The Effects of Soft Experiences on Student Achievement

Jill K. Bruckner

EDL 9550 Symposium on School Leadership

April 25, 2016

Abstract

The implications of balancing budgets, achievement, instructional time and student learning are both continuous and changing. However, reductions in educational spending, and increases in standardized testing, are driving new approaches to creating meaningful classroom experiences, including time spent away from schools and engaged in activities offered by "soft" educational providers, such as zoos, museums, planetariums, farms, theaters and camps. While these experiences may have educational value, the degree to which they impact student achievement is debatable. This research brief examines trends, attitudes and outcomes – reflected in the literature – regarding the role of supplemental, experiential learning, with emphasis on discovery of potential academic gains resulting from off-site exploration by student groups.

Research Topic

Arguably, educators hope instructional experiences result in growth. Whether students are achieving results in core competencies, or are meeting grade-level expectations for social development, few teachers are satisfied with activities that flat-line achievement, create confusion, or produce negative-learning benefits. As a result, educators must carefully weigh where, how and when learning occurs, affording balanced and careful consideration to outside – classroom opportunities by asking, "What are the effects of "soft" experiences (zoo trips, camps, etc.) on student achievement?" Results-driven education is a reality; but, how results are achieved in supplemental classroom experiences varies.

Introduction

As research – and the media – report an uptick in education budget cuts (juxtaposed with increases in accountability), it is no wonder educators are seeking opportunities to maximize instruction and capitalize on class time. Reduced per-student funding, for example, was reported by 26 states for the 2012-2013 school year, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; and, the same organization notes school district budget cuts are continuing nationwide following the onset of the 2007 recession – despite indicators suggesting the economy is righting itself (Oliff, Mai, & Leachman, 2012).

For many, the downward trend in education funding means exercising classroom creativity, which may – or, progressively may not – include supplemental school experiences off

campus. Despite evidence indicating experiential learning contributes to academic understanding (Hill & Woodland, 2002), teacher reticence – often tied to budget reductions – remains.

The ramifications for reduced spending have an overarching fiscal impact, of course, and providers of off-site content, such as museums, report an apparent – and resultant – fall in attendance from student groups, a fall that mirrors current teacher practice. Case in point: Chicago's Field Museum, formerly serving 300,000 students annually has dropped to 200,000 student attendees in a given year (Greene, Kisida, & Bowen, 2014). In other words, fewer educators are busing students off-site for first-hand learning experiences.

Education advisors, not the first to the table of the reduced-spending trend, are also impacting school districts' decisions by suggesting shrinking budgets should first be offset by cutting nonessential programs, including such experiential learning activities as field trips, prior to slashing staff (Trainor, 2009). Ask administrators in the current economic environment to define the place, purpose, and priority of experiential learning – first-hand learning that takes place outside the classroom – and, the soundness of supplemental activities, from field trips to day camps, to afterschool programming, comes into question.

What it is: A "Soft" School Experience

Sometimes positioned as more "edutainment" than education, soft school experiences include such activities as field trips, camps, nature walks, group tours, off-site clubs, special programming, and more. The experiences are broad and varied, but share common characteristics; and, while research seeks to both support and refute the value of such programming, participants – from educators to students – agree some expected similarities

emerge. For example, off-site school experiences are exactly that: experiences that occur away from campus, often at remote locations, such as museums, farms, zoos, or theaters.

Typically, such experiences include programming designed to facilitate student learning (Kisiel, 2005); and, in ideal situations, such programming is aligned with classroom content and curriculum, or includes an emphasis on inquiry (Kenna & Russell, 2015). Taking programming one step further, a 2009 *Research in Learning Technology* article addresses not only assertions that hands-on, field experiences can appropriately align with "real" life, but also points out the addition of mobile devices to experiential programming may have a positive impact on learning (Pfeiffer, Gemballa, Jarodzka, Scheiter, & Gerjets, 2009).

How it Differs: Soft Learning and Classroom Learning

Soft-learning experiences are enjoyed concurrently by a group of students; and, many commercial, on-site educators, such as zoo directors, museum docents, and recreation managers, provide pre-and-post learning activities to build classroom connections. This approach is not unique to experiential learning. On the contrary, classroom educators often follow a similar group-learning strategy, frequently coupled with academic endeavors designed to help embed learned material.

