

# Teacher Perceptions of Field-Trip Planning and Implementation

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## ABSTRACT

The kindergarten to grade 7 (K-7) field-trip market is a sizeable visitor demographic for many museums. As such, it is important for museums to better understand teachers' (the key decision-makers of this demographic) perceptions of planning and implementing such visits. This article reports on some of the outcomes of a study that investigated the factors influencing K-7 teachers' decisions to make field-trip visits in Vancouver, Canada<sup>1</sup>— a large metropolitan city containing a diversity of museums. The key outcomes emergent from the study, in the context of the city of Vancouver, its many field-trip venues and its teachers, have relevance for both educators and museum policy makers in other metropolitan areas. We address issues that call for reflection on assumptions that might be deeply entrenched and also affirm and reiterate the findings of contemporary studies of teacher perceptions regarding field-trip visits.

## BACKGROUND

There are a number of studies that have examined the issues of teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward planning and implementing class field trips. Studies by Falk & Balling (1979), Muse, Chiarelott & Davidman (1982), Orion (1993) and Price & Hein (1991) showed that teachers considered issues such as cost and/or availability of transportation as important elements in field-trip planning. Muse et al. (1982),

Orion (1993), Price & Hein (1991) and Michie (1998) also demonstrated that the time spent in preparation and potential conflicts with school time tables are important variables in planning and implementing class field trips to museums. (*Note: For this article, the term museum is used as a collective term for museums, science centers/centres, aquaria and other similar informal-education venues.*)

A study by Jamison (1998) considered the perceptions of elementary- and middle-school teachers regarding field-trip visitation to the Minnesota History Center and the Science Museum of Minnesota. Jamison determined that the museum location (with respect to the teachers' schools), the quality of the exhibits and programs, the safety and security of students, and the relevance of the field-trip experiences to the school curriculum were key factors in teachers' planning of visits to these sites. The study also demonstrated that teachers believed that more effective communication on the behalf of the venues would improve the quality of field trips.

A study by Michie (1995) examined secondary schoolteacher perceptions of field trips and found that communication between the field-trip venue and schools played a very important role in teachers' planning for field trips. Michie (1998) asserted that the teachers interviewed in his study generally agreed that field trips were valuable experiences for their students, while the key barriers that kept teachers from

doing field trips centered on a lack of support from school administrations and lack of time to prepare relevant teaching materials. He suggests that school administrators recognize the value of field trips for student learning, and that professional development sessions should help teachers build confidence in field-trip preparation. However, Falk & Balling (1979) found that administrative support and curriculum flexibility were not very serious barriers for field trips.

The perceptions of teachers emerging from these studies are in many instances not surprising, and might be commonly held views across other contexts. However, our study was conducted to affirm teacher perceptions in the context of the City of Vancouver, and also to explore other unforeseen barriers that might hinder teachers in their field-trip planning and implementation. In addition, we were keen to understand the relative weighting of issues which confront teachers in their field-trip planning, such that museums might be better able to serve this market more effectively and promote increased levels of field-trip participation.

## THE STUDY

This research study was a joint collaborative effort between the University of British Columbia (UBC) and Science World British Columbia, a local science center. We sought to understand the issues, determinants and barriers faced by K-7 teachers when planning and implementing field trips to museums in Greater Vancouver.

<sup>1</sup> The study was conducted in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), with a population of 2 million people.

The study adopted a two-phase approach that employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The first phase focused on a sample of 93 K-7 teachers, who were surveyed at their schools via a 23-item paper-and-pencil questionnaire. A total of 195 questionnaires were administered to teachers in the target school districts. A total of 93 were completed and returned—a voluntary return rate of 48%.

The questionnaire data were analyzed and the findings used to inform the second phase of the study, which comprised the development of a focus group interview protocol and the administration of focus group discussions with two cohorts each containing approximately 6 teachers. The selection of the cohorts was based on questionnaire responses which more fully enlightened key issues surrounding field trips. Thus, the quantitative data from phase one of the study yielded results from which we asserted generalizations about the K-7 teacher population in Vancouver, while the qualitative data of phase two yielded mutually supporting information that added both richness and depth to the emergent findings of phase one.

