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Pulling out all the stops: Getting a high response rate with a questionnaire for parents

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The ESRC-funded Hampshire Research with Primary Schools (HARPS) project required an exceptionally high response rate for a questionnaire distributed to the parents of more than 2000 children attending primary schools in North Hampshire. Therefore a particularly rigorous approach was taken to its design, dissemination and collection. In the event the approach taken by the HARPS project achieved a higher than usual return rate of 84%, including an excellent response from parents with children attending low socio-economic schools. This paper reviews the strategies employed by the project in the hope that such an account will be helpful to other educational researchers wanting to achieve similarly high response rates. A key lesson from the HARPS experience is the value of close collaboration with schools but the paper also raises numerous other strategies could help to boost response rates.

Introduction

Achieving a high return rate is a persistent problem in educational research involving questionnaires. Fogelman (2002:106) suggests that due to increasing pressure on schools and teachers, a mere 60% response rate for a questionnaire is currently considered to be quite acceptable while Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000: 263) suggest that a typical response rate on first attempt would be 40%, with the potential to rise to 75% with subsequent follow up. Response rates are clearly partly to do with the inclination and ability of those being surveyed to respond irrespective of researchers actions but as Cohen and colleagues point about 'following up' might remind us, response rates can also be helped or hindered by the strategies employed by researchers. This means that even an apparently 'basic' research task like distributing a questionnaire will raise numerous issues for researchers since the specific approach employed can make a significant difference to the success or otherwise of a research project.

Although not all projects require a high response rate, this paper discusses the strategy we used for a project where a very high response rate was needed and a higher than usual response rate (84%) successfully attained, even though some of the concerns covered by the questionnaire were quite sensitive. The project was the ESRC funded study 'Primary school composition and student progress', RES-000-23-0784), more commonly know as the HARPS ('Hampshire Research with Primary Schools') project and the questionnaire was distributed to the parents of 2014 primary school children in North Hampshire.

An unusually methods-centred discussion for us, we are offering this paper at BERA because we feel that the HARPS experience provides a number of lessons about establishing support, sharing specialised knowledge and careful planning which would be helpful for researchers wanting to achieve high than usual response rates for other studies, especially where the target group are parents. A key feature of the strategy employed was the use of schools to distribute and collect in questionnaires. School staff were the research team's representatives and point of personal contact for the parents involved. Indeed although contact details for the research team were supplied, only a handful of parents actually made direct contact. Schools were also asked to do most of the legwork in raising the profile of the project amongst parents and encouraging them to co-operate in the questionnaire. It has been argued that due to increasing pressures on schools headteachers and other school staff often cannot spare the time needed to support research projects even when they are in support of them (Fogelman, 2002). Putting faith in schools as a third party has therefore become a risky business but in the case of the HARPS questionnaire, it was a faith well-invested and an approach that worked well in generating a high response rate. Other factors we think helped to make the difference included collaborating with LEA personnel and local headteacher organisations from the outset on all aspects of questionnaire design and distribution, minimising the possibility of offence in the way we asked questions, personalising the questionnaires for individual children/families, using the press to raise the profile of the study and using incentives to boost return rates.

We begin this paper by providing a brief background to the project and the concerns which were to be investigated through the questionnaire. We then chart the decisions made about the conception, design, distribution and collection of the questionnaire and conclude by reflecting on difficulties experienced throughout the exercise as well as insights gleaned from it.

Background to the HARPS project and the concerns of the questionnaire

The HARPS project is trying to estimate and better understand *compositional effects* at primary school level, i.e. the impact of factors such as; social economic status (SES), ethnicity, gender, prior achievement, special educational needs (SEN) and age composition of primary school intakes on student academic progress. For researchers it is intended to address a long-standing debate about the significance of compositional effects, test the reliability of some existing measures of compositional variables and point the way to the development of more refined methods for measuring compositional effects. For policy makers and practitioners the project is intended to highlight school effectiveness possibilities and constraints whilst also informing policy on the evaluation of school performance. The main research questions to be addressed by the study are;

- What effects do SES, gender, ethnicity, SEN and age composition variables have on student progress and are all students in the school subject to these effects?
- Which particular compositional variables are significant in influencing student progress?
- How do compositional effects 'work': is it through any or all of the following: peer group cultures, the influence of the nature of the intake on curriculum and pedagogy, the influence of the nature of the intake on school organisation and management?
- Is there a relationship between falling rolls and student progress? If so, how can it best be explained?

