

MAKING THE CASE FOR FIELD TRIPS: WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US AND WHAT SITE COORDINATORS HAVE TO SAY

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This article presents the findings from a national survey of field trip sites. It also addresses the positive instructional impact of field trips and focuses on 5 major components of the field trip experience. In addition, the article presents recommendations and suggestions for positive field trip experiences.

Field trips in the formative years are one of the most important things teachers can provide for their students. As we all know, children learn by doing. They remember what they have personally experienced. In addition, concept development is optimized through active, explorative experiences. Field trips are a type of experiential learning that gets children away from the traditional classroom setting and into a new mode of learning. They can be as simple as taking a class of children out on the school grounds for a lesson in observation, or as detailed as an out-of-state visit to a particular field site. Field trips not only expand children's learning and experiences by providing them with hands-on experiences, they also increase children's knowledge and understanding of the world in which they live.

The recent fuel crisis in America has forced most school districts to reevaluate the instructional importance of field trips in light of rising fuel costs and, in some cases, depleting fuel supplies for bus fleets.

The current standards-driven accountability movement has also had a significant impact upon our school leaders, who cherish the limited number of instructional minutes teachers have with children. The nation's goals seem to maximize standardized testing preparation. This article addresses the positive instructional impact of field trips and focuses on 5 major components of the field trip experience: value, logistics, planning, and health and safety issues. It also presents the findings from a national survey conducted by two undergraduate students at the College of Charleston, Katie Wise and Jamie Lee Vandeddi. The purpose of this survey was three-fold: (1) to solicit feedback from nationally recognized field trip sites regarding their experiences with successful visits by students; (2) to compile data to reflect the opinions of field site coordinators for successful field trips, and (3) to make recommendations for teachers on how to plan and implement successful field trips.

Value of field trips

Current research (Kisiel, 2006, Martin & Seevers, 2003; DeMarie, 2001; Knapp, 2002) has shown that field trips are essential for many reasons. Field trips provide real experiences related to all content areas. For example, a trip to a bird sanctuary brings all the sights, sounds, and nesting habits of these animals to life for children. Field trips extend learning by expanding a child's world and provide a framework for learning. Children visiting a construction site can return to the classroom and build their own homes, businesses, or even sky scrappers in the block center.

Field trips enrich and expand the curriculum.

Children begin to think outside the box, as well as learning outside of the classroom. For example, third grade children are required to study and learn about state government. A field trip to City Hall or the court house gives children a first hand look at who runs the government.

Field trips strengthen observation skills by immersing children into sensory activities.

For example, a trip to the aquarium brings the sharks up close and personal for children to observe teeth, fins, and eyes. This is certainly something that children will not find in a textbook.

Field trips increase children's knowledge in a particular subject area.

A visit to a natural history museum is much more exciting and informative than watching a video or reading a textbook (Semlak & Beck, 1999).

Field trips expand children's awareness of their own community.

When children take a field trip to visit the local fire or police departments, they begin to understand, in a very concrete way, the value of these important community resources. Field trips focusing on a "beach-sweep," or "street-sweep," allow children to participate in activities in which they become community advocates. Field trips provide living laboratories where children acquire knowledge outside the realm of the regular classroom.

Logistics of Planning Field Trips

Teachers must consider the logistics involved in field trips. For example, teachers must complete a number of additional tasks before the actual trip. These include applying for administrative approval from the appropriate individuals, and notifying parents/guardians to obtain permission for the children to participate in the trip. Teachers must visit the site in advance of the actual field trip, and talk with the person in charge about what the children will see and experience. Teachers and site coordinators must agree upon dates and times for the visit, and develop a schedule for the day. In addition, the teachers must obtain health emergency information papers for each child, and collect all required fees. Arrange for enough chaperones for the class size. Name tags should be provided for everyone. All the children should have clothing suitable for the trip (Queensland Government, Landcare field trips for schools. (2001) Department of Natural Resources and Education. The State of Queensland, (www.nrm.qld.gov.au/) Retrieved June 19, 2008.

