelings towards a topic – for example, 47% might indicate that a topic should be included in the curriculum, whereas 25% of the same sample indicate that it should be covered outside school,

with 28% indicating other alternatives.

The second source of variation is present in different degrees in responses to the different topics. In questionnaire design, a major objective is to create each question so that it is interpreted in the same way by every respondent. Every effort is made to work towards this ideal, but it would be foolish and potentially counter-productive to assume that this has been achieved in *Just A Tick*, or indeed in any questionnaire. When examining responses by pupils, teachers, parents, and Health Care professionals alongside each other, we need to bear

this in mind. We know from many discussions involving parents and teachers together that different points of view can be displayed which turn out to arise from different understanding of what some of the topics mean. The use of these results as an agenda for debate at meetings between staff and parents to explore and clarify their meaning is, therefore, strongly recommended. It should also be noted that, so far, the adult groups have not had access to the extra prompts used by teachers in the classroom to aid the pupils' understanding of what the topics are intended to mean.

	Infant/First age group (5-7 year olds)	Junior/Middle age group (7-11 year olds)
90%	Safety in traffic	
80%	* Water safety † Care of hair, teeth, skin Safety at home	Safety in traffic How my body works † Care of hair, teeth, skin * Water safety Menstruation (periods)
70%		Safety at home Food and health Smoking Human reproduction
60%	Food and health	Care of eyes Physical fitness Staying well Care of feet First Aid
50%	‡ Talking with doctors, nurses, dentists Care of eyes Care of feet How my body works	‡ Talking with doctors, nurses, dentists Glue-sniffing Immunisation Drinking alcohol
40%	Staying well Physical fitness	Understanding needs of handicapped
30%		Understanding needs of old people Illness and recovery
20%	Smoking Understanding needs of handicapped Physical fitness First Aid Immunisation	
10%	Illness and recovery Glue-sniffing Human reproduction	Health and Social Services
0%	Drinking alcohol Menstruation (periods) Health and Social Services	

Table 2. The percentage of Health Care professionals who considered each of the 22 topics in List A 'should be included' in the curriculum.