- How reliable is the FSM measure in assessing the impact of student composition on student progress?
- Are there school policies and practices that can especially help improve student progress in schools with particular kinds of intake characteristics?

The HARPS project started in October 2004 and is focussing on a cohort of children passing through Years 3 and 4 (Key Stage 2). It is a large and complex mixed methods study in which research is being undertaken at 3 levels. At one level the research design is involving quantitative analysis of LEA-provided data on all 306 full primary and junior schools in Hampshire. More detailed quantitative and qualitative data on student backgrounds and schools has been collected in a subsample of 46 schools in and around the Basingstoke and Deane area in North Hampshire. The third and most in-depth level of the HARPS project involves ethnographic qualitative research in 12 of these subsample schools, this phase of the project is beginning in September 2005.

The questionnaire discussed in this paper was the one used to collect detailed data on student backgrounds in the subsample of 46 schools in and around the Basingstoke and Deane area. The purpose of the questionnaire was to flesh out the social context of children within the subsample schools in a way that could provide a check on the less detailed and possibly quite inaccurate context data being used for the larger all-Hampshire cohort, such as the proportion of students on Free School Meals (FSM) and postcode data. However in order to be confident about the social context of each school, it was imperative to get a very high response rate from parents of the children in the year group under study. We now turn to how we went about getting a high response rate through forging links with the LEA and schools, careful development of the questionnaire, and a comprehensive strategy for distributing and collecting in the questionnaire.

Forging links

The choice to select Hampshire as the area in which to study compositional effects, rested mostly in the established links between research team member Professor Harvey Goldstein and the Hampshire LEA. Goldstein had acted as consultant to Hampshire LEA in the setting up of its system for assessing value-added (see Yang et al.,1999) This existing relationship paved the way for the LEA being enthusiastic about the HARPS study. Two preliminary meetings of the research team with the LEA senior management and representative headteachers in 2002 and 2003 were valuable to secure schools' support for the project and regular progress updates were provided to schools by the LEA. It also helped that schools in Hampshire have a strong tradition of supporting research and development. The LEA's commitment is reflected by Nigel Hill and Paula Guy from the LEA's Information and Research Unit becoming part of our research team, attending team meetings and playing an active part in decision-making. With their help the project title was changed to HARPS and the headteacher who leads the group of headteachers in the main local area or 'Patch' we are concerned with was approached to assist in the design phase of the questionnaire. During two meetings with this person and a small group of other volunteer heads, the research team was able to go through provisional questions and seek feedback as to their suitability. We also sought advice about how to best gain support for the project from other local heads and how to distribute the questionnaire.

The Patch heads suggested an initial launch for all local heads to raise the profile of the study and ask their help. This took place in a hotel venue recommended by the Patch heads and was

hosted by then County Education Officer, Andrew Seber, who explained the importance of the study from the LEA's point of view. His endorsement appeared well received by the head teachers who attended (about half of the 50 we wanted to involve in the project) and core team members were also able to introduce themselves and the study. The press was also invited and an article documenting the research appeared in the local paper. News of the project spread to those who hadn't attended and most headteachers were happy to be involved although a few were reluctant, usually explaining that they were too busy. Although correspondence was initiated with these schools to encourage participation, in the event 4 of the 50 schools targeted for the subsample refused to be involved. The research team had to respect this, leaving 46 schools in the study.

These 46 heads were then asked to update a lists of pupil names from the LEA which we could use for personalising each questionnaire to every child (see below). Shortly after sending this request, schools were contacted by phone to confirm participation and remind them to return the class list data. This sometimes required several calls but for most headteachers it was their first direct verbal correspondence with a member of the research team. Contacting heads individually in this way was extremely useful for providing reassurance or answering queries about the project, enthusing schools to take part and building an acquaintance with head teachers and the office staff who usually answered the phone. Essentially the project was beginning to establish a profile for itself at the individual school level. By the end of this task the majority of schools were supportive and enthusiastic and by half term most lists had been returned and preparation of the personalised questionnaires could begin. These were ready for delivery to schools in the first week of the summer term 2005.

