

A DOOR TO THE WORLD

WITH TEACHERS INCREASINGLY ASKED TO JUSTIFY THE EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS OF OVERSEAS TRIPS, ELAINE SKATES EXPLORES THE IMPACT AND PRACTICALITIES OF SCHOOL TRAVEL IN RAISING ATTAINMENT AND ASPIRATIONS...

Every year, thousands of teachers give up their own time, not to mention significant energy and sleepless nights, to extend their pupils' learning beyond UK shores.

These teachers are not doing it because they fancy a nice 'holiday'. They do it because they want to make a difference to the young people they work with, broaden their horizons and inspire learning. Because they can see that it works.

Learning outside the classroom (LOtC), whether it happens in the school grounds or the Southern Hemisphere, raises attainment, improves behaviour and engages all pupils. Overseas visits offer varied and powerful opportunities for learning.

As Ian Pearson of School Travel Forum (STF) puts it: "Everybody remembers their school trips and I think it is because the dynamic experience you get from them fits how people have learnt from time immemorial"

A 2014 survey, undertaken by STF in partnership with the Education Company Ltd (EdCo), found that a massive 97% of secondary schools offer residential trips in the UK and overseas, with schools with good or outstanding Ofsted ratings being the most likely to offer these experiences.

The survey also reported that the most predominate reason for residential visits is "to illustrate and enhance classwork", a fact that seems at odds with the notable trend towards residential trips happening in school holiday periods.

Why overseas?

When planning any learning experience, the first question to ask is "What are we trying to achieve?" Learning outside the classroom is about choosing the best place for impactful learning. Sometimes this can be achieved in the classroom or local community, but often there are major gains in taking learning further afield.

The teaching of the curriculum can be enormously enriched by studying geographical and historical characteristics that can't be seen in the UK, immersing students in a language or culture, or understanding other people's lives and beliefs through first-hand experience.

Memorable experiences enthuse learning with adventure and engage students in science, maths or English. This is evidenced by a 2014 study from the Education Endowment Foundation (Using self-regulation to improve writing), which has found that giving pupils "memorable experiences" to write about can improve literacy skills by nine months on average – and 18 months for disadvantaged pupils on free school meals.

There is also a compelling case around social, moral, spiritual and cultural education, from



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Elaine Skates, is acting chief executive of the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (lotc.org.uk)

broadening horizons to building independence and improving social skills. As one teacher responding to the EdCo survey commented: "For our 13 year olds, it is often the first time they've spent a week away from their family. The fact that our trip is abroad gives added excitement."

Whatever your reasons for leading a visit overseas, focusing on learning objectives and undertaking a cost/benefit assessment will help you make the case to management, governors and parents alike.

Cost and equality

Disadvantaged students may lack experiences beyond their own housing estate or town, let alone further afield. However, with most schools relying on parental contributions to fund visits, the pupils who stand to benefit the most are often the least likely to access these opportunities. The STF/EdCo survey found that schools with high numbers of pupils qualifying for Free School Meals had lower numbers of students participating, but were more likely to place value on the educational content. "Cost of trips and equality of access are the biggest barriers we have to the organisation of trips," commented one respondent. "We are often encouraged to take trips in our own holiday time and little to no recognition is given."

Tips

- Take a whole school approach to budget planning. What will have the most value for learning – new computers or a well-targeted educational experience?
- Consider cross curricula opportunities to improve the value of the visit and free up curriculum time.
- The government has stated its belief that LOtC is an effective use of pupil premium funding. Contributions for disadvantaged pupils can resolve equality of access issues.

- Offer payment plans to collect parental contributions in smaller installments.

Planning and safety

Conducting a thorough risk/benefit assessment and careful planning is vital. This will take time, but should not be excessively onerous. Ensure that planning time is proportionate to the level of risk.

Tips

- Use a specialist school travel company or expeditions provider to reduce planning time and help you identify opportunities for learning.
- Look for the LOtC Quality Badge when selecting a school travel, expeditions or any other LOtC provider. This national accreditation will help you identify providers offering good quality educational experiences and managing risk effectively lotcqualitybadge.org.uk.
- Free guidance on planning, running and evaluating effective LOtC experiences is available lotc.org.uk.
- Access advice from your local outdoor education adviser. Search for an advisor or access the national guidance at oep.info.

