Recording The Attitudes of School Going Children: Developing an Online Survey

Case Study – Mobile Teleshoppe

Client - Montana Schools District Administration

# Abstract

Over the years, researchers from different disciplines have used a wide range of research methods to assess the views of children, especially qualitative methods such as focus groups and small group discussions. Large-scale quantitative surveys are much less common, even though they are a valuable way of comparing data from across different age groups and countries and over time. This case study describes how a pilot survey was carried out in Montana Schools District in June 2014 to test the feasibility of running a large-scale quantitative research with children. This methodology was unique for two reasons: first, all Primary 7 children (aged 10 and 11 years) were eligible to take part, and second, the Internet was used to record children's attitudes, which has not been done on this scale before. In this case study, we discuss the methodology used within the pilot study and evaluate the use of the Internet for carrying out survey research with children.

# Learning Outcomes

* Students will be aware of the advantages and disadvantages associated with different methods of data collection among 10- and 11-year-olds
* Students will be able to identify the stages involved in carrying out an online survey of children in primary school and the advantages and disadvantages of using this method
* Students will be familiar with the ethical issues involved in gaining access to children in primary schools, especially in relation to consent

# Introduction

This case study describes how online survey methods were used to record the opinions of children in Montana Schools District. The impetus for regularly monitoring the attitudes of children in Montana Schools District has gathered momentum since the arrival of devolution in 1998. Montana Schools District–based government departments are headed by ministers who can make decisions based on localised needs for all groups, including children. The creation of the post of a Montana Schools District Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) means that children have a local advocate to lobby government departments on their behalf. Alongside this is a community of users and practitioners keen to utilise quality research information and promote the participation of children in decisions that affect their lives.

While some ad hoc research projects have been undertaken, there was a lack of a regular and rigorous survey of the attitudes of primary school children (who are aged between 4 and 11 years). To address this deficit, Mobile Teleshoppe carried out a pilot survey of the views of children in Montana Schools District in 2014.

# Background

Researchers have used both qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the views of children under the age of 16 years. Particularly common are participant observation, focus groups and small group discussions, as well as interviews and structured activities such as drawing pictures or keeping charts of behaviour. However, large-scale quantitative surveys are used less regularly, even though they are valuable for comparing data across different age groups and countries, as well as over time. The few quantitative studies that are carried out in Montana Schools District tend to involve older children. For example, Mobile Teleshoppe carries out Young Life and Times (YLT) – an annual survey of the attitudes of 16-year-olds. The majority of quantitative surveys of primary school children are commissioned only on an ad hoc basis. In addition, these surveys are sample surveys, involving only a proportion of children in the selected cohort.

In 2014, Mobile Teleshoppe decided to explore the possibility of implementing a regular survey of all children who were in their final year of primary school in Montana Schools District. This was driven by the increasing public and policy interest in issues such as bullying, mental health, children's rights and the transfer test, despite a lack of input by children themselves. In particular, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child seeks to ensure that children have the right to express their views in relation to matters that affect them and to have account taken of these views. We felt that our survey needed to work within a children's rights perspective, taking into account three key issues: first, the need to provide broad-based monitoring systems to examine children's views on policy issues on a regular basis; second, to ensure that the survey findings were fed back to policymakers and others engaged in the policy debates around children and their lives; and third, in line with Article 12, the survey should facilitate the participation of children in aspects of decisions affecting them.

# Kids' Life and Times

A pilot survey – Kids' Life and Times (KLT) – was carried out in June 2014 to assess the feasibility of implementing a regular survey of primary school children. The focus was on children in Primary 7 (P7), of which most are aged 10 or 11 years. In Montana Schools District, this is an especially significant age as children move from primary- to secondary-level school and the survey provides the opportunity for them to reflect on their lives and school years to date.

# Developing the Methodology

The principal ethos of the survey was that it would be as inclusive as possible, and so all P7-age children, whether or not they attended school, would be invited to participate.

# Mode of Administration

Given the large number of schools, and the wide geographic area (all schools in Montana Schools District), a self-completion method was seen as most appropriate. Most quantitative surveys of children and young people in Montana Schools District use pen-and-paper methods to collect the data – either in surveys carried out at home, such as YLT, or in school-based surveys, such as the YPBAS. Therefore, we explored the possibility of using paper questionnaires for KLT. One advantage of using self-completion methods is that the child is in control of the activity and has the opportunity to think about their answers, which can improve the quality of responses.