Soft-learning connections, according to Behrendt and Franklin, who shared their 2014 experiential-learning findings in the *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, can echo classroom learning in an environment that differs markedly from a school setting – so much so that replicating the experience in an educational institution is impossible. Kenna and Russell (2015) also point out knowledge of specific content can be increased – and

potentially more easily retained - during experiential learning; however, the hard cost of leaving the classroom is a consideration for many educators.

Summary of Findings

In a 2008 study, researchers found teachers' motivation for engaging students in off-site learning varied (Lelliott & Mosabala), with academic potential rating high; but, entertainment and exposure to previously unexplored experiences also serving as motivating factors.

Whom it Impacts: Measuring Outcomes

Differences in engagement and learning-retention appear to emerge relative to the scope of off-site activities. Examples might include dissimilarities of an afternoon visit to a zoo, versus a summer-long zoo-camp immersion experience. Predetermined outcomes and the structure of the experience (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008) also play a role in program success and learning.

An ongoing summer day camp program designed to impact marginalized youth, for example, showed a positive effect on resiliency (Allen, Cox, & Cooper, 2006), however results for continuous growth in this area are not extendable to single-day community outings.

For students and educators alike, this makes both defining – and qualifying – a "soft" experience worthy of additional examination. Aside from describing the nature and scope of experiential learning, traditional educators (as well as off-site program facilitators) seem to find further challenges in the delicate dance that is balancing budgets with instructional time. Even so, Plymouth University researcher Rong Huang (2012) suggests the value of authenticity – provided by field experiences – can enhance curriculum.

Behrendt and Franklin (2014) assert students view subjects more positively following experiential learning, however, a dearth of research on standards-based outcomes resulting from such experiences seems to be adding to the conversation regarding the value and scope of off-site learning in general.

What it says: The Magic Bullet Theory

Professional communicators, not unlike educators, seek outcomes. Advertisers, for example, hope an effective call-to-action will elicit a desired response, such as a product purchase. Therefore, it could be argued educational communication strives to create motivated responses (outcomes), as well.

Enter the Magic Bullet Theory, the now debunked, but often revisited, supposition that humans react instantly to communicated stimuli. The theory, born without supporting evidence in the 1930s (and also called Hypodermic Needle Theory), purported individuals might react to mediated messages, such as propaganda, with specific behaviors intended by the communicators.

For educators seeking outcomes, soft-learning experiences – sometimes characterized as a one-time trip to a select site – may be a slippery slope of difficult-to-measure Magic-Bullet-Theory-like responses. Kenna and Russell (2015) suggest predetermined measures of effectiveness prior to the soft-learning experience, such as a field trip, can guide outcomes; however, the same researchers, do not propose a spike in student achievement might be a direct consequence of an experiential-learning activity.

Melber (2001) notes rich experiences can result when students are exposed to first-hand knowledge, such as a trip to the zoo; but, again, a direct link of a single zoo trip does not seem to

increase achievement across curricula. In 2004, University Wisconsin, Whitewater's Gosen and Washbush reviewed classroom learning and experiential learning relative to gaming. The pair considered a host of scenarios (and more than 80 studies), including business and student applications, where experiential learning might have been undertaken; suggesting, in the end, that, although a paucity of studies on outcomes relative to such experiences might exist, developing measurements for such experiences is not out-of-reach.

Why Leave the Classroom: Creating Off-Site Experiences

Although anecdotal research indicates students might remember and enjoy an out-of-school experience (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008; Farmer, Knapp, & Benton 2007), such as a field trip, studies tying the field trip experience immediately to student achievement appear as variable as any stimulus-response experiment. Gregory Rohlf (2015) further acknowledges educators might question a field-trip experience that, at first glance, seems entertaining and memory-making, but yields few direct achievement results. His suggestion: Measure student reaction from the students themselves by asking participants to gauge the effectiveness of the excursion. Rohlf (2015), who purports lifetime memories can emerge from experiential learning, did just that, offering positive narrative responses from students who'd attended a field trip years earlier.

DeWitt and Storksdieck (2008), on the other hand, suggest lifetime, or long-term, adjustments in attitudes subsequent to a single organized student outing – in this case, a museum visit – are unlikely. At the same time, some researchers note changes in behavior and attitudes following experiential learning can occur (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014; Farmer et al., 2007), while others suggest the lasting impact of a field trip is in the memories it makes (Connolly, Groome, Sheppard, & Stroud, 2006).