Developing the questionnaire

Very careful thought was put into the questionnaire: into its questions, structure and layout. We began by trying to clarify the objectives of the questionnaire in order to evaluate what kinds of questions would need to be posed. (Peterson, 2000). The primary objective was to find out about the socio-economic context of Year 3 children in the selected schools and most questions related to this. However information was also sought on ethnicity, mobility, school choice and friendship groups.

Because the object of our enquiry was Year 3 children and their family background, the questions would all be concerned with issues of personal fact. Questions concerning personal fact have the potential to incur specific problems surrounding 3 areas; problems of definition, accuracy of response and honesty of response (Heather & Stone,1984:5). Recognition of this demands a meticulous choice of wording in order to minimise of the risks of problems in all three areas. The HARPS questionnaire went through several drafts and as much discussion was devoted to the wording of questions as it was to the choice of questions themselves. The English language is rich and complex and even the most banal word can be open to multiple interpretations (Payne, 1951). While it would be impossible to claim the perfect wording for any question, there were *more* or *less* appropriate questions with regards to the study group at hand. The HARPS study group contained the parents or guardians of every child and would be mostly aged between 20 and 50, yet this is about as much as could be safely assumed about the group.

It has been argued that when the target audience is the general population, language should be no more technical than that used mid-secondary school (Peterson, 2000) and should not

employ multi-syllable words (Cox, 1996). On the other hand it is important not to patronise highly literate readers either. Regarding issues of definition, Peterson (2000) identifies two levels of understanding which the researcher must consider to assure responder clarity; 'absolute' and 'relative'. 'Absolute' understanding is when respondents grasp the literal meaning of the question. If a respondent does *not* understand what a question is asking, they will not provide a response. A failure to grasp the 'absolute' meaning of a question may occur if it is phrased in a complicated way or if the words used are too complex. This highlights the importance of wording questions for less literate respondents or those for whom English is an additional language. 'Relative' understanding is when the responder's interpretation of the question is the same as the researcher's. If a respondent does not have 'relative' understanding, he/she misunderstands what the researcher is asking in the question. In such instances the respondent will give a response that does not provide the information that the researcher intends from the question.

Assuming the respondent does interpret the research questions correctly, this does not *per se* infer that an accurate response will be given. On the contrary an inaccurate response may be given for either deliberate or accidental reasons. (Heather and Stone, 1984:5) Accidental inaccuracy of response occurs when a participant mis-remembers or estimates (inaccurately) their reply to a question. Fortunately, all the questions contained within the HARPS questionnaire referred to significant information which parents were unlikely to forget, or estimate, therefore the problem of response inaccuracy was unlikely. However, there was the concern that respondents might report inaccurate data *deliberately* should they feel offended and intruded upon by questions asked of them. For this reason it was the questions of a possibly sensitive nature which were particularly important to phrase as delicately as possible. The wording of these questions was a matter of much debate within the group and is discussed shortly.

For the purposes of the HARPS questionnaire, the issue of 'relative understanding' was not of undue concern, because questions offered fairly narrow interpretations. Nevertheless, closed questions were used offering a choice of multiple responses, this being a useful way to guide a respondent's interpretation of the question (Heather & Stone,1984). However, the choice to use closed questions with multiple answers is not without its own cautionary considerations. It has been suggested that limiting a respondent's choices for answering questions may be potentially biasing if certain responses have been omitted or if options are not fairly balanced (Oppenheim, 1992; Cohen et al., 2000), making it essential to offer a full and balanced number of option responses for each question. To ensure that option choices were necessarily balanced and exhaustive, the research team sought feedback on provisional option choices by piloting the questionnaire.

Piloting

No matter how experienced a researcher is in questionnaire design, it is rarely possible to create a first draft which needs no further amendment (Cox,1996). Therefore pre-testing is essential and several researchers have observed that piloting a questionnaire is the most effective means of pre-testing in order to increase reliability, validity, and practicability (Oppenheim, 1992; Morrison, 1993, Wilson & McClean, 1994). The HARPS team were fortunate enough to negotiate piloting of the questionnaire amongst the parents of Year 3 children at a Winchester primary school. This provided a pre-test sample that was similar to the study sample (Morrisson,1993), although because of the catchment of the school it was skewed towards higher SES parents. Parents were asked to fill out the questionnaire and also

an attached form asking for their comments on the questions and structure. In total 60 of 90 questionnaires were returned to the research team from the pilot school. This exercise proved invaluable in providing an exhaustive list of options for multiple-choice questions as well as highlighting formats, words and phrasing which parents would probably find sensitive or confusing. The feedback from the pilot enabled the questionnaire to be amended in order to take its final form.

