

Field Trips Among Secondary Social Studies Teachers in Florida

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Abstract

Social studies teachers have long utilized field trips; yet in the 21st century, scholars are describing a bleak future for those who attempt to utilize the practice. The common reasons being cited, among others, include a slumping economy, an increase in accountability due to high-stakes testing, and rising fuel costs. While obstacles have always existed, this investigation surveyed 70 secondary social studies teachers from Florida to see if they described any new obstacles or motivations. Furthermore, the investigation sought to determine the percentage of teachers who utilize field trips and establish the average number of field trips they used. The findings reported here are exploratory in nature and focus specifically on identifying the status of field trips among secondary social studies teachers.

Key words: social studies, field trips, museums

Introduction

Each year, teachers from across the United States take millions of elementary and secondary students on what is often a vivid experience, the school field trip (Association of Science and Technology Centers, 2010; 2011). These experiences are no doubt memorable for a myriad of reasons. For many, it is the simple diversion from the normal schedule that makes it stand out. For others, it is the opportunity to experience sights and sounds not afforded to them in their lives outside of school. And still, for more, it is the chance to visit and see the abstract ideas typically only viewed in a textbook or discussed in a class. While these points are accurate for most school disciplines, it rings particularly true among those teaching social studies.

Social studies teachers have long utilized field trips as a teaching pedagogy of “lived learning” whereby “students actively learn through the field experience and the interaction generated among the students as well as between teachers and students” (Coughlin, 2010, p. 200). In fact, teachers used field trips extensively during the early progressive period in education in order to emphasis pedagogies of constructivism (Muse, Chiarelott, & Davidman,

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1982; Windschitl, 2002). Furthermore, the experiences provided to students by field trip sites, such as museums, support the broader goal of social studies—to help students develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). Yet in the 21st century, scholars are describing a bleak future for those who attempt to utilize field trips (Blachowicz & Obrochta, 2005; Brugar, 2012; Coughlin, 2010; Gillett, 2011; Nabors, Edwards, & Murray, 2009; Schatz, 2004; Stoddard, 2009). In my own experience, I found my pre-service teachers consider field trips to be an antiquated pedagogical practice. Therefore, in an effort to better understand this dilemma, I sent out a survey in an attempt to establish the current state of field trip utilization among secondary social studies teachers.

Literature Review

Although there are a variety of reasons provided for the decline of field trips as a pedagogical practice including economic, liability, and testing concerns; the literature suggests teachers have long addressed obstacles. Scholars in the early 1980s for example cited the following obstacles: (a) logistical concerns of transportation and cost, (b) the disparity of teachers' skills, (c) time constraints with school schedules, (d) lack of support from school administration, (e) curriculum inflexibility, (f) poor student behavior, and (g) an inadequacy of resources or venues (Boutelier, 2019; Fido & Gayford, 1982; Kenna & Russell, 2018; Kisiel, 2005; Muse et al., 1982). Moreover, field trips were never a universally adopted practice.

In fact, in 1981, Krepel and DuVall estimated that only about 10% of teachers used field trips. While Muse, Chiarelott, and Davidman (1982) found that approximately 64% of the teachers they surveyed ($N = 195$) utilized a field trip in the previous academic year. Specifically, they found 74% of elementary teachers ($N = 101$) and 54% of secondary teachers ($N = 94$) used a field trip. More recently, Marcus, Levine, and Grenier (2012) found that 60% of the secondary history teachers they surveyed ($N = 94$) utilized a field trip during the previous academic year. Whereas, Kenna and Russell (2015; 2016) found, using a random sample of teachers, that 85% of elementary teachers ($N = 92$) and 46% of the secondary teachers they surveyed ($N = 282$) utilized a field trip in the previous academic year. Thus it appears there is some consistency among the percentage of teachers utilizing field trips in the past 30 years. The frequency of field trips, however, tells another story. The available data suggests elementary and secondary teachers are utilizing field trips about half as many times as they did 30 years ago—a drop from

four to two for elementary teachers and two to one for secondary teachers (Kenna & Russell, 2015; 2016).