Planning

Good planning must precede all field trips. Research (Martin & Seevers, 2001; Hopkins, 2001) suggests that there are a number of things that teachers must consider before the actual field trip. Teachers must consider the needs of the children and the requirements of the particular field trip site.

Meaningful field trips should tie into the children's educational needs and interests. Planning must also address the curriculum and, ideally, focus on the standards. In addition, it is imperative to consider the field trip site location. Is the site near enough so that the children will not get overly tired? How will you get to the site? Are there fees involved? Who is responsible for transportation? Teachers must consider the entire day's schedule, from beginning to end. For example, when must the group arrive at the site? Who will arrange for meals? When are the bathroom breaks scheduled into the day?

Successful field trips planner must consider safety issues. Are there any hazards involved? Do you have enough parents or volunteers? Have arrangements been made for children with special needs?

Health, Safety and Equipment Issues Related to Field Trips

Teachers should engage children in a brainstorming session to develop a set of rules, safety awareness ideas, and other important considerations for a field trip. For example, everyone on the trip must wear a name tag; this includes teachers and all volunteers. Everyone stays with the group at all times. The teachers must bring copies of emergency information that

includes parents' consent for emergency medical care. Cartwright (1995), DeMarie (2001), Knapp (2002) and Martin & Seevers (2003) remind us that the following safety, health, and equipment issues are critical:

- Pack first-aid supplies such as sunscreen, hand sanitizer, paper towels, adhesive bandages, antiseptic cream, bottled water, baby wipes, syrup of ipecac, plastic bags, extra ponchos or rain jackets, a cell phone with extra batteries.
- Designate a "site" person or a special place that the children can recognize if they get separated from the group.
- Make special arrangements for young children with special needs. Every classroom has children with special needs even if the needs are minimal.
- Assign each child a buddy and use color coordinated name tags to make it easy for children to find their buddy.

A National Survey:

Responses From Field Site Coordinators

A survey was mailed to 60 nationally recognized field trip sites. Some of the respondents included The Nature Conservatory, Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, the Jamestown Settlement in Williamsburg, Virginia, the Oracle Center for Environmental Education, Arizona State Parks, the Betsy Ross Museum, and the Grand Canyon Field Institute. These were selected at random by undergraduate students at the College of Charleston.

This survey was designed to address the following: (1) to solicit feedback from nationally recognized field trip sites regarding their experiences with successful visits by students; (2) to compile data to reflect the opinions of field site coordinators for successful field trips, and (3) to make recommendations for teachers on how to plan and implement successful field trips for children. Sixty surveys were mailed to field trip site coordinators and a return rate of 63.3% (n=38) was achieved. Responses from the site coordinators are summarized below.

In an effort to secure widely varied opinions regarding the preparation by teachers of children for field trip visits, Question 1, of the survey, was open-ended.

“What are the advantages to you and your organization when students come prepared for a visit to your site?” Responses varied greatly to this question so they were categorized into two categories: Active Learning and Student Behavior.

Site coordinators reported the following Active Learning interactions as important to the success of a field trip:

- Participatory. Children need to be prepared to participate in the activities planned by the site coordinators.
- Discussion. Children should have questions prepared related to the site.
- Questions. Teachers must encourage children to ask questions and attend and respond to the answers.
- Assessment. Teachers and site coordinators should conduct informal assessment right after the visit, followed by a formal assessment that takes place back in the classroom.

- Collect. Evidence to evaluate how the children developed an understanding of the content.

The site coordinators listed the following types of behaviors exhibited by previous classes of students who were effectively and properly prepared for the field trip visit:

- Students were well behaved.
- There were fewer discipline problems.
- There was less time getting ready for activities and transitions.
- The visit was less confusing regarding expectations and procedures.
- The students were more attentive.
- The students showed respect for the well-being of the site's resources/offerings.
- The students demonstrated control and order throughout the experience.

Question 2 asked site coordinators another open-ended question related to specific teacher behaviors that positively impact field trip visits.

“How should teachers prepare students for a visit to your site?”