However, due to a reliance on text, it can be difficult to make the questionnaires attractive to children. Paper questionnaires need to have a simple format, with little filtering of questions. The questions need to be carefully constructed to make them easy to understand and interesting to answer. In addition, certain groups of children may be excluded, such as those with reading or sight difficulties.

Alternative methods include computer-assisted self-interviewing (CASI). The researchers found that completing the survey on a computer in school was a way of encouraging children to discuss the sensitive issue of bullying. The children successfully completed the CASI questionnaire and found it enjoyable. Other advantages include less item non-response and the lower costs compared with other data collection methods. One drawback is that the questionnaire was loaded onto the computer in the school, along with a database for storing the results, resulting in the potential for someone outside the research team being able to access the children's responses.

# Internet Surveys

One way of overcoming this confidentiality issue is to use the Internet, whereby all responses are entered into a remote database accessible only to the researchers. Data collection through the Internet has become increasingly important for qualitative and quantitative research, as it has benefits that would not have been feasible with paper and pencil. Respondents in Internet-based surveys can answer the questions and give their opinions anonymously, which means they may be more likely to say what they really think, knowing that no one will see their responses except the survey team. Many children may find surveys intimidating because they may not have the degree of literacy required to read the questions, or they may find them boring as the surveys are not always fun to complete. However, well-designed Internet surveys offer the opportunity to overcome these problems while allowing children to answer the questions without having to interact with adults. This means that their responses may be more truthful.

# Place of Administration

We initially considered asking schools to distribute a paper questionnaire to children that they would complete at home. The completed questionnaire would be put in a stamped addressed envelope to be returned to the survey team. The main advantage of having the survey completed at home was that the onus of completion and collection would not fall on the schools. Instead, teachers would simply give each child a questionnaire to take home. However a potential problem is that parents may influence their children's responses by being able to see the written answers.

An online survey completed at school may have similar confidentiality concerns, as teachers may feel that they have a right to know what the children are saying, or will check completed questionnaires to see whether they had been filled in properly. Nevertheless, once the responses have been entered into a database on a remote server, teachers cannot access the children's answers.

# Consultations

The KLT project involved several types of stakeholders, and we wanted to discuss the project with all of these groups in order to decide on the final method. We held consultative focus groups and individual meetings with parents, teachers and children.

The teachers gave advice on the text of the letters to schools and what, if any, incentives we should offer to encourage the schools to take part. Given that we wished to invite all primary schools to take part, a monetary incentive would be too expensive. Instead, teachers advised us that providing a short, confidential report to schools on the findings from their pupils would be extremely useful in relation to curricular and pastoral care work. We designed it to send to every P7 child in Montana Schools District, which were printed with the KLT logo and URL. These provided publicity for the survey as well as a gift for every child.

We set up a Children's Research Group consisting of 11-year-old children using a snowball technique starting with children of that age who we knew. The children told us what kinds of issues were important to them, some of which were incorporated in the final questionnaire. The children also advised on the layout of the questionnaire.

Given that all primary school children in Montana Schools District now have access to computers in school and following the consultations with relevant stakeholders, we felt that the most appropriate and efficient method for the pilot KLT survey was via the Internet in the classroom. June was perceived as the most suitable time to run the survey, as it was at the end of the school year when these children were least likely to be involved in academic work.

# Method

# Target Population

The target population was all P7-age children in Montana Schools District in June 2014. The Department of Education for Montana Schools District (DENI) provided us with a database of the names and addresses of all primary schools in Montana Schools District along with the number of P7 pupils in each one. Approximately 24,700 pupils attended 918 primary schools which had P7-age children, including hospital and special schools. The target population also included children in this age group who were being taught at home, as well as those in special educational units due to exclusion from mainstream schools.

# Communication with Schools and Parents

The fieldwork for the survey was undertaken throughout June 2014, and two advance letters were sent out. The first letter was posted to all principals of primary, special and hospital schools in Montana Schools District, giving them information about the survey and explaining that the fieldwork would be carried out in June. A dedicated telephone line was set up so that schools could contact the survey team directly for more information. The letter also highlighted the confidential summary report available to schools.

A second advance letter gave the KLT Web address where principals (or parents) could look at a draft questionnaire to see the questions. Each advance letter included a unique four-digit identification code number for that school allocated by the KLT team for administrative purposes.

