“These are hard questions:” An Investigation of the Developmental Abilities of 6th Graders to Answer Survey Items

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Background

- Data collected about health behaviors, attitudes about school, and teacher opinions often come from adolescents
- Many resources are invested in education and health research focused on youth
- It is important to test procedures and use different methods to improve the quality of responses to survey questions

Research Questions

1) Do survey procedures work as planned in the time allotted during an actual school setting?
2) Can middle school students understand and accurately report on questionnaires about behaviors, attitudes and opinions?

Methods

Sample

9 middle school students from Sojourner Truth Academy (5 males, 4 females)

Procedures

Pilot Survey

105 questions on 12 total pages, separated into different sections including:
- School experiences
- Beliefs and attitudes
- Family and friends
- Alcohol and drugs

Cognitive Interview

41 questions with prompts and probes to measure student comprehension, retrieval, and response abilities

Analysis

Qualitative analysis of observations & staff notes

Results

- Student 1 preferred option one because it “seems more familiar”
- Student 2 preferred option one but it was “backwards, from what I’ve seen”
- Student 3 preferred option one because “it’s very clear”
- Student 4 preferred option one because “I like the word ‘strongly’, the second option is very confusing”

Discussion

Pilot Survey Findings:
- 28.5 minutes to complete
- Took longer than a typical advisory period (20 minutes)
- Regular class period is 40-50 minutes
- Length of survey creates added burden for study participants & classroom teachers who give up class time

Cognitive Interview Findings:
- Students comprehended questions
- Retrieved certain memories to answer items
- Picked responses that demonstrated their understanding of certain questions

Relation to Other Studies

- These findings are similar to those found in the Elementary School Success Profile study (Woolley & Bowen, 2006):
  - Most students could read questions on the cognitive interview guide without any help
  - Some rewording is needed to improve age appropriateness of questions

Limitations

- Sample size

Importance/Next Steps

- Results will guide revisions for carrying out a longitudinal study, Partnering for Healthy Student Outcomes, to improve academic and health outcomes for students in diverse, urban middle schools
  - Most students could read questions on the cognitive interview guide without any help
  - Some rewording is needed to improve age appropriateness of questions

Implications

- The research team was able to refine study procedures to increase the quality of survey data used to measure academic and health outcomes for middle school students