As noted earlier, field trips became a prevalent practice and were promoted by progressive educators, perhaps none as prominent as John Dewey (1899/1952; 1938). Early researchers further encouraged the use of field trips due to the favorable findings on how field trips facilitated the acquisition of student learning outcomes (Anderson & Lucas, 1997; Bamberger & Tal, 2008a; 2008b; DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008; Falk, & Dierking, 1992; Gottfried, 1980; Mason, 1980). More recently, researchers have begun to examine the retention rates of students after visiting field trip sites. For example, Strum and Borgner (2010) compared the learning outcomes of sixth grade students ($N = 190$) who experienced the same educational activity but in two different learning environments, one at a field trip site and the other in a classroom. Using a pre-, post-, and retention-test, Strum and Borgner concluded both the field trip-group and the classroom-group experienced cognitive gains from the pre-test to the post-test; however, "...the museum-group outperformed the classroom-group in the post-test and in the retention-test" (p. 17). Thus, students who attended a field trip to a museum not only experience short-term but also long-term cognitive gains equal to or greater than those who did not attend the field trip.

Interestingly, the bulk of teachers' motivations for utilizing field trips are in line with non-cognitive learning goals, such as affective and social learning outcomes. Kisiel (2005) found eight reasons why elementary teachers' ($N = 115$) wanted to use field trips: (a) connect with curriculum, (b) provide learning experiences, (c) promote lifelong learning, (d) foster interest and motivation, (e) expose students to new experiences, (f) provide a change of setting, (g) provide enjoyment or reward, and (h) satisfy school expectations. While in another study, Marcus et al. (2012) found that the secondary history teachers they surveyed ($N = 82$) "...value museums as a means of promoting aspects of historical thinking even more highly than as a means of teaching specific content" (p. 78).

Given the documented motivations of teachers, it should come as no surprise that researchers would examine non-cognitive learning outcomes associated with field trips. For instance, a year after a group of middle school students ($N = 30$) had experienced a field trip to the Great Smoky Mountains they were not only able to recall cognitive facts about plant species they had seen but they also expressed a new perceived pro-environmental attitude (Farmer,

Knapp, & Benton, 2007). Another study found that a group of adults ($N = 8$) often recalled several positive aspects to field trips particularly the ability to socialize as well as being exposed to new careers and cultures (Pace & Tesi, 2004). Finally, in a survey of university science majors, Salmi (2003) found that 20% credited a K-12 field trip as a substantial reason why they choose to major in a science discipline.

Field trips alone, however, may not be as educationally productive as once believed. In fact, Cox-Petersen, Marsh, Kisiel, and Melber (2003) discovered, after observing 30 visiting school groups at a natural history museum and interviewing a select number of students ($N = 85$), that students learned only low levels of science as a result of their field trip. Additionally, students are often unaware of the specific learning goals, or objectives, associated with their field trip (Kisiel, 2005). Worse yet, teachers often did not establish obvious learning goals for their field trips, as they struggled to connect it to the school curriculum. Storksdieck (2001) found teachers were unaware of the role they played in shaping their students' experiences while attending a field trip. That is, aside from scheduling the experience, teachers believed it was the responsibility of the staff at the site to lead the experience. Interestingly, 90% of those teachers still acknowledged the field trip as a highly valuable educational experience, yet a majority of them admitted they thought the experience would have been better if they had completed some sort of preparation, follow up, or both with the students.

Purpose of the Study

This investigation grew out of a larger study that examined teachers from a variety of disciplines and their practices with field trips. The findings reported here are exploratory in nature and focus specifically on identifying the state field trip utilization among secondary social studies teachers. The hope is that this information will serve as a discussion point for social studies teachers and teacher educators. Namely, by shining a light on current and past trends so teachers will find encouragement in their current practices, as well as inspiration for improvement with the practice of using field trips. The following questions guided this investigation:

1. What percentage of secondary social studies teachers utilized field trips, and how frequently did they utilize them?
2. Does school locale or Title I status have an influence on whether secondary social studies teachers would utilized a field trip or not?

