

Field Trips for Learning: An Instructional Leader's Guide

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Krepel and Duvall (1981, as cited in Behrendt & Franklin, 2014) defined the field trip as “a school or class trip with an educational intent, in which students interact with the setting, displays, and exhibits to gain an experiential connection to the ideas, concepts, and subject matter” (p. 236). Field trips, a subset within the broader concept known as experiential learning (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014), have long been a part of the US public school system. Many readers will likely be able to recall their own experience packing a lunch, boarding the school bus, and visiting a park, museum, or other non-classroom destination. However, since the advent of the No Child Left Behind legislation, a shifting emphasis toward high standardized test scores coupled with ever-shrinking school budgets has resulted in a nationwide decline in field trip participation (Mathews, 2014; Mehta, 2008). The question instructional leaders face is this: In terms of instructional outcomes, are field trips worth the time, money, and effort they require?

Educational Intent of Field Trips

Field trips have long been used to enrich, enhance, or otherwise supplement the formal classroom curriculum (Lucas, McManus, & Thomas, 1986). There is strong evidence that field trips increase students' knowledge, motivation, and interest in learning across subject areas (Greene, Kisida, & Bowen, 2014; Nabors, Edwards, & Murray, 2009). Students learn better and retain more, and for longer, when they have the opportunity to experience content in a hands-on, interactive fashion, rather than only through textbooks or formal classroom activities (Falk & Dierking, 1997; Lucas et al., 1986). Essentially, experiential learning opportunities are meant to provide students with alternative means of learning (i.e., experiencing) the taught curriculum.

Social Intent of Field Trips

The broader impact of experiential learning opportunities in general, and field trips in particular, is that they provide a shared experience for all students. Field trips have been shown to broaden students' awareness and appreciation of the community around them (Nabors et al., 2009) and to level the playing field for students who might not otherwise have the opportunity to visit the location of a school-sponsored field trip (Greene et al., 2014). Those who view public school as a place of enculturation and opportunity building for students must acknowledge the significance of these factors. Some writers have suggested that the informal nature of field trips is a driving factor in their impact for students and that real learning can and does occur outside of the formal school environment, with its concrete expectations for teacher-student interactions (Lucas et al., 1986). It may be that the unforced and spontaneous social nature of the interactions that happen on field trips plays an important role in student learning (Tal, Alon, & Morag, 2014).

Alignment with the Curriculum

Effective Implementation

Many field trip destinations are now making concerted efforts to attract schools by aligning their programming with state standards (Mehta, 2008) or even providing transportation for school groups (Greene et al., 2014; Plummer, 2014). For destinations where that is not the case, teachers must take the initiative to plan experiences that align with the taught curriculum (Millan, 1995; Nabors et al., 2009). There are several elements that contribute to planning and executing an effective field trip.

Before the trip. Experts and researchers agree that pre-planning is vital (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014; Nabors et al., 2009). Teachers should visit potential field trip sites prior to taking students on a trip (Millan, 1995; Smith-Walters, Hargrove, & Ervin, 2014). This step allows

teachers to foresee potential challenges and learning opportunities, plan logistical elements, and ensure that the prospective site is accessible to all students who will be making the trip (Millan, 1995). Additionally, teachers should ensure that a planned trip aligns with what is currently being taught in the classroom (Millan, 1995), since the overlap between formal and informal learning has been shown to produce the most lasting impact on student learning (Hofstein & Rosenfeld, 1996; Lucas et al., 1986).

Additionally, teachers should work to develop good rapport with at least one site-based contact person; this will help not only with instructional alignment, but also with the practical elements of ensuring a smooth visit (Tal et al., 2014). This relationship building between teachers and site facilitators should happen well in advance of the group's arrival on site, either through phone, email or in-person meetings, to ensure that teacher and site facilitator have ample opportunity to communicate about behavior expectations and learning opportunities during the visit.

During the trip. Experts have also recommended forming small groups of students (Smith-Walters et al., 2014) and keeping students actively engaged, both cognitively and physically, with the field trip environment (Millan, 1995; Smith-Walters et al., 2014). For example, on a trip to an art museum, students might learn about the history of a sculpture or an artist's life (cognitive engagement) before capturing a sketch of the piece in a sketchpad they carry with them (physical engagement). If sites do not provide opportunities for this multi-dimensional student engagement, the responsibility falls to teachers to create concrete tasks for students to complete during the trip (Wilson, 2011).