Sensitive questions

Three sensitive areas highlighted by the pilot were ownership of books, employment and ethnicity. We wanted to ask a question about book ownership as previous research has suggested levels of book ownership is a good indicator of SES (Nash:1992, Nash:1993). However we realised that this question could also be sensitive due to the assumptions respondents would feel were being made regarding their intelligence or 'good parenting'. Half the team felt that a multiple option closed question should be used, thinking it unlikely that respondents would individually count all their books, after all it was only necessary to generate an approximate value. However, after piloting the questionnaire it emerged that using a multiple option closed question posed problems to do with the scale to be used. While it was important for respondents to record honestly the approximate number of books in their household, we were concerned that those with few books might be swayed to report more books than they owned because they assumed that the middle of the scale indicated a 'normal' figure (Payne,1951). For instance, a parent may not report owning 50 books when they see that the scale exceeds 500. On the other hand respondents with a large number of books might be offended if a very low scale was used with a maximum option of 'over 50 books'. Such respondents may in the extreme feel that this figure compromises the quality of the research findings and feel reluctant to continue (in the pilot we had a parent say 'Over 500 books? – we have over 5000!'). The logical alternative was to use an open ended question structure however we were concerned that using an open question would discourage parents from answering the question at all, as it would imply that they would have to count all their books. In the event we decided to use an open question qualified with an instruction to estimate the number of books in the home. Hence the final wording was; "About how many books are there in your home? Please include all kinds of books." In the event this question did reveal diverse patterns of book ownership without leading or patronising parents in a way a closed question may have done.

A second area of concern were questions about employment. This is renowned for being a sensitive topic and employment related questions incur a non-response as much as twice as frequently as other demographic questions (Peterson, 2000). This may be because respondents who are unemployed or who have work roles generally accorded low public status feel they are being judged by the kind of work they do and therefore fail to supply employment information. Responding to this problem, we took care to use a job categorisation scale that inferred no form of hierarchy. This meant changing the ONS census format (which places professional and managerial roles on the top of the scale and retail and plant and machine operative roles at the bottom) to a random ranking to indicate that the job scale was arbitrary. In asking the nature of respondents work, we considered, following the 'simple is best' rule, that we should ask something along the lines of "What job do you have?". However, Bradburn & Sudman (1981) found that for sensitive questions, a longer, more delicately phrased wording incited greater and more accurate response, than shorter more direct questions. Bearing this in mind, the team agreed that a 'softer' phraseology be used for this question, employing more gentle wording (see question 15 below). The question

doesn't assume respondents are in paid work, it acknowledges there are forms of unpaid work, it acknowledges that the period of employment or unemployment may be temporary and in the last question (see question 16) allows respondents not currently in work to describe the work they and their partner did previously;

For the next few questions about work, please fill in for you and your spouse/ partner (if applicable).

14. Are you and your partner in paid work at the moment?

15.If you or your partner are in paid work at the moment, please tick the box(es) below that describes the kind of work that you do.

16. We are also interested in the work you did prior to your current job or period out of paid work. Using the table above, please enter the job category number for you or your partner's previous job? You ___ Partner ___

The third sensitive area was ethnicity. Here we decided to go with the format recommended by the Council for Racial Equality which provides a 'mixed' category and also a catch-all 'any other background' (see below). We did contemplate a potentially less offensive and more interesting open question which asked people to describe their ethnicity (one of us had done this previously in New Zealand, see Lauder et al., 1999) however the CRE approach allows better comparison with other datasets.

23. Which of the categories below best describe your ethnic background? Choose **ONE** section from A to E, then tick the appropriate box to indicate your background

A. White

British

☐ English
☐ Scottish
☐ Welsh
☐ Other, please write in _____

☐ Irish
☐ Any other White background, please write in _____

B. Mixed

☐ White and Black Caribbean
☐ White and Black African
☐ White and Asian
☐ Any other Mixed background, please write in _____