3. What type of sites did secondary social studies visit, and what was the average amount of time and cost associated with those visits?
4. Do secondary social studies teachers express any new motivations or obstacles to the practice of utilizing field trips?

Method

Population and Sample

For this investigation, I used select data collected for a larger study that examined Florida K-12 teachers' utilization of field trips. I selected participants using a multi-stage cluster sampling technique. This involved first selecting clusters (i.e. schools) and then selecting individuals (i.e. teachers) (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Since the intended population for the original study included teachers who taught grades K-12 there were four types of clusters: elementary (i.e. grades K-5), middle (i.e. grades 6-8), high (i.e. grades 9-12), and intermittent schools (i.e. grades K-6, K-8, 8-12).

Employing the National Center for Educational Statistic's (NCES) Common Core of Data, I randomly selected 65 schools from each cluster. Then utilizing each school's public website I randomly selected 12 teachers from each school, for secondary schools that included three from the following subject areas: social studies, science, mathematics, and language arts. I utilized the Tailored-Design Method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009) and contacted 2,902 secondary teachers via email a total of five times between October and December of 2013. In total, 374 secondary teachers responded. The response rate then was about 13%, which I anticipated given the survey method (Lefever, Dal, & Matthiasdottir, 2007). Out of the 374 responders, 70 self-identified themselves as secondary social studies teachers; this is the data I analyzed for this investigation.

I conducted an additional analysis of the sample in order to see to what extent it was comparable to the larger population of secondary teachers in the state of Florida. Given that some of the most often mentioned obstacles to utilizing field trips is time and money, both of which can be attached to transportation, I decided to compare the following variables: school locale and Title I status. Using the NCES's Common Core of Data I was able to calculate the number of secondary teachers for the two variables and compare it to similar data the participants self-reported. While it is difficult to say conclusively how the secondary social studies teachers in the sample differ or relate to those from the intended population, this analysis

suggests the school locale of the sample is representative of the population. However, the Title I status the participants self-reported differs significantly from the population (see Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of Demographics Between Study Sample and Population

Demographic Information		Population	Sample
Title I School:	Yes	81.9%	35.7%
	No	18.1%	55.7%
	Unsure	—	8.6%
School Locale:	Rural	15.8%	10%
	Small Town	18.7%	15.7%
	Suburban	50.8%	52.9%
	Urban	14.7%	21.4%

Instrumentation and Analysis

I developed a questionnaire (Appendix A) to obtain descriptive data using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The survey asked secondary social studies teachers to identify: the total number of field trips they lead, the type of sites they visited, the average time—including transportation—it took to complete the field trip, the average cost associated with the field trip, and what their motivations were for utilizing or not utilizing field trips. I calculated the quantifiable data using frequencies and descriptive statistics, and the following non-parametric tests—Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U—because it was not normally distributed (Stevens, 2007). While I used open coding to analysis open-ended responses to identify important concepts and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Limitations

As is the case with any research study, there are several limitations within this study. First, the data is reflective of secondary (i.e. grades 6 through 12) public school social studies teachers from Florida. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalizable to teachers outside of Florida. Also, the results are not generalizable to teachers outside of social studies, even within the state. Second, the questionnaire was only concerned with teachers' utilization of field trips during the 2012-13 academic year. Thus, no calculations can be made with regards to teachers' utilization of fields prior to or after that time frame. Third, this study was concerned with academic field trips and provided a definition to the participants for clarification purposes; however, some teachers expressed they used field trips for recreational purposes (e.g. rewards).

Therefore, some of the numbers regarding the number of field trips utilized may be inflated. Finally, all of the data used in this study is self-reported. For that reason, all the results were limited by the honesty and reliability of the participants who provided information for this study.