What Makes Experiential Learning Relevant: Students and Supplemental Learning

Thanks to affordable online alternatives, real-time student experiences with remote educators are available on-demand. From connecting classrooms in Connecticut to kids in Hong Kong, to inviting explorers to lecture live via Zoom, Periscope, Skype – or a host of downloadable app's – the opportunities to expand classroom learning are seemingly endless.

Moreover, zoos, museums, and entertainment destinations offer a wide range of online field trips – some of which are pre-packaged (yet interactive), while others are guided by live docents, with students off-site able to ask questions and get up-close (at least on screen) with venues that might otherwise be inaccessible.

For educators, such experiences offer a reasonable alternative to the traditional field trip model, the realities of which include hard expenses and increased liability. Even so, some educators point out first-hand knowledge can supplement (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014) – and sometimes trump – classroom lectures. In areas of high student interest, for example, research indicates increased engagement can occur during "soft" learning, such as science students visiting a science museum – and can even contribute to career decision-making (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014; Connolly et al., 2006).

The extent to which off-site data are retained, however, may be symptomatic of educators' pre-teaching, as well as students' expected outcomes when they return to class (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008). For an examination of research such as this, this means also

considering teachers' attitudes toward experiential learning, as well as exploring educators' commitment to continuing the learning.

How it Works: The Teachers' Role in Experiential Learning

Informal learning is not new, and the United States has a history of incorporating supplemental educational experiences into classroom curriculum. From stories of early settlers' one-room school experiences, to current innovations in teaching, most students will, at some point, leave the classroom to experience an off-site venue deemed educational.

The breadth and quality of the experience, the literature suggests, is affected by teacher preparedness and perception (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008). Kenna and Russell (2005), for example, point out educators who plan prior instruction (aligned with the field trip experience) report increased gains in learning. The pair further asserts orienting students to the venue – through shared expectations before visiting a site – contributes to an upswing in retained knowledge. Pasquier and Narguizian (2006) also suggest (as in any learning situation) gained / retained field trip knowledge is impacted by prior knowledge, while reinforcing field trip learning through reflection is often the obligation of the classroom teacher (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014).

Regardless, Patricia Coughlin (2010) points out educators – regardless of planned reinforcement activities – should consider instructional time relative to academic gains when planning field trips and should carefully evaluate curriculum materials provided by venue-based educators, especially if there is little evidence materials have been evaluated for their effectiveness (which can be the case when non-certified, staff-developed soft-learning content). Coughlin also notes active learning (2010) during a field trip is enhanced when integrated with

classroom content. She suggests educators seek venues with curriculum already aligned with grade-level goals.

For example, in designing a field trip experience for the Lutz-Franklin Schoolhouse in Pennsylvania, Coughlin (2010) collaborated with several groups - including the Lower Saucony Township Historical Society, students, graduates of the schoolhouse, and a professor - to build a three-tiered curriculum-aligned experience for youth that included pre-learning, on-site interaction with schoolhouse graduates, and post-experiences as follow-up in the classroom.

Of the endeavor (and thanks to measured feedback) Coughlin notes students seemed to enjoy the hands-on activities and oral histories provided by Lutz-Franklin graduates. Moreover, the format Coughlin developed makes the experience repeatable, allowing local educators to share pre-activities (such as a coal bucket containing historical lessons) and to participate in a timeline exercise.

Implications of Findings and Application to Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC)

The realities of district budget cuts, in tandem with increases in accountability, are no less impactful locally than they are on a national level. This means area educators are experiencing some of the same instructional rewards and frustrations as their peers across the U.S. - off-site learning experiences notwithstanding.

With 44% of Nebraska's students qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL), according to the Nebraska Department of Education's 2014-2015 State of the Schools Report,

many families' inability to afford supplemental school activities is as real as districts' lack of funding to provide such experiences.

The Cost of Leaving the Classroom

As earlier mentioned, although teachers might agree there is value in off-site, experiential learning, obstacles to providing such experiences – particularly in the absence of empirical evidence supporting achievement – exist.

Consider this scenario: An area Title I elementary school serving 100 students in each grade is planning a field trip for a single grade level. Busses, on average cost $114 apiece, with a maximum passenger capacity of 48. With chaperones the school will require three buses, at a total cost of $342. The hosting venue, a local planetarium, will allow all students to attend at a reduced rate of $4 apiece. Add this to the cost of the busses, and the proposed field trip balloons to $742. For many administrators, what begins as an idea for an outing, deflates in the face of daily needs, such as operational overhead, curriculum materials and hard costs tied to student achievement.