C. Asian, Asian British, Asian English, Asian Scottish, or Asian Welsh

☐ Indian
☐ Pakistani
☐ Bangladeshi

☐ Any other Asian background, please write in _____

D. Black, Black British, Black English, Black Scottish, or Black Welsh

☐ Caribbean
☐ African
☐ Any other Black background, please write in _____

E. Chinese, Chinese British, Chinese English, Chinese Scottish, Chinese Welsh, or Other ethnic group

☐ Chinese
☐ Any other background, please write in _____

Questionnaire format and presentation

Layout and length

Just as important as the questions themselves, is the way they appear on the questionnaire. A questionnaire should look attractive, be easy to answer and appear spacious and interesting (Cohen et al., 2000). These considerations should encourage a potential respondent to complete the survey by conveying a sense of professionalism regarding the study as well as ease of completion. Narayan and Krosnick (1996) suggest that questionnaire structure is of particular importance to those educated only up to high school level as these are the group most likely to be put off a complex structure or complicated instructions. Whether or not this is the case, the research team held that simplicity and clarity of presentation should be to the fore when designing the questionnaire.

A major consideration was the length of the questionnaire. This decision was not an easy one to make as respondent's perception of the time taken to fill out a questionnaire is not directly proportional to the amount of space questions occupy. Heather & Stone (1984) observe the frequent researcher misperception that cramming questions into a small page will make the questionnaire appear shorter. They observe this often has the reverse effect, rather it is not the "physical length of the questionnaire which is important but the length of time required to complete it" (p. 28). Bearing this in mind, the questionnaire was spread so as to take up six A4 sides, printed on three double-sided pieces of paper attached by a staple. Ease of response was ensured by aligning tick boxes evenly, this was especially important for questions with a large number of responses (Bell, 2002). So as to avoid boredom a variety of formats were used for separate questions (Heather & Stone,1984).

Professional endorsement

Youngman (1978) observes that it is important to draw respondent's attention to official permission which has been sought for a questionnaire. He notes that this is especially vital when the respondents are parents; "Certainly where parents are involved, they are unlikely to co-operate fully in a survey which does not have the blessing of the school head or authority" (p.29). We believed that the full support of the Local Education Authority as well as of the school was crucial to the success of the HARPS questionnaire. Furthermore, the HARPS affiliation with prestigious institutions was also useful for indicating the significance of the study. Therefore, the HARPS logo was designed professionally and placed on each page of the questionnaire, along with the logos of the organisations involved; Hampshire LEA, the University of Bath, the Institute of Education, and the Economic and Social Research Council.

Attached to each questionnaire was a covering letter to the parent or guardian of each Year 3 child. The purpose of the cover letter was to explain the importance of the study, assure confidentiality, encourage parents to respond and state a date for return (Cohen et al., 2000). The letter was presented as jointly written from both the headteacher and the HARPS team. Headteachers had previously been asked to amend the template cover letter to suit their particular style so as to emphasise the allegiance between the school and the project. Couper (1997) found a significant link between questionnaire introductions and subsequent answers. Considering this, care was taken to suit the style of the introduction to that of the questionnaire in being succinct, professional, and personalised.

Personalising

The purpose of personalising with the child's name was to emphasise to parents the importance of their child to the study and hence the importance of their response (Verma & Mallick, 1999:122). It also simply made for warmer, less awkward, reading, for instance 'Who looks after Simon most often after school?, compared 'Who looks after your child most often after school?'. However, the decision to personalise was not straightforward. The benefits of personalising had to be off-set against the possible threat to confidentiality some parents may perceive. In evaluating this dilemma we decided that the greatest threat to the response rate was apathy. We thought those parents likely to feel concerned about confidentiality might well contact us about their concerns anyway. As an additional measure we gave parents the option of returning questionnaires directly to the HARPS team, but only a handful of parents did so.

Distributing the questionnaires

Targeting the most challenging schools

In contemplating how best to deliver questionnaires to schools, we would have liked to have met with the head teacher and/or year three teacher(s) at every school to go over what was required and (re)emphasise the importance of a high return rate. Unfortunately we didn't have the time or resources for this so we decided to identify those schools where a personal meeting with the headteacher or Year 3 teacher would probably be most beneficial for adding impetus to the school's efforts to maximise questionnaire return. This was done by identifying schools with large numbers of low SES or high numbers of EAL (English as additional language), SEN children or turbulence (residential mobility), all of which could be expected to reduce return rates because of institutional pressures (Thrupp, 1999) or because of parent preoccupations, attitudes or levels of understanding. We also took into account the

return rates for Ofsted parent questionnaires. These are the questionnaires Ofsted uses to inform elements of its reports on individual schools, response rates from parents are published in those reports.