Site coordinators reported that teacher preparation is essential to the success of field trips. Site coordinators want to be sure that teachers:

- Request pre-visit information and review the information with the students.
- Share the logistics for the pre-planning by talking with students.
- Compare/contrast concepts, or standard driven content knowledge related to the site visit.

Responses to Question 3 identified the expected behaviors of students during field

trip visits. "What do you expect students to do while visiting your site?" Site coordinators identified the following behaviors as desirable.

- Students should participate in the planned activities.
- Students should exhibit good behavior as defined by their age and development.
- Students should have fun and find enjoyment in the experience.
- Students engage in passive learning without necessarily being involved in actual hands-on behavior.
- Students should be aware of and follow all safety rules and regulations.

Question 4 asked site coordinators to identify problems related to field trips.

"What are the problems or conflicts when students come unprepared?" Responses included:

- Objectives not met and learning ineffective.
- Appropriate behavior was not established before students arrived at the site.
- Lack of student interest and/or understanding.
- Problems with health and safety issues.

Because field trip visits are intended as an instructional extension of the classroom, site coordinators were asked the next question, Question 5.

"What do you think students gain as a result of visiting your site?"

Responses to this question fell into both the cognitive and affective domains. Examples of knowledge acquisition in the cognitive domain included:

- Real experiences that might be a once in a life-time experience for some students.
- First-hand experiences with unfamiliar settings that provide a complete and accurate picture of the content.
- Hands-on, working knowledge of the site.
- Experiencing a new way of learning abstract information.
- Students being involved in conducting site-specific research.

Examples of affective learning included:

- Building positive memories of the trip.
- Experiencing the construction of knowledge with excitement and personal satisfaction.
- Developing an appreciation for field-trip sites.
- Discovering that learning can be fun.
- Experiencing enthusiasm and a heightened awareness of the content related to the site.

Question 6 focused on the follow-up with site coordinators and students.

"What type of follow-up, if any, do you provide students after their initial visit?"

27 out of 38 site coordinators said teachers did not ask for any follow-up after their field trips. Site coordinators reported that they value follow-up correspondence by teachers. They also reported that teachers provided follow-up feedback only when solicited by the site coordinators.

When asked the ideal class/group size for field experiences, site coordinators indicated a group of 20 or less was ideal. The

age groups preferred by the site coordinators were grades 1-6.

Conclusions

All of us can become field trip advocates who take children beyond the walls of the indoor classroom to the world of site-specific venues for learning. Teachers wanting to become more active in the learning and knowing experiences of their children will demand field experiences as a way for developing greater partnerships between teachers and field site coordinators. Field-trip destinations can enable students to inquire about varied content related information by observing, asking questions, and devising their own explanations for how and what they are learning. Students also make personal connections with their teachers, peers, and site coordinators, who can open new doors into the learning process. We can only guess the full extent of learning behaviors, both cognitive and affective, that students will exhibit as a result of engaging in discovery and personally meaningful field-trip environments.

We offer the following recommendations for improving your field trip experiences and those of the students in your classroom:

- Make the trip appropriate for the age and grade level and needs of the students.
- Connect the field trip to the current content, standards and units of study.
- Make sure the field trip addresses all modalities of children's way of learning including the visual, auditory and kinesthetic learner.

- Plan, Plan, Plan. Careful planning of any field trip can help avoid disasters and lead to a successful event. A well planned field trip to a near by playground can be more meaningful and educational than a poorly planned trip to a museum.

We also recommend that teachers use the following checklist when making final plans for field trips:

- Thoroughly prepare the children prior to visiting the site.
- Prepare children with pre-visit activities through visiting the site's website, provide logistics about the site, and review safety rules.
- Make the field trip fun for the children by choosing a site that allows for hands-on activities and that involve interactive learning.
- Make a list of materials (name tags, first-aid kit, cell phone, and emergency contact numbers), equipment, and any special clothing.
- Plan for manageable groups (5 students per adult).
- Do all the paperwork on time, permission slips, transportation, and health forms. Remember to check on legal requirements.
- Plan a follow-up activity that will reinforce everything the children have gained from the field trip experience.

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