

Beyond the School Gates: Educational Visits in the Primary School

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Contextualization

Although the research note that follows is primarily about the value of educational visits, undertaken by primary school pupils as part of their school experience, it also raises issues about the extent to which pupils' voices are heard in the debate around the value of such visits. Further, it identifies some of the issues that, necessarily it seems, face a teacher-researcher working in their own classroom, in everyday conditions. If pupils' views about their learning are to be canvassed and taken into account by their teachers, accessing those points of view and making them meaningful for the children involved and other children, bears careful consideration. The account that follows identifies and begins to explore some of these important considerations.

Educational Visits?

A day at the zoo...sketching Roman artifacts in a museum...investigating why rivers have bends...seeing exotic plants and their climatic environments at Kew Gardens. Educational visits are a regular feature of primary school life. So what is all the fuss about? Do educational visits linked to the National Curriculum enhance children's learning and, if so, how and why?

Two big questions that led to a *small* research exercise, which resulted from a professional interest in establishing the educational and personal value of school field trips. The project in question was undertaken as a Doctor of Education (EdD) assignment, in the form of a mini-research report.

Background

Most commentators would agree that primary school educational visits are important (Wass, 1990). Firstly, they are an integral part of school life (Richmond, 1993), despite politically influenced changes that have threatened their future. Secondly, trips are a customary feature of schooling that many believe have intrinsic as well as specific educational value for all children (Gair, 1997; Hunt, 1991; Link, 1981; Richmond, 1997b; Thomas, 1994; Wilkinson and Clive, 2001).

Following the educational reforms that began in the 1980s, there have arguably been a successive series of 'tinkerings' with the school system. Recently, the introduction of new initiatives has been seen to threaten the survival of the traditional school 'trip', as teachers feel manoeuvred into diverting all available curriculum time into school-based activities (Richmond, 1997c). This has become an imperative now, in an era of school 'league tables' and the ubiquitous daily *Literacy and Numeracy Strategies*. Additionally, schools contend with the time-consuming and pressurised regime of national testing. Since 'experience' gained by children is not included in league table *reportage*, there is a danger that the real benefits of educational visits will be overlooked. Do we need to re-evaluate the educational value of out-of-school experiences, before learning becomes so 'strategised' that schooling becomes a series of lessons occurring solely within a classroom vacuum?

Much of the literature to date has, in fact, recognised in positive terms, the cognitive and affective benefits to children of all abilities and in all kinds of personal circumstances, of this type of work (Cotton, 1983; Hammerman, 1980; and LaGrange, 1993). This body of literature collectively reinforces the notion that children's learning is enhanced (Wass, 1990), when it is taken out of the classroom and rooted in first-hand experiences. Additionally, the thrust of most of the work that has been undertaken in this area, views these experiences as inherently a good thing (Arkinstall, 1977), with little dissent that might challenge the precept upon which this view is based, although this has rarely been tested empirically. The mini-project described below is an attempt to begin this process.

The Project

The project intended to bring visits into a sharp focus through the investigation of the value of just one visit, to Kew Gardens, London, organised for my own Year 5 class in school. The point was to begin to evaluate the *educational value* of using visits to teach elements of the National Curriculum for science in Key Stage 2, in an era when, perhaps, teachers might take the view that curriculum time can scarcely incorporate the mandatory and 'in-vogue' practices imposed on them by the statutory curriculum.

This project tried to establish the learning value of educational visits *from the perspectives of children themselves* in terms of their own perceived acquisition of a set of teacher-planned learning outcomes as a part of the children's National Curriculum science work on plant growth and reproduction. Whether or not the children's perceptions of their learning would relate to my own planned ideas would prove interesting! While not in any way 'hard' research, this investigation of a single visit as a 'case', interesting in itself, did provide a valuable insight into children's perceptions and whether or not planned learning outcomes were, in fact, acquired in the way they had been intended by me, the teacher.