After the trip. Finally, teachers should plan to facilitate reflection activities after returning to the classroom to help students solidify the learning connections made on the trip

(Behrendt & Franklin, 2014; Millan, 1995; Smith-Walters et al., 2014; Wilson, 2011). Experts and researchers agreed that this final piece is what separated mediocre field trips from exceptional ones. It seems that when students have the opportunity to make explicit connections between informal learning experiences and the formal, taught curriculum, the positive impact of field trips is greater. This reflection might take the form of a simple reflective journal entry or having students apply field trip observations to a novel task, such as a creative writing prompt. Afterwards, a gallery walk might enhance this reflection, allowing students the opportunity to see what their peers observed and learned during the trip.

A Sample Case

I offer as an example anecdotal evidence from an innovative program I was part of for over three years. The program was a small, private middle and high school outside of Atlanta, Georgia, where experiential learning was a fundamental component of the curriculum. Students at the middle school attended academic and elective courses Monday through Thursday, followed by a field trip each Friday. For high school students, the trips were spaced farther apart, occurring every-other Friday.

Students “earned” field trip participation by completing their academic work on time and maintaining appropriate behavior throughout the days leading up to the field trip. The field trips were a mix of instructionally-focused experiences—like a visit to local historical sites with a guided tour—and more socially-focused experiences—like a visit to the bowling alley. But instruction was deeply integrated into even the social trips. In the case of our trip to the bowling alley, for example, students’ math teachers had integrated lessons on graphing data during the week prior to the trip. During the trip, students collected data and brought it back to class to work with the next week.

I took with me two major lessons from my time working in this school. One was that the shared experiences of all students played an enormous role in creating a positive culture within the school. Students had frequent opportunities to practice social skills in low-pressure environments. This was especially helpful for the middle school students I worked with, who frequently struggled to figure out how to hold a conversation with their peers. Our field trips gave them instant conversation starters and made it easy to find shared interests, which carried over once we were back at school.

The other lesson I learned was related to student learning. Students learned better and retained information longer when they had the opportunity to connect lessons learned in the classroom with lessons learned in the field. For example, on a trip to visit a state park with our high school students, we observed several small waterfalls. This observation later helped students understand classroom lessons related to erosion, ecosystems, and the impact of environmental pollutants on the water system. Could students have learned those same lessons without the field trip? Of course. But there was enormous value in being able to immediately relate the formal, textbook curriculum with the informal experience many of them would not have had outside of our school trip. Students owned what they learned in a way that might not have happened without the first-hand observation of the textbook-in-action.

Literature Review

The Case Against Field Trips: Is it Valid?

A brief review of the literature on the downsides of field trips revealed that the main detractors were cost and a fear of negative impact on state test scores (Associated Press, 2012; Mehta, 2008). Mathews (2014) reported that, nationwide, more than half of public schools had eliminated at least some of their planned field trips in the 2010-2011 school year, primarily due

to concerns over budget shortfalls and the potential negative impact of time spent away from the classroom.

Some schools have turned to low-cost alternatives, like virtual field trips, in an attempt to give students exposure to some of the advantages of an “in the field” field trip. However, teachers reported that these online experiences “pale[d] in comparison to the real thing” (Associated Press, 2012, para. 4), emphasizing the value of outside-the-classroom field trips that exposed students to experiences they might not otherwise have. Other schools have turned to privately-funded grants to offset the high cost of field trips in an environment of shrinking school budgets (Plummer, 2014), but the process of writing successful grant applications requires dedicated time and training that many teachers may not have. Given the reality of limited time and budgets, are field trips worth the effort?

Benefits of Field Trips

The evidence of field trips’ effectiveness is far-reaching. Ylimaki (2014) identified five dimensions of the curriculum: intended, enacted, assessed, learned, and hidden. The hidden curriculum comprises all of the structures and routines that make up school life, including “data-driven decisions, scripted curriculum programs, pacing guides and fidelity to various instructional reforms” (Ylimaki, 2014, p. 32). In some ways, field trips are part of this hidden curriculum. Greene and colleagues (2014) conducted a large-scale study on the effects of museum field trips on student learning. The researchers randomly assigned nearly 11,000 students in grades 3-12 to either a treatment or control group. Students in both groups wrote a short essay to provide evidence of their critical thinking abilities; two researchers rated each essay to establish inter-rater reliability. Then, students in the treatment group visited an art museum and took a short, guided tour where they participated in student-led discussion about

five pieces of art. After the trip, the students wrote another short essay about a piece of art that they had not seen before. Again, two researchers rated each essay, looking for evidence of students' critical thinking. Students in the treatment group exhibited modest gains in critical thinking when compared to those in the control group. Strikingly, those students from low-income and minority families exhibited gains in critical thinking 2-3 times higher than their peers. The researchers concluded that field trips may play an important role in the hidden curriculum, expanding learning outside the walls of the classroom and leveling the playing field for students whose families may not otherwise be able to take them to the places their schools can (Greene et al., 2014).

