Piloting the Questionnaire

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The first pre-test

A small Wellington school (which we will call Pilot School 1) kindly agreed to undertake the first pilot of the questionnaire for us. This was a most worthwhile activity from our point of view, and we would like to thank the teacher and her class for their patience and helpfulness, and the staff of the school for the time they took to discuss their concerns with us.

The children were told that they were piloting the study, and were asked not to discuss it with children from other schools. (The children in the school concerned come from quite an extensive area which overlaps with several other schools, making this necessary. Whether the children did as asked, of course, we do not know!)

The teacher presented the questionnaire to the Year 7 and 8 students in her class while the Year 5 & 6 students worked independently. At least one of the research team was present at each of these sessions. The researcher noted the time taken to complete each question, the ease with which the desired vocabulary was elicited, any difficulties the children had with understanding the questions, any difficulties the teacher had in presenting the questions, the suitability of the space provided for writing the responses, and any other matters which might lead to improvements. Many problems were uncovered and remedied in this process. The teacher was also asked for her input, and had many perceptive and helpful comments to make.

Most significantly, the teachers at this school found it extremely awkward and disruptive to elicit from the children the vocabulary for negative stereotypes which the school strives to counteract. They felt that, by asking the children for them in the classroom, it was as if they condoned them. They felt that the problem was exacerbated by the group dynamics: certain children responded to the peer pressure within the group to outdo each other in providing terms not normally regarded as acceptable school behaviour.

We had been aware that there would be problems in trying to elicit certain types of vocabulary via the teacher, and for this reason had not included any questions about racial names, for instance. The problem proved much greater than we had anticipated, and highlights a real weakness with the methodology of this study: there is an irreconcilable clash between the culture and language of the classroom and the culture and language of the playground. Trying to elicit the one in the context of the other is unnatural, and problematic for both teachers and students. We were forced once again to consider whether it would be feasible to get the children to write their answers individually. We again came to the conclusion that it would not, because of the vast increase in the expense of the mail-out and the quantity of data processing that would be involved. The only alternative was to eliminate all such questions. This severely restricted the types of language we were able to survey. However, it was clearly of prime importance that the experience of answering the questionnaire should not be negative and disruptive for the schools which had agreed to help.

It is nevertheless important to note that while we accepted the impossibility of studying such vocabulary in this way, the pre-test experience suggests that we are right that, despite the very best endeavours of schools to change attitudes in children, these stereotypes are still very much present in playgrounds. These questions elicited immediate responses of the expected vocabulary, both the traditional terms (like *copycat, butterfingers, tell-tale tit*) and an array of no doubt more ephemeral terms of abuse: *unco, loser, fob.* This was in sharp contrast to a question designed to elicit terms for two children riding on one bike. The children did not have a word for this, despite persistent questioning by the teacher, who was sure that they would. Where the practice has vanished, so has the associated vocabulary. The continued knowledge of the terms for stereotypes suggests very strongly that they are still in use. They may be deemed unacceptable by the schools, but the readiness with which they were volunteered implies that they are still a normal part of playground culture.

There was a second type of clash between the culture of the classroom and the purpose of the questionnaire. There is great emphasis in classrooms on creative, imaginative use of language. What the questionnaire aims to elicit is the standard words and phrases, fixed collocations, non-creative responses. The teachers described the language elicited by the questionnaire as "clicheed", and found this a negative characteristic. The children often tried to be creative in their answers, no doubt because this is what they know is expected and encouraged in the classroom. This reinforces the fact that the methodology was not ideally suited to the material.

Even without the "stereotype" questions, the draft questionnaire was excessively long. By noting the time taken to complete each question, we were able to eliminate those questions which took a disproportionately long time and/or offered little by way of useable data. We thus shortened the questionnaire considerably while retaining the maximum possible number of questions. We had estimated that 2 hours was about as long as schools would be able to spare without feeling that it was an imposition, but it was clearly the impression of the teachers at Pilot School 1 that that was far too long, and that half an hour was more like it. Because of the impossibility of knowing beforehand which questions would prove useful in showing up regional varieties, if there were any, we could not make the questionnaire as short as that and retain any chance of getting results. A compromise was inevitable.