It took the first author four days to visit the 16 'need to visit' schools. In most cases it was possible to meet with the head/ deputy head and at least one of the Year 3 teachers. Appointments lasted from 15 minutes to over an hour and proved very effective in generating a rapport with heads and teachers and highlighting the importance of the study. However, headteachers varied in their confidence about getting a high return rate. In several schools with lower SES intakes, heads described strained relationships between parents and the school and a culture of distrust amongst parents where children's problems were invariably attributed to the school. Despite this, virtually all heads were prepared to go out of their way to push for a maximum return rate.

It also took 4 days for both authors to deliver questionnaires to the 30 'no need to visit' schools and on many occasions during the delivery, it was also possible to meet with the head teacher or the year three teacher personally, even though an appointment hadn't been scheduled. This was a good opportunity for introduction and to go over the written instructions included with the questionnaires.

The questionnaire pack

Questionnaires and cover-letters, along with an addressed envelope for return were collated into personalised sealed envelopes. Teachers were asked to hand out these packs at the end of the day to children, with the understanding that they return them to their parents the same evening. Parents were prompted in the cover letter to complete and return the questionnaire sealed in the enclosed envelope. They were asked to send the completed questionnaire back with their child to school to hand in to his/her class teacher. Hudson and Miller (1997) observed that a successful way to boost participation in a questionnaire is through a friendly third party. It was hoped that in having pre-established links with parents, the headteacher and form teacher might prove effective ambassadors of the questionnaire. This strategy also offered parents minimal labour in returning the questionnaire.

School efforts to raise the profile of questionnaire with parents

To raise the profile of the questionnaire and HARPS project, headteachers were asked to raise the HARPS study in assemblies, at parents evenings and other school events. Many also mentioned the HARPS project in newsletters home. Several headteachers sent letters home in advance informing parents about the impending HARPS questionnaire and asking for co-operation.

Heads also mostly used £20 worth of book tokens per school, provided by us, as a further incentive to return questionnaires. Although whether and how the book tokens were used was left to the discretion of each school, all but one school chose to offer the book tokens as a prize in a 'draw' for children who returned the questionnaire to school. We recognise there are ethical questions around such incentives because of the pressure parents would have been put under by children to complete the questionnaire. Nevertheless we felt there were ways parents could escape such pressure (for instance by returning the questionnaire but not completing it – several parents did this) and we were also swayed by the Patch heads

enthusiasm for having some kind of incentive. Indeed, in most schools staff remarked that the book tokens had been a significant factor in gaining a high return rate.

Collecting in and following up

The initial pickup

Although the letter enclosed to schools clearly stipulated that questionnaires were due to be picked up on one of two chronological days, in many schools the office staff seemed fairly surprised when either of the researchers arrived at the school to pick up the questionnaires. This was not a problem in most instances as questionnaires were stored, as requested, in the school office. However, on a number of occasions the returned questionnaires took some time to locate. This was concerning because it indicated that for time reasons or otherwise, teachers may not have read the instruction list enclosed. In considering the significance of this, it transpired that in almost every case, the enclosed tick lists (or duplicates) had been used to keep track of questionnaire returns. Therefore the most important instruction to teachers was adhered to, that of keeping a track of those children who had returned their forms using the tick list. This meant that a discounting of the written instructions would not have necessarily had severe implications. Within schools it seems that even important documents may go astray on route from the school office to headteachers inbox, or class teacher's desk. This illustrates the importance of verbally explaining written instruction to all appropriate gate keepers wherever possible. As the researcher mainly liaising with staff at the schools, the first author had taken care to iterate and reiterate instructions to all parties encountered whilst at the school or on the phone. She also asked for the instructions to be verbally passed on to the relevant parties she hadn't been able to talk with. This may explain why where instructions did go missing instructions were still communicated to teachers to use the class lists to tick off returned forms.

The response rate on initial collection varied from 50 - 100%, but the mean percentage across all schools was 75%. This response rate was far higher than anticipated and a credit to the schools involved as well as the research strategy in general. It was noteworthy that the returns from the schools in which an appointment was made with heads, were higher than for schools in which a meeting was not carried out. In particular, a number of very challenging schools produced some remarkable response rates. It was notable that for a number of these schools, a very good rapport and mutual understanding seemed to have been established between the first author and the headteacher, perhaps highlighting the effect that head teachers can have upon children, staff and parents of children at the school. However, it should not be inferred that the lower return rates achieved at other schools were reflective of the efforts of staff in those schools. It merely suggests that the attitude of the headteacher (as well as class teachers) may *potentially* have a strong effect on the inclination of parents to co-operate.