Findings

Percentage and Frequency

The descriptive statistics revealed that 51% of the secondary social studies teachers utilized at least one field trip in the previous academic year. Table 2 shows the break down of the number of field trips the participants self-reported. Further examination revealed non-parametric data, and so while the calculated mean came to 1.39, the median was one. Additionally, after removing two outliers of 10 and 12, the mean and median number of field trips dropped to 1.1 and .5, respectfully.

Table 2
Break Down of Field Trips Use

Number of Field Trips Utilized	Number of Teachers	Total Attended
Zero	34	0
One	11	11
Two	9	18
Three	10	30
Four	4	16
Ten	1	10
Twelve	1	12
Total	70	97

School Locale and Title I Status

A Kruskal-Wallis test showed there was no significant difference in the number of field trips secondary social studies teachers used based on their self-reported school locale ($\chi^2 = 2.35$, $df = 3$, $p > .05$). While a Mann-Whitney U test revealed there was no significant difference in the number of field trips secondary social studies teachers used based on their self-reported Title I status (MWU = 455.5; $z = -.437$; $df = 64$; $p > .05$).

Sites and Average Time and Cost

Secondary social studies teachers identified visiting a variety of sites, 18 in all (See Table 3). While there is no way of knowing exactly how social studies utilized these sites to teach their disciplines, the bulk of the sites seem appropriate. Yet, there are a few that seem a bit out of place for social studies teachers (i.e. Aquarium, Science Center, and Zoo). A closer examination

showed middle school teachers (i.e. grades 6-8) visited all of the aforementioned sites. A Mann-Whitney U found a significant difference between the number of field trips middle school and high school social studies teachers utilized (MWU = 383; $z = -2.8$; $df = 70$; $p < .05$). In fact, middle school teachers in this study accounted for approximately three-fourths of the field trips, and they had a mean rank of 41.2 while high school teachers had a mean rank of 28.4. There were only two sites high school social studies teachers used exclusively, Business and Monument/Memorial.

Table 3
Sites Used by Secondary Social Studies Teachers

Type of Site	Number of Times Used by Teachers
Museum	15
Theater	10
Amusement Park	8
Government Building	8
Locale, State, or National Park	8
Monument or Memorial	7
Business	5
Science Center	5
College or University	4
Reenactment	4
Festival	3
Space Center	3
Zoo	3
Competition	2
Historical City	2
Aquarium	1
K-12 School	1
Nature	1
Total	90*

*Note: 7 sites were not reported

For the average cost, 32 secondary social studies teachers were able to recall the cost for 53 of the 97 field trips. The average costs ranged from \$0 to \$2,900 with a mean of \$170.49, median of \$10, and mode of \$0. However, after removing nine outliers (i.e. \$200, \$350, \$550, \$700, \$800, \$850, \$900, \$1,200, and \$2,900), the new range was \$0 to \$55, with a mean of \$13.32, median of \$7, and mode of \$0.

For the average time, 36 secondary social studies teachers were able to recall the times for 47 of the 97 field trips. The average time was displayed in hours, and ranged from two hours to 144 hours with a mean of 25.47 hours, median of seven hours, and mode of seven hours. Given there was a positive correlation ($r = .85$, $n = 32$, $p < .01$) between the average cost and average time; that is, a higher cost equals more time, I again removed nine outliers (i.e. 144, 144, 144, 120, 96, 96, 96, 84, and 48 hours). The new range was two hours to 11 hours, with a mean of 5.92 hours, median of 5.75 hours, and mode of seven.

