**Hints and tips: The practicalities of collecting data in secondary schools**

I read Katie Rix’s article, *the practicalities of data collection in primary schools*, in the previous edition of PSYPAG with interest and an empathetic eye (Rix, 2014). As a fellow researcher working in schools, I could easily identify parallels with my own extremely enjoyable, albeit at times rather challenging, experience. As a novice researcher, I approached the task of recruiting schools for my study with equal amounts of vigour and trepidation. As my research focuses on evaluating *Pyramid* club, a specific, school-based, socio-emotional health intervention (www.uwl.ac.uk/pyramid), targeted at a particular age group (pupils in years 7-9), my pool of potential recruits was going to be limited from the outset. My recruitment strategy needed to be slick and organised. As I have discovered, conducting research in secondary schools has its own unique set of challenges, some of which I anticipated and others I encountered along the way. For anyone planning a research project involving secondary-age pupils I would like to offer some additional tips to Katie’s excellent advice:

**Tip number 1: Plan meticulously**

Anyone embarking on research in schools needs to be a meticulous planner. For several weeks of the year your would-be participants are simply not available and research schedules can be interrupted by seemingly random inset days. This is confounded by the fact that in secondary schools accessibility to pupils is further reduced by the increased number of assessments students have to complete. There are definite points in the school year to avoid and in general spring term (January to Easter) seems to offer the best opportunity to get into the classroom. You will need to be flexible and having access to the school calendar will help you plan your time in school more effectively.

**Tip number 2: Identify your key contacts**

Whereas many primary schools are small, intimate communities your typical secondary is vast, complex and home to a huge population of staff and pupils (although this can vary greatly – one school I worked with had a year 8 cohort of 90 students compared to another school with 258). Knowing who is most likely to understand and support your research in school is the first step to securing participation. Although the Head Teacher is the ultimate gatekeeper and is the one who will authorise consent, they may not be the first person you approach or even meet with in person. School websites can be a very useful first point of access to information on who’s who and to find the most likely person to champion your research idea. Also consider contacting other agencies that might help you link with schools, such as educational psychologists or healthy schools’ co-ordinators.

**Tip number 3: Be clear, concise and avoid research jargon**

Once you have found a school interested in participating in your study you need to present your research objectives clearly and succinctly. Although you may be very excited about the intricacies of your design and the virtues of its philosophical underpinnings, your audience in school will want you to cut to the chase. During face-to-face meetings or telephone conversations, being able to summarise your project in 5 minutes allows you to focus on the practical elements of your data collection: what you need; from whom; by when. The same holds true for any written communication; avoid research jargon. The documents I prepared for schools were styled quite differently from those I was accustomed to writing for my research (no references required!).

**Tip number 4: Manage expectations and agree on a contract**

This will save you a great deal of time and effort in the long run. The temptation to jump straight in with data collection can be over-whelming. However, it is well worth producing a short, simple contract, clearly stipulating the commitment you expect from the school in terms of access to participants and the data you propose to collect, within a specific timeframe. I found breaking the data collection down into key activities and summarising them in a table, along with proposed completion dates, really helped to keep things on track. This is particularly useful when the research extends over several months. Equally so, you need to be explicit about what the school can expect from you in terms of feedback and any reports you will provide on completion of the study. It is much better to have this agreed early in the research process, thus avoiding any confusion or ambiguity later on.

**Tip number 5: Establish effective communication channels**

One of the biggest challenges of collecting data in secondary schools is the sheer size and complexity of them. Whilst good communication is a key issue within any research situation, operating within a large organisation makes this imperative. School cultures vary and the preferred means of communication can be different from institution to institution. As students in secondary schools have several subject teachers as opposed to one class teacher, communicating with staff can often be indirect, through the Head of Year or Pastoral Manager. This was the case in the schools I worked with and meant I was a step removed from some of the data collection. If this is the situation for you, remember whoever is requesting information on your behalf will have a plethora of other things on their to-do-list and your data collection will not be as high a priority for them as it is for you; so you need to be patient! If a gentle reminder is needed you can always refer back to the contract you have previously agreed.

**Tip number 6: Raise the profile of your research in school**

Another challenge which arises from conducting research in secondary schools is that in such large communities, with so much going on, it can be hard to get noticed. I was able to distribute flyers and arrange for posters to be put up about the project I was researching (which offered students the opportunity for voluntary participation). However, something that proved really successful was an information coffee morning for students, parents and staff. This provided a great opportunity to raise awareness about the project and to answer any questions. Another useful way of publicising your research is to write a short article about it for the school newsletter. This will bring your research to a much wider audience within the school community.

**Tip number 7: Develop a good rapport with your adolescent participants**

One of the most enjoyable aspects of collecting data in schools is engaging with the students. The age range of my participants stretched from 11-14 years and part of my study involved running focus groups with them. In my experience, young people are generally curious and are interested if you have something interesting to say. At the beginning of the project I spoke to all the students about my research; what it was, why I was doing it and what I hoped to do with the findings. I also explained that I would be visiting them again at the end of the project to hear all about their experiences. This meant that when I did go back in to schools to do the focus groups the students knew me, I was a familiar face. All the students were keen to participate in the focus groups and enjoyed making up their own pseudonyms for the recordings – they unanimously agreed research can be fun!

**Tip number 8: Appreciate everyone’s contribution and give feedback**

Without the on-going support and engagement of staff and students alike, it would not be possible to conduct current, informed and pertinent research in schools. This vital contribution should be acknowledged and appreciated throughout the research process. It is good practice to provide feedback to schools at the end of the data collection period and written reports can be shown to parents and governors or can sometimes be included as evidence for Ofsted. After completing my research I prepared individual school reports with a summary of key findings for each school, which I sent with a letter thanking staff and students for their support. I was delighted to receive a lovely letter back from one of the schools I worked with, stating how beneficial they had found the report and the feedback and praising the professionalism of the data collection in their school!

**Tip number 9: Managing attrition – Don’t panic; persevere**!

Despite the best laid plans there will always be circumstances beyond your control that result in fewer participants than you originally anticipated. Attrition is the unwelcome bedfellow of real world research in schools. Although I had initially recruited 12 schools for my study, only 5 of these were ultimately able to participate in the project during the academic year I had designated for data collection. Moreover, in some of these participating schools student numbers had diminished over the duration of the programme and not all the data I was expecting was available. This is undeniably disappointing but it is not devastating, so if it happens to you, look at the situation as a temporary set-back and stay optimistic. Hopefully, earlier in the research process (in your meticulous planning stage), you allowed for some slack to extend your period of data collection. I speak from personal experience and this is exactly what I had to do.

**Tip number 10: Reflect and learn**

As a novice researcher, my experience working with secondary schools has been extremely enjoyable and I have learnt a lot. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to do some real world research in a vibrant environment. Although I had anticipated some of the challenges associated with collecting data in secondary schools, I also encountered some new ones. One important lesson for me was to be adaptable; every school is unique and has its own way of doing things. Taking time to understand the culture and identify which processes work best can help to smooth the sometimes rocky road of conducting research in schools.

**A last thought…**

I still have some way to go before I complete my PhD and no doubt will have many more lessons to learn as I progress through my final year. However, one thought comes back to me as I consider my experiences so far. I remember on my very first day as a PhD student, someone who had recently submitted their thesis, said to me how easy it is to simply focus on the end result, getting a doctorate, without really paying attention to how you get there. I will share the advice they gave to me and which I try to follow: Enjoy the journey!

**Correspondence:**

Michelle Jayman

PhD Student, School of Psychology, Social Work and Human Sciences

University of West London

Michelle.jayman@uwl.ac.uk

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