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The Challenge of Using Survey Data to Help Determine Elementary School Policies

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Abstract

To help determine elementary school policies, we surveyed elementary school children, staff members, and parents about various aspects of an elementary school's spirit and pride program with input from 185 1st-3rd graders, 215 4th-6th graders, 308 parents, and 39 staff members. A 15-item survey was designed, with slight modifications as they pertained to each group. The results were extremely unusual in that for each and every item, significant differences emerged for the pattern of responding by the four groups. This pattern of results from the four constituent groups highlights the challenges in using survey data.

The Challenge of Using Survey Data to Help Determine Elementary School Policies

With regard to public education in the United States, the stakes are high. There are 3 million teachers and 47.2 million public schoolchildren in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). School administrators make important policy decisions concerning the day-to-day lives of children. It is not surprising, then, that these individuals would seek out advisory data from a number of sources, including students, parents, and staff members.

Surveying elementary school students is becoming more commonplace. Jackson and Henriksen (1997) asked elementary students about smoking behavior and their parents, inquiring about the types of disciplinary actions students should be subject to if caught smoking. Elise (2000) surveyed children about their perceptions of computer technology and inquired about the value of computers (and technology in general) in their lives. Thus, while it is not uncommon to ask elementary school children about their attitudes and opinions, it appears less common to take that information, combine it with additional sources (e.g., parents, staff), and draw general conclusions. The goal of this study was to take that additional step to examine if elementary school children's attitudes and opinions are synchronized with other important people in their lives, namely parents and school staff members.

This study attempted to respond to the issues raised above by conducting such a survey in a local, public school. The principal of that school was interested in various aspects of spirit and pride, as well as evaluating what aspect of the current program were valued by the different constituencies. While the principal of the school was interested in this information as input for evaluation and policy formation, our interest was to examine the different patterns of responses, if any, between elementary school children, parents, and staff members. If these attitudes are relatively homogeneous, then policy making would be facilitated. If the attitudes and opinions

are widely divergent, then these sources of information may be less helpful to those in policy-making leadership positions.

Method

Participants

Four different groups of individuals participated in the study. Regarding elementary students, 185 students in Grades 1-3 and 215 students in Grades 4-6 participated in the study, as well as 39 staff members and 308 parents. Before survey administration to any group, the school principal reviewed and approved the content of the survey. Participation by students, staff, and parents was voluntary.

Materials

The instrument is a one-page survey with 15 items. There are four slightly modified versions of the survey, as they pertain to each group. The base version of the survey contained 15 items and asked the participant to reply with a rating of not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, or extremely important. For children in Grades 1-3, these scale labels were replaced with large numbers 0 through 3. Individual teachers provided explanation for what the number meant, and instructed students on how to use the scale; surveys were completed during class time. For Grades 4-6, these students received the written labels and completed the surveys in class. Surveys were distributed to staff members in their mailboxes, and replies were given to another staff member. Parent versions of the survey were sent home with each student enrolled in the school; in addition, the parent survey included the question “approximately how many times do you visit the school per month?” All participants were asked an additional, open-ended question concerning suggestions for spirit and pride; these data are not analyzed in the present study.

Procedure

Students received their surveys in the classroom setting at the teacher's convenience. Staff members received surveys in their mailboxes, and each child was given a survey to take home to his or her parents. Each group of participants were given as much time as necessary to complete the survey items.

Results

Given the four groups of participants and 15 questions on a 4-point importance scale, chi-square analyses were performed to determine if there was an association between group membership and the pattern of responding to each survey item. There was a statistically significant association on every question, with χ^2 s ranging from 41.69 to 154.97. Table 1 presents each survey item, a top-two box score by group, and χ^2 observed for each question. The top-two box score is the percentage of respondents selecting moderately important + extremely important.

For parents only, correlational analyses were performed on the question "approximately how many times do you visit the school per month" with each of the survey items. The correlation between PTA involvement and number of school visits per month was statistically significant, $r(267) = +0.22, p < .001$. Those involved in PTA may wish to look at those who visit the school most often as potential members; conversely, those who visit most often may be those most likely to join PTA.

Discussion

Do 1st-3rd graders, 4th-6th graders, staff members and parents respond in a unitary fashion when asked questions about elementary school policies? The answer is a resounding no. In fact, on the 15 different aspects of spirit and pride that participants gave importance ratings, there

were statistically significant differences on all 15 questions. It seems remarkable that on every question, there was no unitary response. School principals and administrators need to be aware of this information alone—that unilateral decisions about school policies may not have a unilateral effect on the constituent groups. If principals are looking for patterns or trends across groups, it did not happen in this study. Perhaps more importantly, it is valuable to know where the differences lie with respect to these groups.

Principals faced with making school-wide policy decisions would benefit from the survey process described in the present study. Even with differences on each question, different types of differences emerge. For instance, there are some items where only one group differs from all other groups. In this study, this seems to happen with the 4th-6th graders, where they tend to rate spirit and pride items lower than other groups. In other cases, both staff and parents rate items more important than students (regardless of grade level). In one case, this pattern was reversed, with students (both groups) rating a school activity as more important than staff and parents. It seems that any school principal would want to understand the impact of school programming, and from this study we realize these decisions may differentially affect the schools' constituent groups.

There are limitations to the present study. The data are self-report survey data. Our conclusions drawn are based on one sample of students, parents, and staff from one large public school. Care should be taken not to draw overzealous generalizations from the present study. Further studies in this area would be helping in determining the stability in these patterns of responding as well as to continue to verify the benefits of the process.

School principles seeking to find unitary opinions about school policy issues may not succeed when surveying elementary school children, parents, and staff members. However, the

pattern of results that do emerge may still be instructive in understanding the impact of a school policy that is eventually enacted and enforced. Those interested in using multiple constituent groups in the formulation of policy need to be aware of potential challenges that may lie ahead.

References

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Table 1

Top Two Box Scores (Percent Moderately Important + Percent Extremely Important) for Four Groups With Chi-Square and Significance Level

Items	Grades 1-3	Grades 4-6	Staff	Parents	χ^2
School t-shirts/Sweat shirts	74.7%	60.8%	76.9%	70.8%	79.16
K-Kid Assemblies	85.2%	82.4%	74.4%	88.3%	41.69
Welcoming Feeling when Entering the School	84.9%	83.7%	94.9%	98.4%	58.59
School Newsletter	65.2%	51.8%	89.8%	89.3%	143.85
School Manner of the Week	83.0%	60.6%	87.1%	87.7%	101.30
School Carnival	90.9%	85.8%	81.6%	79.7%	143.21
Learning Fair	87.7%	85.1%	87.2%	93.0%	57.70
Upper/Lower Grade Buddy Program	77.0%	74.9%	92.3%	95.1%	77.44
Framed Pictures Throughout Building	75.8%	51.4%	74.4%	60.0%	133.95
Grade Level Community Service Projects	89.2%	81.5%	86.8%	89.7%	49.81
Staff Openness/Friendliness	94.2%	90.0%	97.3%	99.6%	53.60
PTA Involvement	86.1%	74.6%	92.3%	86.4%	109.28
Campus Environment Feeling Safe	88.7%	89.8%	94.9%	99.6%	57.43
Back-to-School Picnic	85.0%	71.4%	61.5%	66.2%	154.97
Trail Wind Web Page	82.6%	59.6%	64.1%	58.3%	149.00

Note: Original response scale was 0 = *not at all important*, 1 = *slightly important*, 2 = *moderately important*, 3 = *extremely important*. All chi-square statistics were statistically significant, $p < .001$.