The study included teachers, who volunteered to participate, from 10 different schools across 3 different large school districts of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), namely Vancouver (central city), Richmond (~10 to 15 miles from central Vancouver) and Surrey (~40 to 50 miles from central Vancouver).

The central city area of Vancouver contains many of the large museums, such as Science World, the Vancouver Aquarium, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Vancouver Museum, the Maritime Museum and the H.R. MacMillan



**Figure 1.** The Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) illustrating the location of the city center in relation to the GVRD school districts.

Space Centre, which schools in the GVRD visit during class field trips. Figure 1 illustrates the relative locations of the school districts to the city center.

## OUTCOMES

We are reporting some of the key outcomes that speak to the issues of teacher perceptions and museums' assumptions, as well as connect with the findings of some of the studies discussed previously.

### Teachers' Characteristics

Here are the characteristics of the 93 teacher respondents.

- **School District**  
22% of teachers were from the Vancouver School District, 35% from Richmond and 44% from Surrey.
- **Years of Teaching Experience**  
11% of teachers had 1 to 3 years experience, 27% had 4 to 8 years experience, and 62% had more than 8 years of experience in the classroom.
- **Grade Level Taught**  
48% taught grades K-3, while 52% taught grades 4-7.

### Teachers' Views of Field Trips

The vast majority (90%) of teachers were firmly of the view that field trips were highly valuable educational experiences for their students. Only 10% felt that such experiences were only of moderate educational value for students.

Teachers were asked about where the division of responsibility for preparation and planning lay among themselves, their administrations and the field-trip venues. Two interesting outcomes emerged. First, the majority of teachers (60%) believed that it was the combined responsibility of the museum and teacher to provide the *planning of at-venue experiences*; however, almost one-third said that it was the sole responsibility of the museum to provide the *planning of at-venue experiences* for visiting classes. Second, one-third of teachers indicated that it was a museum's responsibility for the provision of *post-visit activities*.

Regardless of one's philosophical position on the issue of where responsibilities should lay, the message for museums is that they need to cater to diverse needs and perceptions. Programs and field-trip experiences need to address the needs of teachers who desire to direct and/or co-mediate experiences and agendas, as well as those who desire and expect museums to fully mediate the experience.

Teachers' reflections on the divisions of responsibility for field trips between themselves and their administrations revealed that more than one-quarter of all teachers in the study reported that they were dissatisfied with where responsibilities laid. This finding is in keeping with the outcomes of the study by Michie (1998) reported earlier. Issues frequently cited included a need

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*Students and chaperones enjoy a field trip to Science World in Vancouver.*

for less work when dealing with money, transportation, permission and paperwork, and also a desire for a central person in the District Office to make planning easier.

The emergent issues of teachers' attitudes about pre- and post-visit activities were probed further in both focus group discussions and through other items on the questionnaire. The analysis revealed that teachers held the strong view that the provision of pre-visit materials by the museum was more desirable, and probably more important, than provision of post-visit activities for the overall success of the experience.

*I think that pre-visit [materials] are more important [than post-visit]; for me to tell the kids where we are going, what we are going to be doing, why we are going, what to watch for, what to try, just to prepare to answer a lot of their questions before even going, [so they know] why we are taking them to a field trip in a certain place.*

Grade 5 Teacher, Vancouver

The preference for adequate pre-visit resources above post-visit resources was further affirmed by the fact that few teachers reported capitalizing on the field-trip experiences when back

in the classroom, nor within the curriculum frameworks that were the justification for the field trip.

### ***Perceptions of Planning and Implementation***

We probed the issues teachers consider when planning and implementing field trips in both the questionnaire and focus group phases of this study. On the questionnaire, teachers were asked to rank order a set of thirteen issues, from the highest to lowest priority of importance, that they consider in planning and implementing field-trip visits.

We calculated an overall rank ordering and an evaluation of relative importance for the top five issues—a weighting of 1.0 was given to first priority issues through to 0.2 for the fifth priority issue. Teachers' top five issues and their associated weighting

of importance are detailed in *Table 1*. Analysis indicated that the most dominant and important issue was the degree to which the field-trip experience fit the school-based curriculum (*curriculum fit*). *Perceived value of the experience* [for the students] and *venue entry costs* were considered of equal relative importance. The *amount of enjoyment* students would likely experience and *transportation costs* were considered equally as the third most important issues.

