

# Collecting data ethically in Health Education



This information sheet is to provide guidance for teachers working with students in Health Education who are collecting data through surveys, interviews, and other similar methods, for use in learning and assessment.

## Collecting evidence from surveys, questionnaires and interviews

Investigating health issues may require administering a questionnaire, or carrying out a survey, or an interview, as a way to collect data and information. This needs to be carefully planned to make sure the questions provide the information needed, and that the evidence is collected ethically and responsibly.

Ethically means something is done in accordance with the rules or standards for proper, or morally right conduct or practice.

## Ethical data collection

Collecting data 'ethically' means that the people who are being asked for information need to give their informed consent:

- they know what they are being asked about, preferably ahead of time,
- why they are being asked, and
- what the information they provide will be used for.

In most cases information will need to be kept confidential (unless agreed otherwise).

To ensure data is collected ethically, students conducting surveys or interviews are encouraged to:

- Write an information sheet about the purposes of the survey which is given to the person they are asking to complete the survey or be interviewed
- Seek and gain approval from the teacher/principal (as appropriate to the school)
- Ask for permission from the people they would like to interview or complete the survey
- Keep the data safe confidential and use the data only as intended.

## Planning a survey or interview

Planning considerations:

- What do you want to know about the issue that you need to ask other people about? What don't you know already; or what do you think you know and need to confirm?; or what do you know but need to find out how wide spread or common a particular view is (for example)?
- What questions are relevant to the issue? Why or how do you know a question is relevant? Who can you check with to make sure you're on the right track?
- If planning the survey or interview as a group, what question ideas do you already have? What question ideas do others have? How will you all agree on which questions to ask?
- Who are you asking to complete the survey or the interview? Why these people?
- Are you better to survey lots of people or interview a few? How much time do you have, how many people are available to conduct the surveys or interviews, and what (if any) costs are involved and can you afford it?

## Types of question

'Closed' and 'open' are two main types of question.

- Closed questions have yes or no answers. Closed questions are quick to collect and easy to summarise but they do not give much detail.
- Open questions require people give their ideas and opinions. Open questions take longer than closed questions to collect, record, and process but they give much more information. Given the time and effort needed to organise interviews, and the opportunities that come with asking questions directly of a person, (mostly) open questions should be used.

## How to collect the information

Survey data can be collected either:

- As a written pen and paper questionnaire, or

- Through an online survey tool like Survey Monkey or a Google form (probably the most popular option), or
- You can ask the person face-to-face and fill in the answers on a form or on computer as you go.

Think about the resources you have available to conduct the survey, and importantly, what will be easiest for the people who you want to complete the survey. Eg for Survey Monkey, can everyone you want to survey access the internet?

Interviews are conducted face-to-face in person or through an online facility such as Skype and need to either:

- Have someone recording (writing) answers as they are given (use a prepared 'answer sheet' for this), or
- Be digitally recorded (audio) and then transcribed (written out) afterwards. Make sure you get people's permission to record their voice. Video can sometimes be used for interviews but this may become a privacy issue because you are recording someone's image. You may need an extra (formally signed) permission form to be completed for video recording.

### Designing questions

Survey and interview questions can take a lot of thinking and discussion to get right. There is no one right way to go about designing questions. It may help to look at some other examples of interview or surveys to get an idea how questions are worded. It is recommended that you work with others to design the questions and try them out on each other to make sure that:

- others understand what you are asking,
- they are relevant to the issue you are investigating and the answers tell you what you want to know,
- the person being asked feels safe answering the questions (the questions are ethical, and not too sensitive or upsetting).

### Sensitive questions

Health Education deals with a lot of sensitive issues. Students will need to be guided by their teacher and other adults in the school (eg principal, guidance counsellor) as to which questions should not be asked for reasons of personal safety for the person being asked, and for the student conducting the interview or survey.

Make sure your teacher has approved your questions and ensured they meet 'ethical' requirements before conducting your survey or interview.

### Using ratings scales for survey questions

If you are conducting a survey by written questionnaire or by using an online programme like Survey Monkey, or a Google form, it is recommended that you have closed questions, or open questions that can be easily answered by ticking an option on a rating scale. Ratings scales can be more useful and provide more information than simple yes/no questions. Surveys that ask for people's opinions or views often use a ratings scale for answers (where people have one of several choices); eg

- from 'never' to 'sometimes' to 'always', or
- 'disagree' to 'somewhat agree' to 'agree'.

Make sure your question and the descriptors on the ratings scale match up, for example make sure a 'disagree-agree' scale is with a question that requires the person to say whether or not they agree with the statement.

If using a ratings scale, try to get 4 or 5 descriptors from one extreme to the other, or put the 'extreme' opinions at opposite ends of the scale and provide numbers from 1-4 or 1-5 along the scale. How many numbers to put on a ratings scale varies. For the type of surveys students are likely to conduct (and the number of people they are likely to survey) a scale of 4-5 is usually enough. If you have a scale from 1-10 and only a few people answer the survey, you can end up with a whole lot of numbers that are hard to draw conclusions from.

### Inviting people to complete the survey or participate in an interview

- Prepare a brief introduction to explain what the survey is about, how you will use the information, and that answers are confidential.
- Also prepare a script to read before you start the survey or interview. The following is an example of a script that can be adapted to suit your needs.

*Hello, I am [.....] and I'm conducting a Health Education survey/interview to find out [.....]. The survey/interview will take [.....] minutes. When I summarise the results of the survey/interview your answers will be combined with others so your answers will be confidential and you will not be identified by name. Would you be happy to answer the questions for me?*

Ask the questions, allowing time for the person to answer and for the responses to be recorded. You might like to add a question asking if they have anything else to say on the situation (this is optional).

*Thank you for your time and for being willing to be included in the survey/interview.*

### **Summarising the results**

- For survey data, count up how many people said yes or no, or gave a particular answer, or how many rated each item 1-5 on a scale, and turn the number into a percentage.
- For interviews, summarise the answers people gave to the questions. If interviewing several people, look for recurrent (and similar) answers across the group in addition to comments that are different from each other. Interpret what people are saying in relation to implications for well-being, influences on well-being (and the determinants of health), and what can be done to improve people's well-being – as applicable to your issue.

You do not need to present all of the data you collect.

- Keep to the information that helps to explain the issue you are investigating.
- That said, it can sometimes be helpful to report information you weren't expecting, especially if it shows there are other important parts of the issue that need to be reported.

Adapted from the *Level 3 Health Education Learning Workbook* J. Robertson & R. Dixon (2014), ESA.