Nabors et al. (2009) surveyed 38 site coordinators from field trip destinations across the US. The consensus among these experts was that field trips expand students' awareness of their community (Nabors et al., 2009). If the aim of public schools is to create students who are prepared for college and career, surely it is in schools' best interest to expose students to the world outside of the school building. The site coordinators also reported that field trips seemed to improve students' observational skills (Nabors et al., 2009). This is a benefit that could easily travel back to the classroom with students, resulting in increased attention to detail in the taught curriculum. It should be noted that this study was small in scope and relied only on a snapshot of site coordinators' perspectives; additional support is needed to confirm the validity of these findings.

Field trips have been shown to improve students' critical thinking and historical empathy (Greene et al., 2014), both skills that may easily translate to better performance on classroom and state assessments. Behrendt and Franklin (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of the literature related to experiential learning. They concluded that science field trips—across grade levels and

socio-economic status—increased students’ interest in and motivation for learning. Again, if this increase in motivation stays with students after they return from a field trip, there are positive implications for classroom learning.

In an interview study with 128 children and adults, Falk and Dierking (1997) found that students retain the knowledge gained on field trips for years to come: “Even after many years, nearly 100% of the individuals interviewed could recall one or more things learned on the trip, the majority of which related to content/subject matter” (p. 211). Over 80% of participants could recall three or more specific events or details from the trip, with no significant difference in the age of the participants. These findings align with those from Greene and colleagues’ (2014) large-scale study, where 70-88% of students recalled specific content-related information from the field trip weeks after it had occurred. When Falk and Dierking (1997) analyzed the content of participants’ field trip memories, they found that 77% of the details recalled were related to specific content or subject matter. In other words, students remembered learning facts on field trips that were related to what they learned in the classroom. Many readers will likely be able to relate to this finding as they reflect on the lessons they remember from their own experiential learning opportunities.

The benefits of field trips seem to apply across subject areas. I previously referenced Greene and colleagues’ (2014) findings related to art appreciation and historical empathy. Additionally, Hofstein and Rosenfeld (1996) conducted a review of the literature related to informal and formal science learning. They concluded that informal learning, such as field trips, did in fact enhance formal classroom learning. These findings were reaffirmed in Behrendt and Franklin’s (2014) meta-analysis of the literature related to experiential learning in science. However, both sets of researchers (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014; Hofstein & Rosenfeld, 1996) also

advised that more could be done to blend informal and formal learning in order to maximize these benefits.

Field Trips and Instructional Leadership

Implications for Instructional Leaders

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) tasks the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) with writing standards for instructional leadership (CCSSO, 2014). These standards guide not only best practices for school leaders, but also the formulation of licensure requirements and exams that prospective instructional leaders must pass before earning their certification.

ISLLC Standard 4 offers this guideline for instructional leaders: “An educational leader promotes the success and well-being of every student by promoting robust and meaningful curricula and assessment programs” (CCSSO, 2014, p. 17). Among the functions proposed to support this standard, ISLLC includes four ideas that are particularly salient to the topic of field trips: “(b) ensures culturally relevant curricula and assessments; (c) maximizes opportunity to learn; (d) ensures authentic learning and assessment experiences; [and] (f) ensures the use of learning experiences that enhance the enjoyment of learning” (CCSSO, 2014, p. 17). If we assume that a “robust and meaningful” curriculum includes opportunities for formal as well as informal learning, it stands to reason that instructional leaders should find ways to provide both. Field trips provide exactly the kinds of authentic opportunities for students to interact with their environment that ISLLC alludes to in Standard 4.

Additionally, the evidence of field trips’ positive impact on leveling the playing field for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., Greene et al., 2014) suggests that field trips may also play an important role in school culture. Numerous studies have affirmed the motivational

nature of field trips for student learning—quite simply, field trips are “learning experiences that enhance [students’] enjoyment of learning” (CCSSO, 2014, p. 17). Instructional leaders should heed these facets of experiential learning when allocating resources and considering proposals from teachers.

Cautions

Instructional leaders cannot ignore the powerful evidence of the effectiveness of experiential learning. Using cost as an excuse to avoid programming these opportunities for students is irresponsible and may, in fact, cost schools more in the long run in terms of student achievement and the hidden curriculum. However, leaders must be aware that pre-service teachers receive little to no training in planning effective field trips (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014; Smith-Walters et al., 2014); therefore, if field trips are a priority, instructional leaders must be prepared to offer such training on the job, in the form of comprehensive professional development.