Interestingly, the issue of *venue entry costs* was considered twice as important as *transportation costs* in the overall consideration of planning and implementing field trips. This finding was independent of school district, and hence geographic distance from the bulk of the GVRD museums. These views were also supported by the focus group data.

### ***Disparity between museum expectations and teachers' beliefs***

Some disparities became evident between the initial perception and beliefs of our museum co-investigator (Science World), and also, the perception and pedagogical practices of teachers.

Prior to the commencement of the study, our museum co-investigator's policy and practice assumed that

***Table 1. Top five issues teachers consider when planning field trips by weighting factor***

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Overall Weighting Factor</b>
Curriculum fit	61.6
Perceived value of the experience	43.8
Venue entry costs	43.2
Amount of enjoyment	24.8
Transportation costs	22.2

*transportation costs* was a dominant issue of concern for teachers planning field-trip visits and the prime hindrance to higher levels of visitation. However, phase one of our study demonstrated that teachers regarded at least three other factors as being significantly more important in influencing their decisions to plan field trips. Of greater surprise was the finding that the issue of *venue entry costs* was considered twice as important as *transportation costs*. This outcome was affirmed in other independent measures from the questionnaire and the focus group discussions with teachers in phase two.

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Interviewer:

*So, do you think in your situations, transportation costs are a less important issue than venue entry costs?*

Teachers (All):

*Absolutely!*

Teacher:

*Personally, the entry cost is more important than the transportation cost, because I work at a school where parent drivers aren't a huge problem. So, transportation costs aren't always such a worry.*

Grade 3 Teacher, Richmond

*[Editor's Note: In the U.S. many school districts prohibit parents from transporting students to school-sponsored events, and so U.S. teachers may hold different views on these issues.]*

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For our museum co-investigator, the view that teachers were more concerned with museum entry costs compared with transportation costs spoke to assumptions in both policy and practice that were, on the basis of this study, not the same as the perceptions of the K-7 teachers they served. This finding provides cause for museums to reflect carefully about closely held assumptions that drive policy and practice, and demonstrates

the need for consulting the views of key stakeholders towards such policy and practice.

#### *Disparities between pedagogical beliefs and field-trip practice*

The other disparity we found related to the dominance of teachers' belief that *curriculum fit* was the upper-most issue in both planning and implementing field trips. Analysis of qualitative data sets demonstrated that this belief was not evidenced in teachers' self-reported pedagogical approaches to field-trip implementation, nor in the ways they later integrated the experience within their classroom curriculum.

This finding is similar to the outcomes of recent studies by Storksdieck (2001) and Kisiel (2003). Storksdieck found that most students on field-trip visits to a planetarium did not perceive any post-visit follow-up of the experience in classroom, and that few teachers reported that they had integrated the experience into their classroom curriculum. Kisiel's study also demonstrated the importance that teachers place on curriculum fit, despite a lack of evidence of integration of the field-trip experiences into the school curriculum.

Although there is much evidence to suggest that teachers are required to justify field-trip experiences in terms of curriculum fit in order to secure the legitimacy and administrative authority to implement field trips, there is little evidence that teachers integrated the field-trip experiences into their post-visit curriculum frameworks. Responses from teachers concerning the issue of post-visit capitalization and integration centered on the motivational aspects.

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*... they come away a bit more energised.*

Grade 2 Teacher, Vancouver

*The kids were turned on and had a lot of fun..., that would be successful for a field trip.*

Grade 6 Teacher, Richmond

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Ultimately, teachers placed considerable importance in a field trips' potential to demonstrate relevance with the school-based curriculum. The prime issue of curriculum fit appears to be inextricably linked to the need to secure the legitimacy and administrative authority, and not with integration of field-trip experiences with the school-based curriculum.

Pedagogically speaking, there is little doubt that it is good practice to capitalize on the richness of students' field-trip experiences in the classroom and in the contexts of the school-based curriculum they encounter. The challenge thus lies in the strategies that can foster and assist teachers to capitalize effectively on field-trip experiences after they have left museums.