There was approximately two weeks between delivering questionnaires to schools and collecting them in and the process of collecting the questionnaires took part in two stages. The first stage of collection concerned the 30 schools where there had been no meeting requested. It took both of the researchers two days each to drive around each of these schools collecting questionnaires. The second stage concerned the 16 schools in which the first author had met initially with the headteacher. There were less of these schools and it took two days to drive between each school collecting questionnaires. As we picked up the questionnaires we were able to review the state of play and we left a letter for the headteacher, thanking them for their efforts and noting the number of questionnaires which yet to be returned. The

letter asked that any remaining questionnaires be chased up and forwarded to us by mail and gave a date when the first author would call the school to check off any further questionnaires which had been returned.

School office efforts

The process of following up the non- returned questionnaires continued over several weeks and principally concerned liaising with administrative staff in the school office. These efforts brought the overall mean return rate across schools up from 75% to 85%. This 10% increase indicates the importance of administrative staff, who generally appeared to know ever child by name as well as their home and family situations. They were typically able to go through the cases where questionnaires had not been returned and give their initial impression as to the likelihood of return for each case. The administrative staff varied in their offers of support for the follow up process, ranging from promises to pass on messages to teachers, to typing and circulating reminders for children to send home and even contacting parents directly, but many administrative staff appeared to put considerable efforts into encouraging non-responding parents to return their questionnaires. If it is recognised that the 25% of parents who had not returned their forms by the specified date would have been more difficult to obtain completed forms from than the 75% had returned them on time, facilitating a further 10% (a 40% return from the outstanding questionnaires) is very impressive. Where administrative staff were less willing to chase up questionnaires, the first author negotiated permission to type a reminder letter from the HARPS team to parents to be circulated by class teachers. In many cases it was necessary to send replacement questionnaires as frequently non-returners complained of having lost their questionnaires.

Contacting parents directly

The final stage of follow up involved a direct correspondence between the research team and the study group and took place when school staff felt they had exhausted efforts to claim back non-returned questionnaires. We decided that three schools could be identified as warranting continued efforts to generate a higher return rate. For these schools, permission was obtained to contact parents directly by posting questionnaires straight to children's home addresses. Addresses were obtained from the LEA and then confirmed by the school manager at each school. In total 53 questionnaires were sent out to home addresses and 11 were returned to the team. Although this may not seem like a large number, each single returned questionnaire builds a clearer picture of the school catchment and especially in one school which had just18 year three children, even a single questionnaire returned was important.

Lessons learned

The HARPs experience offers a number of lessons for future questionnaire surveys, especially those targeted at parents. One of these was the value of professional endorsement through collaboration with local authorities. Our collaboration with Hampshire LEA not only allowed access to the schools themselves but the involvement of the LEA at the launch markedly increased school's support. Also important has been the continuing relationship with the LEA through two of its employees being part of our research team. It is likely that their committed interest has been a considerable motivator for both school staff and parents.

A second lesson is the value of using schools as a third party. On the face of it, asking a compete 'stranger' to fill in and return a questionnaire which offers no direct benefit demands

an altruism most people are unwilling to display. Hence researchers encounter the challenge of conveying as simply and immediately as possible the importance of a study. However, this is still, in itself, not motivation enough for many people to invest the time and effort required both to fill out and return a questionnaire. However, people are more encouraged to display altruistic behaviour towards a person that they know, like and respect. This can be the major advantage of using a third party as intermediary between the researcher and study group. The HARPS project was concerned with schools, it aimed to benefit schools and therefore was able to a large extent to elicit the support of those schools to generate as high a return rate from the questionnaires as possible. Headteachers, class teachers and administrative staff have the advantage of regular contact with parents and are often able to recognise those individuals who are less likely to respond and encourage them to return their questionnaires.