Procedure Used

The trial involved two classes of Year 5 pupils, one used in the piloting process and the other for the actual fieldwork. The pilot involved asking a parallel Year 5 class the same questions about the trip to Kew, which those children, too, had just visited based on the same agenda as my own class visit (parallel classes follow the same topic plans and 'paired' teacher work ensures this). It focused on a single, unique *experience* in its own right, which was this 'optional' trip to Kew to see a range of indigenous and exotic flora. The idea was to supplement class work, related to different plant species and the manner in which they are propagated in the natural environment, and to 'see' how they grow. The crucial point to be made here is that the situation was seen as intrinsically worthy of examination, with a professional goal as its outcome: the enhanced acquisition by the children of a set of planned learning goals about plants, were to be judged jointly by the children and the teacher afterwards. A self-administered questionnaire was developed with a small group of pupils to collect data about the trip from the rest of the children in the class. This method seemed attractive, as it took into account the nature of the research task- a small scale, exploratory piece of course work research- and the maths work on surveys being undertaken in the Year 5 classes at that time. The science topic on plants, provided a small 'window' of opportunity in a very busy and crowded school year to begin to evaluate, empirically, my teaching of science through field trips, using a cross-curricular link with survey based work.

The questionnaire enabled the research to be integrated into existing class work, doing a 'real' survey that would influence their learning. It also permitted the involvement of four particularly able children to act as 'co-researchers' with me, to trial the nature of the questions in devising a questionnaire that would yield useful data, both for my academic work and for the work of the class itself. The decision to create the core group of four of the

most able pupils was simply due to expediency in undertaking this initial project. The short time scale to complete the class work, and the pressure to submit an EdD assignment, meant that less able children, who would have required more intensive involvement in formulating a viable questionnaire, were in effect excluded. This decision was made, despite the likelihood that the insights of less academically developed children may have been equally, more, or indeed differentially, valuable, bearing in mind their own special needs and the commonly-held belief that trips are a means to improved inclusion as suggested by LaGrange (1993). This was a limitation, which would need to be addressed in further, more expanded research.

The process of piloting the questionnaire also proved more complex than had been anticipated. Indeed, the framing of questions- both closed and open- had to be appropriate to the wide range of reading and comprehension skills of the children. The 'co-researchers' themselves, demonstrated a surprising range of interpretations among the small group, highlighting the crucial importance of careful question 'framing'. This group piloted the questions first. It was clear as a result that more preparatory work with the group of four 'co-researching' pupils was needed on the nature of surveys in questionnaire format. It proved to be quite difficult to convert complex, 'adult' ideas into a form both accessible to 9-10 year-olds, yet valid as a research instrument in its own right.

Problems that emerged during the piloting process mainly concerned question wording and eradicating ambiguity in the mechanics of completing the questionnaire 'on screen', using a computer. The questionnaire was piloted four times before it was administered. This was done three times just within the group of four and once more with the parallel class of Year 5 children. This involved asking the parallel class to complete the questionnaire on an occasion before it was given to my class. What struck the group of four, and me, the most was the possibility for ambiguous interpretation of apparently straightforward questions. For example, the question;

"Overall, do you think the trip was worthwhile - Yes, Not Sure, No?"

was vague and invoked a range of responses that surprised us: some children said "No" but also indicated elsewhere on the form that they had learned a lot about plants, while others said "Yes" but had difficulty being specific about what they could remember about plants seen during the visit. This led to discussion among the group of four about their peers' attitudes towards, or even recognition of, learning; that is as the teacher had at least intended it to be! The result was a 'tightening up' of the question frame:

As our aim was to learn more about plants than just by learning about them in class, do you think the trip was worthwhile in helping you to do this?

Difficulties encountered by this group- both semantic and technical- were mainly addressed, despite time constraints, through extra support from me as teacher/researcher in the form of several small-group discussions about the intended focus of the trip and exactly which questions needed to be asked of the children's own peers.

The major ethical issue - that I needed to avoid being *exploitative* of the children's help in the project - was a cause for concern, despite an initial feeling that, as the nature of the study was professionally orientated, the position *appeared* to be straightforward. This study did, though, present some difficulties since, as class teacher, I evaluated children's learning as a positioned observer with a *dual purpose* in mind. It was never the intention, however, to gain an objective 'judgement' about the value of this particular field trip, but rather to 'share' in its evaluation with the very children with whom I work, even at the risk of compromising any 'researcher distance', that it was tempting to adopt. The point here is that the experience

was, indeed, a shared one, that I was intimately involved in the situation, that this would encourage a frank interchange of ideas and that I would not be seeking observational distance in the pursuit of my work with the children in question.

It might also have been worthwhile to gather a parental perspective on the children's involvement in this visit and more generally in school based trips. This information may also have provided me with contexts outside the school within which to locate individual responses, since home attitudes and experiences related to the research topic were likely to influence children's perceptions of them and their educational worth. However the limited nature of the research task and time pressures prompted me to consider these as issues for future development. In the event, children were told that they would be helping me with 'college work', by evaluating the trip to Kew. By integrating the children's learning into the project, both as co-writers of the questionnaire and as respondents through *planned* class work relevant to the National Curriculum, it became in my view, a legitimate activity.