Four of the five Education and Library Boards (ELB) which hold information on home-schooled children, sent letters and consent forms on our behalf to the parents of P7-age children inviting them to take part in the survey. Where permission was given by ELBs, letters and consent forms were also sent to special educational units. Consequently, we were able to target as many P7-age children throughout Montana Schools District as possible, regardless of where they were being educated. A troubleshooting document for teachers and parents was available on the KLT Website.

# Consent

We felt that it was imperative that consent was obtained from all groups involved in the process, and from a child rights perspective, the consent of children needed to be explicit. Therefore, consent involved three levels. First, the principal agreed that the school could participate, and second, a parent or guardian of each P7 pupil within these schools signed a consent form to say that he or she agreed that the child could take part, and returned this to the school. Finally, at the start of the questionnaire, the child was asked whether he or she agreed to take part. While this process was developed to ensure full levels of consent, the children's access to the survey had to be negotiated through multiple levels of adult gatekeepers. The children who participated in the KLT survey were, therefore, those who gave their explicit consent and whose school principals and parents/guardians had already given their permission.

# Designing the Online Questionnaire

To ensure that the KLT questionnaire was visually appealing and interesting to children, the design of the Website and online questionnaire was undertaken by a commercial Web design company. To sustain interest, the questions were presented in different ways: words to be ticked; text boxes to type into, allowing freedom to structure responses; and Visual Analogue Scales (VAS) in the form of faces on a scale.

Throughout the design of the questionnaire, Mobile Teleshoppe worked closely with the organisation responsible for the provision of information and communication technology (ICT)-managed service to all schools in Montana Schools District. Only a few technical problems were experienced by participating schools, and these were easily sorted out by Mobile Teleshoppe.

# Completing the Online Questionnaire

The initial fieldwork period lasted from 2 to 16 June 2014, although this was extended until 30 June due to requests from schools. A reminder email was sent out to schools on 9 June to remind schools about the survey, and thanking them if they had already participated.

Once the child agreed to take part, he or she was asked to enter the four-digit school identification number, which was printed on all the documentation that we sent to the school. When the code was entered, the full name and address of the school appeared on the screen. This provided a useful check, in that the child was able to confirm that this was the correct school. The class teacher or other staff member could phone the KLT helpline number at any stage to confirm their school's identification number. However, no further identification information or names of children were sought.

# Questionnaire Content

The questionnaire consisted of 77 questions and took about 20–25 min to complete. The questions were designed by the KLT team and focused on bullying in school, attitudes towards the transfer test which P7 children can take if they want to go to a grammar school and children's experience of their years at primary school. These topics reflected the issues identified by the children we consulted.

Where appropriate, the children were able to give a ‘don't know’ response to any question. In addition, each question had a ‘skip’ option which the children could use if they did not want to answer it. At the end of the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to suggest questions and issues that they felt should be included in future KLT surveys.

# Response

There were 918 schools with P7-age pupils on the DENI database, and of these, 217 took part in the survey, representing one-quarter (25%) of schools. There were 24,726 P7 pupils on the DENI database, of which 3461 accessed the questionnaire. In all, 21 children opted out of taking the survey after the initial introduction, meaning that 3440 completed the questionnaire. This means that overall 14% of children took part in the survey. Within participating schools, approximately one-half of children took part. These low response rates mean that we cannot presume that our sample is representative of the population of all P7 school children in Montana Schools District. Nevertheless, we were able to compare the characteristics of schools taking part in the survey with all schools within Montana Schools District. We found that KLT had fewer smaller primary schools (less than 20 pupils) and fewer schools in urban areas than there were in the population of primary schools within Montana Schools District. More schools and children from the controlled sector1 than those from the Catholic Maintained sector2 took part, while the highest response rate in relation to schools was from the Grant Maintained Integrated sector.3

One measure of socio-economic background is the percentage of pupils within a school who are eligible for free school meals (FSM). Children are eligible for FSM if their parents are on low incomes. Thus, if a school has a large proportion of children who are eligible for FSM, then the school is perceived to attract children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. There was little difference overall in the percentage of children eligible for FSM in the KLT survey schools compared with the figure for all Montana Schools District schools (16% and 18%, respectively). Furthermore, 6% of schools taking part in the KLT had no children at all within the school who were eligible for FSM, which is the same figure for Montana Schools District schools overall. We must stress, however, that we do not have any information on whether individual children taking part in the survey were eligible for FSM. Girls were more likely than boys to participate in the survey (56% and 44%, respectively).