As an alternative to mining school budgets for "soft" experiences, such as camps and field trips, administrators might consider partnership opportunities for student growth and learning.

Grant Funding, School Breaks and Marginalized Populations

At The Durham Museum in Omaha, the shift by educators away from field trips and camp experiences reflected national trends. With increases in online field trip offerings, and decreases in monies allocated for experiential learning, area educators were making changes to

their instructional practice - changes designed to meet testing requirements and accommodate thin budgets.

At the same time, grant funders were seeking opportunities to reach out to marginalized learners and provide hands-on opportunities otherwise unavailable to those living in high FRL environments. To this end, The Durham Museum, Peter Kiewit Foundation, Gifford Farm and Completely Kids, built a Fall Camp Academy for 200 high-poverty students.

The two-day academy featured outcomes tied to Nebraska state standards, and housed students on-site at the Museum, and at Gifford Farm, for the duration of the day camp experience. To facilitate the students' nutritional needs, lunch was also provided, and every student in attendance received a need-based scholarship.

It is important to note, however, the experience was built for learners during a scheduled break, and attendees were qualified by an agency / nonprofit consortium, rather than by their facilitating schools. Funding for the experience was capped at $4,500.

With more than 200,000 children and youth ages 5-19 in the 50-mile radius that comprises Omaha / Council Bluffs (according to the U.S. Census), this initiative could be criticized for serving a very slim component of a more full, robust population. Additionally, some might see the collaborative approach of funders and soft-education providers as unorthodox, while others might label it innovative.

Regardless, the approach provided student experiences – the same type of experiences that might have usefulness for MOEC. The waters are muddied a bit, however, when grant-funded experiential learning is tied to achievement, even at the local level. For example, while

funding might exist for students to attend a day camp, budgets might not permit in-depth analyses of both the short-term, and long-term camp experiences. In the absence of proven results, future funding is jeopardized, and recommendations for student involvement can, conversely dissipate.

However, consider this: Perhaps soft student experiences yield "soft" results. If, then, this is the case, do such results – which might be social, physical or emotional – have value in the overall picture of student growth? Further, if such benefits arise from soft, experiential learning, can the leap from emotional well-being - resulting from such experiences - be made to substantiate increases in achievement? As the learning climate continues to evolve, MOEC's consortium of seasoned educators may want to consider partnership opportunities for extending classroom experiences to the community.

Nevertheless, such partnerships are not recommended at the expense of jeopardizing the instructional day or minimizing the role of achievement in extraneous learning experiences. At the same time, some educators recommend advance establishment of field trip outcomes as a stand-alone measure of achievement – a measure that serves as a yardstick for the experience itself, rather than the experience as a stimulus for increased standardized test scores across curriculum.

Such a strategy, some suggest, requires re-envisioning the purpose and scope of an experiential endeavor, including creating student-led questions prior to the event and having an itinerary that separates students into groups for exploration and inquiry. For example, student groups might create appropriate open-ended questions that can be explored on a science museum

field trip, and can then compare their findings both at the venue and in the classroom (Connolly, et al., 2006).

To optimize the off-site learning experience, Rohlf (2015) recommends preplanning and debriefing, which he notes, may require up to eight hours of classroom time – a commitment he recognizes as significant. He further suggests using inquiry as a springboard for classroom discussion, and continuing the discussion in the experiential environment. For example, a museum trip might include investigative strategies, such as locating particular objects and hypothesizing their origin, followed by object analysis and further research. Such an approach, Rohlf's research suggests, leads to long-term impressions of the visit – impressions that may have intrinsic value – but may not be directly tied to outcomes outside of the visit itself.

References

Allen, L. R., Cox, J., & Cooper, N. L. (2006). The impact of a summer day camp on the resiliency of disadvantaged youths. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, *77*(1), 17-23.

Behrendt, M., & Franklin, T. (2014). A review of research on school field trips and their value in education. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, *9*(3), 235-245.

Coughlin, P. (2010) Making field trips count: Collaborating for meaningful experiences, *The Social Studies*, 101:5, 200-210

Connolly, R., Groome, M., Sheppard, K., & Stroud, N. (2006). Tips from the field. *The Science Teacher*, *73*(1), 42.