The questionnaires were completed simultaneously in the school's computer suite. This was intended to provide the children with an ICT task with a 'real' objective and to provide a measure of anonymity by avoiding the identification of individuals by the recognition of their handwriting. It was also expedient to complete the questionnaires at once, therefore using valuable class time economically. This was necessary because the school's timetable did not allow individual, separate time in order for children to work privately on a computer, unsupervised. It was also intended that the children would be given the 'freedom' to opt out, without being identified as a part of the planned, partially anonymous, conditions under which questionnaires were to be completed and printed. However, this proved impossible with one 'slot' in the computer suite, since children could observe each other and I could see what was happening. These issues themselves, reflect some of the practical difficulties of pursuing valid research in schools as a teacher researcher. In the future, the plan would be to provide proper anonymity, through individual access to a computer, despite the problem of supervision, which would need to be overcome. One child, did, however, elect not to take part, while five questionnaires were 'lost' during printing, and twenty-six responses were collected.

Analysis and dissemination of the findings also had to be a transparent process through which the principal participants, the children, stood to gain. Ownership of the data, and findings, was negotiated through discussion, and agreement with the children from the outset. This provided a means of basic respondent validation, at least in terms of exactly who would see the agreed findings, how they would be written up (both in school and in the form of an EdD assignment), although in reality we did not alter anything after the questionnaire was completed. The data were tabulated manually by the team of four children, reporting the findings back to the class for further discussion and through the presentation of a bar graph in class (I used SPSS software to represent data afterwards, mainly for the formal assignment). The ethical advantage of obtaining fully 'open' participant consent to the research activity and dissemination is, however, in my view, off set by the potential for children to exercise their freedom to reject or censor the findings, thereby possibly causing the project to become a contentious issue which could threaten pupil-teacher relationships. A 'real' use for the findings in school was explained to the children in terms of providing the next Year 5 teacher with information that would help them to decide whether or not to arrange a similar trip next year. This was a genuine intention and was duly undertaken by class representatives. Individual children were not identified, and the teacher received aggregated recommendations based on the number of 'Yes', 'No' and 'Not Sure' responses.

The Outcomes

Most children responded positively to the trip, the majority feeling that they had learned something about plant reproduction and growth cycles (consistent with the planned, formal learning objectives) and enjoying the experience of seeing things for real. Looking at their questionnaire responses, the children's perceptions of their learning did relate broadly to my own, planned objectives, although the gift shop proved even more important to them than I had expected (or hoped). The learning acquired by the children was demonstrated later on in the form of newspaper reports on exotic plants, integrated into English lessons during the subsequent week and shared with the parallel class through a joint display. Aware of the possibility that the children might simply provide what they thought would 'please' the teacher, it was encouraging that some children expressed dissent from a purely positive view, being candid about not having thought much of the trip. An unexpected outcome for me, was the apparent disparity between some children who said they had not *enjoyed* the trip, yet were able to confirm that they had acquired some, or even most, of the learning planned into the day. This could be significant. Much thinking to date, C.B.E. (1983), and indeed my own ideas, Richmond (1997a), on the value of out-of-school learning assumes a tacitly-held correlation between learning *and* enjoyment. A number of responses in this situation seemed to challenge the value of this correlation, opening up a new avenue for study in the next phase of the research.

The exercise has proved useful. As an EdD student, it focused research interests on a *real* professional situation, and in a manner consistent with an ethical concern for enhancing children's learning. It tried out a questionnaire in a planned, reasonably systematic way. Most importantly, it led to an interesting approach to classroom research that involved children acting in part as 'co-researchers' themselves, although this also raised questions about the extent to which such involvement can be fully 'consensual'. This approach aims to evaluate the educational efficacy of trips and how children themselves can become involved in this kind of self-evaluation.

How, exactly, the children learned at Kew, in a way that might contrast with classroom study, remains as yet unanswered. A possible answer to this could lie in an investigation into the connection between 'enjoyment' and 'learning', the traditional and tacitly understood *raison d'être* of educational visits, as has been stated. This feature of children's educational development does, indeed, promise much for further investigation, especially in an era in which there is little or no 'spare' time in the curriculum to teach anything other than the curricular Statutory Orders. The more detailed evaluation of educational visits as a means of teaching the National Curriculum effectively and efficiently, in a way that adds to children's experiences of primary school, is clearly the next step in this area of educational enquiry.

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