Third, there is the importance of reciprocal communication between the research team and gatekeepers. It was not merely the choice to *use* third party support but also the manner of the research team's involvement which was so vital to the success of the questionnaire. That is, the research team were able to benefit from the advice and information offered by communication between the two parties. The PATCH heads gave important advice as to the suitability of wording and the best ways of carrying out the survey. It was also the idea of the PATCH heads to have a launch to raise awareness of the study. Reciprocal communication between the research team and gatekeepers was not restricted to the PATCH heads, but rather this ethos was realised with all headteachers and also with teaching and office staff. The research team invited all headteachers to personalise the introduction letter included with the questionnaire to parents which was signed by both parties. More generally, advice was sought from headteachers and office staff as to a suitable time to disseminate the questionnaires and the most effective means by which to encourage non-responders in each school to return their forms.

Fourth, the HARPS experience highlights the importance of a carefully considered questionnaire design. Assuming respondents have made the decision to fill in the questionnaire, it will not necessarily follow that they will actually fill it out accurately and be motivated to return it. To ensure this the researcher must have as much confidence as possible that the respondents understand and are not offended by the questions. As a result we spent many hours discussing the merits of wording and we also piloted the questionnaire. Care was also taken as to the layout and design of the questionnaire, to the point of hiring a professional graphic designer. Such meticulous preparation helped to ensure that once respondents had made the decision to fill out the questionnaire, there was minimal possibility that they would be put off completing it.

A fifth lesson is the value of a clear and easy mode of return. Where respondents are required to complete a questionnaire, survey research demands two forms of effort. The first is that the (potential) respondent fills out the questionnaire and the second is that they return it to the research team. Whilst attention has been drawn to the efforts we made to create a questionnaire which is as appealing as possible to complete, this would have been pointless if the questionnaire was completed but never returned. A major limiting factor with postal questionnaires is that most people do not have a post-box right outside their house. Therefore a questionnaire may well sit on the side for some time awaiting the respondent's next visit to the post-box. Being low priority, it is vulnerable to being misplaced or inadvertently thrown away. Collecting through the school avoids these problems. Another advantage of this form of collection is that teachers (and the research team) can see who has and who has not

returned their form, and therefore target individuals to follow up. We think this mode of return was a key factor in our higher than usual return rate.

Finally, it is crucial to have a carefully thought out mode of following up after initial collection. For the HARPS study, whereas the dissemination and initial collection of questionnaires relied primarily upon the efforts of headteachers and year three teachers, the follow up process mainly drew on the skills of the school office staff. As can be recognised from the discussion of following up non returned questionnaires, non-responders were targeted individually. However, this may not have been so feasible had the initial collection return rate been significantly lower. Therefore the value of the follow up process was increased due to the success of the other stages of the HARPS process as previously discussed.

Conclusion

This paper has charted through from conception to collection, the HARPS strategy around a questionnaire from the parents of year three children in 46 Hampshire primary schools. The task was not an easy one. Fogelman (2002) observes the difficulties in getting a good return rate from primary schools, especially during busy times; "In England do not expect a good response from primary teachers to a questionnaire sent to them during or close to an Ofsted inspection, at SATs time or shortly before Christmas" (p.106) Yet it is extraordinary what schools can achieve if they want to. For instance one large primary school in a low SES area was mid-Ofsted inspection and yet still obtained a return rate of 84% *before* follow-up collection. The final mean return rate of 84% was far higher return rate than the team had anticipated, having studied return rates of Ofsted evaluation questionnaires completed by parents. These figures can be viewed on many Ofsted inspection reports available on-line. (http://www.hants.gov.uk/education/schools) and range from 17-66%, with the average response rate hovering around 30% return. If these figures can be used as any indicator of usual parental response rates to a school- related questionnaire, the strategy adopted for the HARPS questionnaire speaks for itself in terms of the response rate achieved.

Another likely indicator of the success of the HARPS approach came from the final catch-all question we asked:'If you have any other comments related to the topics covered in this questionnaire, please write below'. 141 people used the space provided to make additional comments and in 19 of these cases parents expressed concerns about the questionnaire itself. These comments had to do with general concerns about anonymity (3), the aims of the questionnaire and the use to which it would be put (10) or about the wording of or concerns about particular questions within it (6). We do not dismiss these concerns, which may of course have also been held by some of the 16% who never returned the questionnaire. Nevertheless we were pleased that more people did not use this opportunity to express concerns. It may suggest we got the questionnaire about right, certainly not perfect, but seemingly accepted by most parents.

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