The pilot alerted us to the problems presented by children offering long-winded, polite, politically-correct answers, creating on-the-spot variants on stock patterns, or making the most of the opportunity to use rude language normally frowned upon in the classroom. These problems were tackled in a variety of ways.

We provided check-boxes for the teachers to indicate that they had received certain types of answers, to save a great deal of writing on their part. We greatly increased the space for teachers to write the answers in; we had under-estimated in most cases. We also provided far more guidance to teachers on the recording process.

We re-wrote the instructions to students to emphasise that we were interested in the things which they would most **usually** say to their friends, and specifically asked them not to make up new ones for the purpose of the questionnaire. We removed the emphasis on how to deal with things too rude to say in the classroom, without removing the basic information about it. The original draft

for the Instructions to Students produced problems of deictic reference when read by the teacher. These were avoided in the re-writing.

The children quite readily became distracted when the material of the questions provided scope for digression. Some of the questions which led to this behaviour were eliminated, but some were too vital to omit. Such questions were placed at the end of their section, to minimise their disruptive effect.

We re-ordered the sections as a result of the pre-test. The draft for the first pre-test began with questions on "formulae", but these proved, surprisingly, amongst the hardest questions to deal with, and were amongst the most time-consuming, although we were able to make improvements to many of them. We thought that the teachers would feel that they were not making progress, and would give up if those were first. We originally felt that it would be best if the first set of questions involved all our fictional characters, so that the children became familiar with them before they had forgotten the introductory remarks about them. However, in the end this factor was over-ridden by the necessity of setting an appropriate tone for the questionnaire at the outset, by placing the most neutral questions at the start. A sheet with the names of the fictional characters and a picture which indicated their gender was provided to assist the children's memories.

Some of the original layouts of the questions proved awkward for the teacher. These were noted and altered if the questions were retained.

In some instances where the children did not produce the expected items, the researcher or the teacher asked the children after the session whether they used these. In most cases they did, but hadn't thought of them. This was taken as an indication that the scenario presented to the children needed to be modified. Because there were cases where they didn't know them ('doubling' etc. on a bike being a case in point), we mentioned in the instructions to the students the possibility that they would not have anything special in answer to some questions, and told them what to say in such cases. We hoped that this, together with an explicit request for the children not to invent responses for the questionnaire, would help to avoid some of the problems which arose in the initial test.

The Second Pilot

Because we had made such substantial alterations to the questionnaire as a result of the first pilot, including producing completely new scenarios for some items, it was necessary to undertake a second pre-test. We approached another Wellington school (Pilot School 2) for help with this stage of the project. Once again, the children were told that they were piloting the study, and were asked not to discuss it with children from other schools.

The teacher presented the questionnaire to a Year 7 and 8 class with one of the research team in attendance. In all respects, the second pilot went much more smoothly than the first. The re-worked questions produced the desired results. The re-ordered questionnaire established a more appropriate tone. The emphasis on the normal, and the request to refrain from inventing new answers seemed to have the desired effect. There were still places where minor improvements could be made in terms of space, additional check-boxes and adding emphasis to certain words in questions to make it easier for the teacher to read them

appropriately. A few further changes were made to the order of questions. In one question, we reverted to the earlier wording, because the new one introduced a new problem, and did not eliminate the unwanted data.

The entire questionnaire was completed in under an hour. However, the children could not concentrate for that length of time, and were given a short break part way through. We incorporated advice from the pilot teachers concerning the optimal length of sessions in the instructions to teachers.

We extend our thanks to Pilot School 2 for undertaking this pilot test for us. As a result, we sent out the final questionnaire with much greater optimism that it would be manageable by the participating schools and that it would give us enough data to be worthwhile.