



TOP TIPS & LESSONS LEARNT

From WWT's school visit research project



hope-stone
research



This project looked at the impact a school visit to a WWT Wetland centre had on children's attitudes to nature.

The research was conducted by Hope-Stone Research in collaboration with WWT between May 2015 and July 2017.

This document is for anyone planning to do similar research. We hope it is useful.

If you would like to read more please visit wwt.org.uk/learn/research

1. A collaborative approach reaps rewards

WWT worked closely with Hope-Stone Research on the research design. This collaborative approach made the model more robust and gave WWT better insight into how to improve their school visit experience. Although ultimately worthwhile, this involvement was time consuming, which should be taken into account when planning.

WWT learning staff supported the researchers during data collection by carrying out supplementary observations of groups during visits. This gave a different perspective and provided a useful '2nd pair of eyes' for the researcher. By giving staff the opportunity to observe a group throughout their entire visit, from a fly on the wall perspective, WWT has identified areas of improvement around group logistics and engagement.

2. Minimise the variables but ensure representation

One of our biggest challenges was ensuring data was comparable and representative. We addressed this by reducing variance wherever possible. Every variable can impact the comparability, and thus validity, of the data so it is important to reduce variables as much as possible.

To do this we selected schools that attended the same session (pond dipping) and WWT centres that represented similar experiences. In this way the experience and likely 'takeaway' were as similar as possible. We selected state funded, mixed gender schools and Y4 pupils where possible.

It should also be noted that within any given sample, more variables mean smaller sub-sample sizes that are harder to reliably measure.



3. Giving a voice to children and other stakeholders

One key element to this research work was to give a big voice to the children taking part. Initially we wanted to understand, from their own perspective, what makes a good trip and what they like doing. Afterwards we were keen to discover what they got out of the visit and the longer-term impact it had on them. Additionally we gave them an opportunity to comment on the research findings and share any solutions they had to the big questions, about increasing impact, which WWT wanted answered.



Critical to the study was teacher feedback. While teachers were not able to answer regarding impact on individual pupils, they know their class and were able to provide a context and overview of the impact of the visit. They were also able to provide insight into the learning and social context of the pupils and help us understand some of their responses. This was important as on occasions pupils appear to recall



things or make claims that didn't make sense and teachers were able to verify, refute or clarify this feedback.

Finally we came to understand that, not surprisingly, life outside of school has a big impact on pupils, both their general environment and the people they spend time with. In retrospect, having some element of feedback from parents, carers and other relatives involved with the children would have provided additional insight into the factors affecting pupil actions and attitudes.

4. Don't ask more questions than necessary

At the start of our project we formulated each survey question to address a particular desired outcome but we found that only a handful of these questions provided relevant insight into change. This approach also led to some questions being similar, which the children completing them found repetitive.

While it is tempting to ask as much as possible while you have the opportunity to do so, we recommend aiming for an ideal of just three questions to measure key outcomes. Any more creates fatigue for children and additional analysis time for the researcher.

5. Qualitative feedback is critical

The quantitative survey data provides measures of change, but without asking pupils and teachers why these patterns occur we cannot fully understand what they mean.

We found having a qualitative element to our research particularly helpful when some of the quantitative data appeared contradictory, for example some indicators increasing while others are decreasing.

It also helped us to understand any small but insightful phenomena that are invisible in survey data.



6. observation is valuable, but not in isolation

Observing the school groups during the visit and learning sessions is important to understand where pupils become engaged and where they switch off. It also provides an insight into the role that adults (teachers, accompanying parents, presenters etc.) play in managing the day. This can then provide a context for the follow up interviews and discussions with pupils and teachers. However observation needs to be conducted in conjunction with these other approaches, as it is possible to generalise behaviour across a school group and to misinterpret visual signs.

7. Be prepared to adapt your approach

Test the quantitative elements of your research before doing a full roll-out. We found that some questions didn't work, either because of the value of data we obtained or the comprehension by children answering. Once tested quantitative tools are best kept the same to ensure comparable data over time and across participants.

Qualitative tools have more flexibility, as additional questions can be asked and others dropped without seriously affecting the data collection. This allows for new questions to be posed in the light of interim findings that may need more exploration or clarification.

Changing the approach can also be helpful if the participants are changing themselves. In the case of school children it might be growing older, changing interests and lifestyles or changing schools. Additionally, if the programme offers changes during the course of the research period, reflecting and asking about these changes will help explain quantitative results.

8. Keeping participants engaged



All pupils had a change of teacher part way through the research period as they moved from year 4 to year 5. The new teachers were not always familiar with the project, or even the visit itself. Therefore it is important

to maintain contact with both the original teacher and to establish a relationship with the new teacher to ensure that the research process can continue.

We found that pupils can become bored with the process. The surveys once every few months had little impact but repeated focus group discussions were felt by some to be repetitive. To address this we changed and added content, asked different questions and kept discussions short and fun.

Further ways to maintain engagement could be to change the discussion location, for example outside in a green area, or do different tasks, such as writing, sticking and drawing rather than just talking.



9. The research effect on awareness and recall

Simply by asking questions about the visit pupils are likely to say they recall something that they might have otherwise forgotten. This research effect can artificially raise levels above schools that didn't



take part in the research, we cannot be certain by how much.

It is more pronounced in schools where an evaluator visited the school to perform the qualitative research rather than the school simply receiving questionnaires

to complete. Keeping these two samples separate would be one approach to reducing the impact of the research effect but this could also reduce the comparable sample size and thus overall reliability.

We found when working with young children that they were nearly always pleased to see the researcher and often wanted to please by giving the 'right answer'. Good qualitative research techniques - remaining neutral, asking for different opinions, suggesting that being negative can be as helpful - can help reduce this effect, but it is something that needs to be taken into account.

We found that over such an extended period of time (around 12 months for each pupil) the exact chronology of events was often inaccurate. Caution was needed to ensure that actions taken and changes in attitudes occurred after the visit rather than before. Again checking back with the teacher is helpful in such circumstances (see point 8).

10. Make sure you get consent

Working with children requires consent, either from the school or parents, particularly if video or audio recording is taking place. If research takes place during the school day, at the school or under the control of school staff (e.g. during a visit session) then consent is a school responsibility.

It is advisable to issue consent forms that cover each level of interaction and data use (e.g. research, marketing, online, broadcast) at the beginning of the project. It ensures parents are fully informed and can opt their child out if necessary, in our experience few took this option.

11. When change only occurs among a small number it can be hard to spot



While we have some evidence of aggregated change across the whole sample, those individuals expressing this are limited in number and the reasons for change do not readily show themselves in survey data.

Having qualitative discussions can help identify individuals experiencing change and why the change might have occurred. But unless the quantitative data set is much larger (and consequently more expensive) we cannot easily measure who experiences change and why.

If resources allowed, continuing the research among those who have expressed a change as a result of their visit would be an interesting further study.

12. Share your work widely and freely

We are openly sharing our methods, survey design, results and the lessons we have learnt. We have been pleasantly surprised by how many organisations have been interested in this research and we have found other organisations willing to share their research approach too. It is harder to know what research is already happening, outside of large-scale projects, and we are pleased to see that the sector is making efforts to bring together research in this area.





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