Understanding these strategies requires further research to not only more fully appreciate the teachers' perspective, but also understand other forces in their professional lives and work environment that may prevent greater integration of the field-trip experiences within the classroom-based curriculum (Anderson et al., 2002).

#### *Factors that impact overall success of field trips*

On an open-ended response eliciting the key factors influencing the overall

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Students and teachers interact with the exhibits in a Science World gallery.

success of field trips, teachers frequently cited factors such as effective pre-planning/pre-lessons, appropriate curriculum fit, engaging/hands-on experi-

ences for students, and sufficient parent volunteers/drivers/easy transportation. *Table 2* provides a detailed distribution of teachers' views on the key factors

**Table 2.** Teachers' views on the key factors influencing the success of field trips

Factor	Counts	Percent
Pre-planning/Pre-lessons	31	33.3%
Curriculum fit	20	21.5%
Interactive/engaging/hands-on for students	18	19.4%
Sufficient parent volunteers/Drivers/Easy transportation	15	16.1%
Enthusiastic/friendly/helpful/skilled venue staff	12	12.9%
Venue well organized/Program offered	7	7.5%
Smooth timing of the planned day/Activities	7	7.5%
Post-visit activities	6	6.5%
Teacher familiarity with venue	5	5.4%
Co-ordination with venue staff	3	3.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>133.3%</b>

*N.B. Multiple responses from teachers account for total percentage >100%*

influencing the success of field trips. Combined with the qualitative data reported earlier, these outcomes affirm the teachers' need and desire for pre-visit material above post-visit resources.

Teachers participating in the focus group discussions were asked about steps that venues, like Science World, could take to assist teachers with the preparation and implementation of field-trip visits so as to influence both the success and impact of the experience. The key issues that dominated the discussion centered on two issues.

First, they requested museum-produced documentation in print that was clear and accessible and, more importantly, showed the links to school-based curriculum and Provincial Curriculum. Second, they wanted a contact person or liaison from the field-trip venue with whom teachers could readily access and identify to directly assist them with their field-trip planning.

The themes and sub-themes of these focus group discussions again pointed to the high priority teachers place on curriculum fit and relevance, the time and workload pressures they face, and their desire for effective and efficient communications. These were consistent with the findings of Jamison (1998).

### SUMMARY

It was clear from our study that teachers perceive field trips to be highly valuable educational experiences for their students. However, the evidence for their value in terms of post-visit use of the experience in the classroom and within curriculum frameworks appears limited. This is despite the fact that teachers overwhelmingly perceive curriculum fit as the most important consideration in planning and implementing field



This year, during the 7th Annual April Award Luncheon held on July 18, 2003 at the Visitor Studies Conference in Columbus, the April Award committee and VSA said farewell to Dr. Marilyn (Molly) Hood. Dr. Hood has impacted the visitor-studies field through decades of groundbreaking audience research. She received a standing ovation when she noted that she was retiring and announced that Rita Deedrick, chair of the 2003 VSA Conference Host Committee, would replace her on the April Award committee.

Dr. Hood spearheaded the effort to bring new professionals into the field. In 1995 she devised the April Award Travelship. Named for her lifelong research assistant, the late April C. Lahm, the April Award Travelship provides a travel stipend and conference registration for a professional new to the visitor-studies field. The recipient is honored during the Conference at the April Award Luncheon.

This year, the luncheon was especially poignant. April Lahm's daughter Kate Lahm Midnight, presented the Travelship check to the seventh recipient, Kimberly Burtnyk of the California Science Center. Luncheon attendees reported it was "very emotional."

Special guests also included Jim Lahm, April Lahm's husband, and Dr. Gary Mullins, April Lahm's graduate advisor and director of the School of Natural Resources at The Ohio State University. The school

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trips. Further research is required to not only more fully appreciate the teachers' perspectives on these matters, but also to better understand other forces that may prevent greater integration of the field-trip experiences within the classroom-based curriculum.

Teachers also clearly value pre-visit materials and resources for their classes and, consistent with the findings of other studies, value effective, efficient communication with venues and increased support from the school administrations.

Finally, perhaps one of the key messages for museums that emerged from this study is the need to reflect on closely held assumption that may drive policy affecting their visitor markets, and the often-cited need to consult the views of key stakeholders towards which policy is targeted.

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