Motivations and Obstacles

I asked secondary social studies teachers two open-ended questions: “why do you utilize field trips” and “why do you not utilize field trips”. In total, 68 participants provided 36 responses to the first question and 40 responses to the second question. After coding, I found little difference in the motivations they expressed towards field trips and those I found in the literature. Actually, secondary social studies teachers’ motivations were similar to the elementary teachers’ in Kisiel’s 2005 study. The lone exception came with the idea of promoting lifelong learners, as no teacher described this as a motivation. In all, they described seven motivations listed in Table 4. These teachers often expressed multiple motivations and so the motivations are not mutually exclusive.

Table 4
Sites Used by Secondary Social Studies Teachers

Motivation	Description	Teachers Identified with Motivation (N =36)
Connect with the curriculum	Teachers see a field trip as an opportunity to support or enhance the content taught in the classroom	42%
Provide a general learning experience	Teachers see a field trip as an opportunity to provide students with a memorable learning experience	25%
Provide a reward or incentive	Teachers see a field trip as an enjoyable experience, and as such, an opportunity to reward student behavior or effort	17%
Expose to new life experience	Teachers see a field trip as an opportunity to provide students with a new learning experience they may not have other wise	11%
Foster interest with content	Teachers see a field trip as an opportunity to foster student interest with the content.	11%
Provide a change of setting	Teachers see a field trip as an opportunity to get out of the classroom and change the routine	6%
Satisfy school expectations	Teachers are expected to conduct a field trip per school policy or tradition	6%

As with the motivations, there was little difference between the obstacles described in the literature and those described by secondary social studies teachers in this study. Eight obstacles were coded and ranked (see Table 5). Again, teachers expressed multiple obstacles. It is also important to note the similarity between several of these categories. For instance, there is often a positive correlation between the funds or time and the level of administrative support provided. While, curriculum inflexibility can relate to a lack of resources or a teacher's skill level.

Table 5
Obstacles Identified by Secondary Social Studies Teachers

Obstacle	Description	Teachers Identified with Obstacle (N =34)
Lack of funds	Teachers feel field trips cost too much for schools and students	53%
Lack of time	Teachers feel field trips take too much time to plan field trips and there are too many scheduling conflicts	44%
Lack of support from school or district	Teachers feel their administration does not support their use of field trips	21%
Curriculum inflexibility	Teachers feel the demands of their curriculum are not supported by field trips	18%
Teacher's skill level	Teachers feel they lack the knowledge to plan and conduct field trips	18%
Poor student behavior and liability	Teachers feel poor student behavior and the liability associated with taking students off-campus out weigh the benefits of going on a field trip	15%
Paperwork and other logistics	Teachers feel the paperwork and other logistic concerns associated with field trips are too cumbersome	12%
Lack of resources or venues	Teachers feel there is little to no resources or venues available to them	3%

Discussion

The initial research question sought to determine the percentage of secondary social studies teachers who utilized field trips and the frequency they utilized them. Comparison to previous studies reveals several similarities. First, the percentage of secondary teachers utilizing field trips has changed little over the years. While the frequency has decreased from the studies completed in the early 1980s (Muse et al., 1982), it is in line with more recent studies (Kenna & Russell, 2016). Finally, like the Muse et al. study, I found a small sample of secondary social studies teachers utilized a high volume of field trips, which I consider four or more field trips a year. Thus, six teachers (17%) accounted for nearly 40% of the total number of reported field trips.

Overall, these findings suggest a large number of secondary social studies teachers still value field trips as a pedagogical tool. Plus, they provided no new obstacles or motivations.

Therefore, teachers today must weigh the motivations and obstacles differently than in previous years. For instance, a top motivation to using field trips identified both in this study and in previous studies was connecting the resource to the curriculum. Yet, thanks to the Internet teachers today can simply connect students to outside primary and secondary sources, perhaps lessening the push of this motivation. Conversely, a frequent obstacle has long been time, however, the demands of testing has intensified its pull.