DeWitt, J., & Storksdieck, M. (2008). A short review of school field trips: Key findings from the past and implications for the future. *Visitor Studies*, *11*(2), 181-197.

Farmer, J., Knapp, D., & Benton, G. M. (2007). An elementary school environmental education field trip: Long-term effects on ecological and environmental knowledge and attitude development. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, *38*(3), 33-42.

Farmer, J., Knapp, D., & Benton, G. M. (2007). The effects of primary sources and field trip experience on the knowledge retention of multicultural content. *Multicultural Education*, *14*(3), 27.

Gosen, J., & Washbush, J. (2004). A review of scholarship on assessing experiential learning effectiveness. *Simulation & Gaming*, *35*(2), 270-293.

Greene, J. P., Kisida, B., & Bowen, D. H. (2014). The educational value of field trips. *Education Next*, *14*(1).

Hill, J., and Woodland, W. (2002). An evaluation of foreign fieldwork in promoting deep learning: A preliminary investigation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 27*(6), 539–555.

Huang, R. (2012, May). An effective use of experiential learning to integrate field trips and classroom teaching. In *2nd Advances in Hospitality and Tourism Marketing and Management Conference* (Vol. 31).

Kenna, J. L., & Russell III, W. B. (2015). Tripping on the core: Utilizing field trips to enhance the common core. *Social Studies Research & Practice*, *10* (2).

Kisiel, J. (2005). Understanding elementary teacher motivations for science fieldtrips. *Science Education*, *89*(6), 936-955.

Lelliott, A., & Mosabala, M. (2008). Why do they bring their classes? Teacher and learner perceptions of the purpose for class visits to science centres.

Melber, L. M. (2001). Why are they doing that? Animal investigations at the local zoo. *Science Activities: Classroom Projects and Curriculum Ideas*, *37*(4), 10-14.

Nebraska Department of Education, 2014-2015 State of the Schools Report. Retrieved from http://reportcard.education.ne.gov/pg_Demographics.aspx?Page=StudentMeals&AgencyID=00-0000-000

Oliff, P., Mai, C., & Leachman, M. (2012). New school year brings more cuts in state funding for schools. *Washington: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, 1-14.

Pasquier, M., & Narguizian, P.J. (2006). Nature as a resource: Effectively planning an outdoor field trip. *Science Activities, 43*(2), 29-33.

Pfeiffer, V. D., Gemballa, S., Jarodzka, H., Scheiter, K., & Gerjets, P. (2009). Situated learning in the mobile age: Mobile devices on a field trip to the sea. *ALT-J: Research in Learning Technology*, *17*(3), 187-199.

Rohlf, G. (2015). How to make field trips fun, educational, and memorable: Balancing self-directed inquiry with structured learning. *The History Teacher*, *48*(3).

Trainor, C. K. (2009). Tough choices, hard cuts. *American School Board Journal*, *196*, 44-5.

Author's Information

An educator and Omaha's longest running female humor columnist, Jill Bruckner is the former director of education at The Durham Museum in Omaha, where she was accountable for articulating programs for the 20,000 K-12 students - and the nearly 25,000 adult learners - served annually by the museum.

In 2015, under Bruckner's tenure, The Durham Museum's education department welcomed such scholars as Brian Skerry, a multi-year winner in BBC's Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition (owned by the Natural History Museum in London), Egyptologist Kara Cooney and actor / activist Tatanka Means; as well as partnered with area nonprofits, universities, schools, service units and corporations to deliver strategic, textured, intentional and meaningful educational content designed to connect professionals, students, scholars and youth with opportunities for growth.

Formerly, Bruckner was Educational Service Unit #3's data management specialist responsible for measuring effectiveness of professional-development trainings designed to boost educators' skills and increase student achievement. With an expertise in research, design,

analysis and results-presentation - as well as continuous experience collaborating with area school districts to execute climate surveys, FERPA-compliance curriculum and assessment strategies - Bruckner recognizes the unique challenges and opportunities shared by teachers, learners and administrators.

Her past experience includes such diverse activities as launching Nebraska's first CNN Student Bureau to interviewing two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Nicholas Kristof. A former journalism teacher, and longtime media professional, Bruckner has published more than 300 feature articles, profiles, columns and news stories.

Bruckner holds her administrative certification in curriculum supervision, as well as her secondary education certification in speech, journalism and mass communication. She is in progress on her doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Her research focuses on the synergies of math and language, as well as on assessment, evaluation and professional learning.