Instructional leaders should also be mindful of the potential adverse impact of field trips, especially at the middle and high school level. Care should be taken so that students do not miss multiple classes on multiple days, unless this is part of a broader plan to integrate learning across the curriculum. Field trips, like all other aspect of the curriculum, should be carefully coordinated as part of the bigger picture of students’ education. Again, just like any curricular decision, the decision to spend the time and money required to plan an effective field trip should only be made within the context of a school’s overall educational mission.

Practical Recommendations

Such sites as Yelp, TripAdvisor, and even Pinterest may provide a good starting point for instructional leaders who are interested in finding free or low-cost field trips. Instructional

leaders might also consider destinations that are closer to the classroom, like the school cafeteria, where students can go behind the scenes to learn about food preparation and serving sizes as well as budgeting and menu-planning. Similarly, it might be helpful to reach out to parents and community partners to ask for tours of local businesses; this has the added advantage of strengthening the school's ties with the surrounding community. For those in Hampton Roads, Virginia, I have shared several ideas for free or low-cost field trips in the Appendix.

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Appendix

Free and Low-Cost Field Trip Options for Hampton Roads, Virginia

Bluebird Gap Farm in Hampton [Free]: “Bluebird Gap Farm offers an exciting, family-oriented adventure and educational experience rarely seen in an urban environment. The 60-acre farm has around 150 domestic and wild animals. We have the usual farm animals such as horses, cows, pigs, goats, and chickens. We are also home to birds of prey, whitetail deer, llamas, alpacas, tortoises, peacocks, rabbits, and waterfowl!” (<http://www.hampton.gov/bbgf/>)

Huntington Beach Park in Hampton [Free]: Featuring lake access, James River access, a public beach, large playground, and a rose garden as well as Vietnam War and Holocaust memorials. (http://www.nnparks.com/parks_huntington.php)

Lee Hall Mansion in Newport News [\$5/person]: “Built between 1851 and 1859, Lee Hall Mansion was home to affluent planter Richard Decauter Lee. One of the last remaining antebellum homes on the Virginia Peninsula, Lee Hall offers visitors a step back to the mid-Victorian period.” (<http://www.leehall.org/>)

Fort Monroe’s Casemate Museum in Fort Monroe [Free]: “Completed in 1834, Fort Monroe was originally designed to protect the Hampton Roads waterway from an enemy attack and is the largest stone fort in America. Within the fort is the Casemate Museum, which chronicles the military history of Fort Monroe from the construction of Fort Algernourne, the first defensive fortification at the site in 1609, through the last major command to be headquartered at Fort Monroe, the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command. The museum features the room where Jefferson Davis was held briefly as prisoner following the American Civil War, highlights Major General Benjamin Butler’s Contraband of War decision that granted refuge to 3 escaped slaves, and tells the history of the US Army Coast Artillery Corps.” (<http://www.fmauthority.com/visit/casemate-museum/>)

Chippokes Plantation State Park in Surry [\$10/bus (parking fee)]: “Just across the James River from historic Jamestown in beautiful Surry County, Chippokes Plantation is one of the oldest continually farmed plantations in the country. A working farm since 1619, the park offers modern recreational activities and a glimpse of life in a bygone era. Visitors tour the historic area with its antebellum mansion and outbuildings, stroll through formal gardens, and view antique equipment at the Chippokes Farm and Forestry Museum.” (http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/chippokes-plantation.shtml#general_information)

Chesapeake Public Schools Planetarium in Chesapeake [Free]: “In 2015, the Chesapeake Planetarium will celebrate its 52nd year of operation. Construction funds for the planetarium were provided by the Chesapeake School Board as a result of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). It was the first planetarium constructed in Virginia by a public school system. It was designed as a teaching aid for the school system, but has been made available to the general public as well. More than 50,000 students and adults visit the planetarium each year to view educational programs.” (<http://www.cpschools.com/departments/planetarium/>)

Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art in Virginia Beach [\$3/person]: “Through regularly scheduled events for children, teens, and adults, MOCA offers exciting programs that foster awareness of the significant art of our time. All programs, activities, and resources are designed to encourage discussion, transforming galleries into laboratories of ideas. Whether bringing a student group, listening to an audio tour, or joining in an informal gallery conversation, our range of offerings allow for visitors to choose and tailor their experience.”