

BIBBY'S BLOG

Research,

Reflections, &

Rants



Musings of a Multi-Focused Mind

BIBBY BLOG –

“The Rise and Fall of Survey Research in Schools”

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Some people think that survey research is a breeze. All a person has to do is draw up a questionnaire, pop it in the mail, reach into one’s mailbox, and analyze it. Anyone can do it.

It’s not at all like painstaking historical research that requires one to spend countless hours poring over documents. It’s also far less demanding than qualitative research, where a select number of people are interviewed face-to-face, and pages and pages of transcriptions are examined. Years ago, a professor of mine summed up sentiment that remains widespread today: “Maybe you could get at the question by doing a quick and dirty survey.”

Wow! I’ve got breaking news for such people. Survey research has become incredibly difficult to carry out. It takes a tremendous amount of time and money, energy, and patience.

Anyone who has perused my blog over the past while has noted that I have been pretty much invisible since arriving back in Canada from Japan at the beginning of March. My family and friends, colleagues and contacts, have also been aware of my relative scarcity, physically and mentally. I further am keeping a close eye on my research budget, am tired, and struggling to suppress my impatience.

The reason is pretty simple. I’ve been almost totally preoccupied with the carrying out of my latest national youth survey – Project Teen Canada 2008. As you may be aware, this is the fourth national youth survey in the Project Teen Canada series; earlier surveys were completed in 1984, 1992, and 2000. We have pursued the participation of one class in approximately 150 high school and CEGEP-level classes across the country.

In 1984, things seemed fairly uncomplicated. My colleague, Don Posterski, and I put together the questionnaire. My student assistants and I drew up a sample of about 200 schools across the country and mailed out the survey packets. Few school boards had to be cleared; parental and guardian permissions were not required. Schools participated fairly readily and fairly quickly.

Over the past three decades, the survey research terrain has been changing significantly. I have had to submit some forty school board applications in order just to have the doors opened so that I can proceed to the second step of approaching principals to pursue school participation. The board applications average about 15 pages each. Parental/guardian consent forms are mandatory. Although board permissions are widely demanded, they typically mean only that principals can be approached, with the caveat that their involvement is at their own discretion. As one board spokesperson wrote to me, “Congratulations! Your application has been approved. Of course, participation will be up to the principals involved.” At both the board and in individual school level, a consistent question that understandably is raised is, “How will the survey benefit us?”

We have known remarkable board cooperation. Yet, no one bats one thousand. We can clear a highly structured board committee in a major city, only to find that the door is slammed on the whims of a single individual who is the keeper of the access keys in another setting – even though we typically want a minimum of only one class in one school in a system to participate in the survey.

We also can find it difficult to make contact at the individual school level. Despite my effort to write personal cover letters and convey the importance of the survey by sending materials to principals by courier, more than 50 of our 200 principals and office staff either mislaid or discarded our packets – requiring us to send replacements. These packets are not unobtrusive arrivals. Besides being delivered by courier, they contain 30 to 35 questionnaires, parent/guardian consent letters, instructions, and a pre-paid return envelope. With courier costs, they are worth about \$50 each, not including my time.

Because of the delicate nature of pursuing board approvals and approaching school principals, much of the project work cannot be assigned to assistants, students or otherwise. I have given an average of about 12 hours a day to the administrative work since the end of November, with a few days and parts of days off along the way.

In the midst of having to adjust to rising demands and rising expectations, along with the perception on the part of almost everyone that life is extremely busy, we have learned that a key component of securing support and participation at the individual school level is the proverbial personal touch. The principals of schools we have not heard from have been called by Project Teen Canada 2008's project's associate director, James Penner. James has been highly effective in persuading principals to participate. He has been assisted in Quebec by bilingual assistants. As a result, we have been able to salvage a solid majority of those schools where questionnaire packets never seem to have been seen.

And guess what? For all the strain and pain, the good news is that we are experiencing comparable success to what we have known in the past. In fact, we are projecting the highest level of participation we have ever known – close to 200 schools and around 4,000 teenagers, 15-to-19. I think the data we will end up having will be pure gold!

Which all goes to show that the willingness of individual principals to have their schools participate in a nation-wide survey remains high. But the litigiousness of boards, the administrative organization of school offices, and the time-pressures of administrators, teachers, and students alike have combined to make participation in Project Teen Canada 2008 more difficult to procure than in any of our national youth surveys.

Survey research continues to be one important means of finding out how the world works, including learning what is going on the minds and lives of young people. However, no one should be surprised if large-scale surveys that rely on the indispensable support of Canada's schools become increasingly rare. Such surveys not only have become increasingly *difficult* to carry out; they may soon be almost *impossible* to carry out.