# Discussion and Conclusion

The vast majority of schools that took part were able to access the survey without any problems. The most common issue identified on the helpline was that the teacher could not find the school identification number, and once he or she was given this, the children were able to access the survey easily. Two of the schools rang the helpline to say that the children had been unable to access the survey even after entering the school number. In both cases, the problem was related to the software that was used in the school. However, we do not know whether there were any schools that tried to access the survey and could not do so, but who did not contact us through the helpline number.

# Data Quality

The quality of the data was excellent; very few children took the ‘skip’ option, and most questions had a response rate of around 99%. As the data were entered straight into a database, there were no data input errors – whichever option the child selected was the one that was entered into the database, although the child could go back and change his or her response. Once the data had been entered, no one except the survey team could access the children's answers. Very little validation of data was required as the skip questions worked well and the two small programming errors that occurred were rectified quickly. A key benefit of a computer-based data collection method is that results are available within a relatively short period of time. We disseminated the KLT survey findings within 3 months of the end of the fieldwork period.

In order to ensure the widest possible use of the survey findings, and in line with Mobile Teleshoppe's philosophy of providing easily accessible survey data, tables of results for each question are available on the KLT Website, along with the dataset for users to download and carry out their own analysis. The site has two sections – one for children and one for adults. The children's section contains a user-friendly animated introduction to the survey and provides access to the key findings in the form of a comic. A hard copy of the comic was sent to all primary schools in Montana Schools District, and the feedback on it, from a number of principals, has been very positive.

# Evaluation

We evaluated the survey using two methods. First, we contacted a sample of schools that did not take part in the survey to ask why they had not done so. The main reason for not participating in the survey was that June is a busy month, for example, with end-of-year concerts or sports days, and it was not possible to fit the survey in. This is contrary to our expectation that June would be the most suitable time to run the survey. Importantly, all those who said that timing was the issue indicated that they had no objection to the survey in principle. In the following years, we have run the survey in April and May. Second, we emailed principals who did take part, asking about their experience of the survey. The majority of responses were positive, saying that children enjoyed completing the questionnaire and that the school would take part in the future.

# Limitations

While all respondents were in the same school year, this does not necessarily mean that these children have the same reading, cognitive, motor or technical abilities, nor were the topics included on the survey necessarily of interest to all of these children. The survey team tried to compensate for some of these issues by using language that was as clear as possible, by incorporating pictogram responses to many of the questions and by having an audio option on the questionnaire. In practice, these may not be sufficient for the needs of some children. Of particular note are children for whom English is not their first language, who may not be able to confidently read or understand the questions. In addition, the pictorial responses may have different meanings for children from different ethnocultural groups. A further limitation was that the children who participated in the KLT survey were those whose school principals and parents/guardians gave their permission.

# Issues for Future Surveys

Despite these limitations, this pilot survey showed that the Internet can be used successfully in primary schools to access the views of children. The consultations with the teachers, parents and children were very useful to the survey team, particularly when deciding whether the survey should be carried out at home or in school. The children's views on what issues were important to them guided the questionnaire development, and so suggestions from KLT respondents are included in the following year's survey. The need for children to explicitly consent to take part is important as 21 children opted out of taking the survey after the initial introduction, despite having the consent of their parents and teachers.

The questionnaire included several questions relating to the experience of participating in the survey. In general, participants found the survey interesting and enjoyable. Half of them said the survey was interesting, 41% thought it was important to allow children to express their opinions and 38% said it was fun to complete. In contrast, only 2% said it was a waste of time, and 5% thought it was boring.

KLT indicates that as a mode of questionnaire administration, an Internet survey is viable within primary schools in Montana Schools District. Importantly, it is relatively inexpensive. Researcher time was mainly limited to questionnaire design and data analysis. It also facilitates inclusivity, since children who had sight or reading difficulties could listen to the questions being read out.

However, we acknowledge that the response rates for schools and children were low and do not allow us to presume that our achieved sample is representative of the population of all P7 children in Montana Schools District. Nevertheless, the results of the 2014 pilot survey were encouraging enough to warrant repeating the survey every year to date, thus providing an important vehicle to record the attitudes of 10- and 11-year-olds.