Additionally, the data demonstrated there was no significant difference in the number of field trips a secondary social studies teacher would utilize based on their school locale or Title I status. While a common held belief might be that suburban or urban teachers utilize field trips more often due to a greater abundance of resources and venues, such as museums, the data suggests rural and small town social studies teachers are able to attend field trips with a similar frequency. The wide variety of field trip sites identified by the teachers may help explain these particular results. For instance, in the top half of the list is sites available in nearly all school locales (i.e. government buildings, parks, monuments, and businesses). Not to mention the resourcefulness of teachers in identifying 18 different types of sites.

Still, because 18 different sites were identified it does not mean the average teacher is aware of so many sites. I believe these results present an opportunity to those who might want to advocate for field trips. Namely, generating awareness of potential field trip sites available to secondary social studies teachers and identifying how each site might connect to social studies content. Perhaps a curriculum specialist could create such a list for their district by surveying their teachers and compiling their responses. Once compiled, the list should be easily accessible, often referenced, and occasionally updated. Furthermore, given there was no significant difference in the number of field trips social studies teachers used based on school locale, this resource should be completed by both rural and urban school districts.

Another key research question sought to determine the average amount of time and cost associated with the field trips. This information is important because the literature has identified it as the two most important obstacles teachers face when deciding to utilize a field trip, which the participants reaffirmed in this study. Although teachers reported weeklong field trips that cost students thousands of dollars, after controlling for those outliers, the majority of the field trips cost students less than \$15. Additionally, field trips took students roughly 6 hours to complete, which suggests students are able to take their usual transportation to and from school.

Another encouraging finding is that the mode for the average cost was zero dollars. It is important to note, though, several teachers reported receiving a grant or completing fundraising in order to keep the cost to students low. So while monetary cost may have been low for students, it may have come at the expense of a teacher's time. Moreover, several participants reported taking small groups of students on a field trip requiring schools to pay for a substitute teacher to attend to the students who do not go on the field trip. Finally, some participants stated they had to take field trips on weekends or during school breaks in order to circumvent the issue of paying for substitutes. This again brings about the issue of the cost of time to teachers, not to mention the question of monetary compensation for directly working with students during non-traditional contact hours.

Ultimately, it should come as no surprise that teachers identified time and money as the main obstacles; however, it communicates several ways they need help. First, teachers described time as a scheduling problem. Teachers had to make sure their schedule, their intended site's schedule, and their school's schedule all aligned. Given the personal experiences and school contexts of each teacher, there might be little an advocate can do to aide a teacher with this matter. However, the description of time as energy had more to do with the planning and organizing of field trips. Thus, in addition to providing teachers a greater awareness of potential sites and helping them build a rationale for those sites, districts can make sure teachers have access to the necessary paperwork, including completed examples. Additionally, a district can provide teachers a list of approved vendors to use for transportation and links to potential revenue sources (e.g. grants and fundraising ideas). While few participants of this study cited paperwork and logistics as an obstacle, it is perhaps one of the easier obstacles to address. Plus, addressing planning and organization directly affects the time component that teachers put into field trips.

Conclusion

A field trip is an educational tool and practice, and like other tools and practices, I do not expect every teacher to use it. While the literature on field trips is not as rich as other areas, historically about 50% of secondary teachers used field trips with a two-trip average, which hardly seems like a lot. Nonetheless, the findings of this study confirm recent commentaries about the decline of the practice, at least to some degree. Yes, the frequency of teachers who use field trips has decreased but the percentage of teachers who utilize the practice has remained

consistent. Although the teachers in this study did not identify any new motivations or obstacles, their descriptions indicated that the motivations and obstacles were weighed differently than in previous years. This study also affirmed that large populations of teachers who desire to use field trips still exist. However, if the frequency is ever to return to previous levels then teachers will need assistance in two ways. First, teachers need a list of potential field trip sites with a corresponding rationale for each site. Given the average time associated with field trips, districts or local advocates may be best suited to generate a list of this nature. Second, teachers need clearer directions from districts regarding the early planning and logistical aspects of field trips such as, completed examples of paperwork, help with transportation, and links to grant and fundraising opportunities.

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