Implementation of Experiential Learning in 4-H Educational Travel Opportunities: A Delphi Study

Samuel Minch & Tim Buttles

University of Wisconsin-River Falls

410 S. Third St
River Falls, WI 54022

715-425-4085

samuel.minch@my.uwrf.edu

timothy.j.buttles@uwrf.edu

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Introduction

With a nationwide enrollment of 6 million youth, 4-H has become the largest positive youth development organization in the United States (National 4-H Council, n.d.). Wisconsin and Minnesota account for 73,000 and 66,000 youth, respectively (Division of Extension, 2019; University of Minnesota Extension, n.d.). Urban and rural 4-H youth take responsibility for their learning by exploring project areas ranging from citizenship to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) (Enfield, 2001). Popular 4-H experiences are the educational travel opportunities which include Citizenship Washington Focus, National 4-H Congress, National 4-H Conference, and Space Camp (National 4-H Council, n.d.). State 4-H programs also offer interstate youth exchanges and other national trips which allow youth to travel to various locations in the United States while networking with other state 4-H members. Members' firsthand experiences include citizenship, leadership, the inner workings of government, and STEM (National 4-H Council, n.d.).

As 4-H implements the experiential learning model and the interest in educational travel opportunities grows, the need to understand the impact experiential learning has on these experiences will only continue to increase. The lack of published studies leaves a gap for 4-H educators in research-based information around the use of experiential learning in educational travel opportunities. The objectives of this study were to (a) identify where and how experiential learning is implemented in 4-H educational travel opportunities**;** (b) determine potential drawbacks of using the experiential learning model in 4-H educational travel opportunities; and (c) choose possible ways that experiential learning could be further implemented in 4-H educational travel opportunities.

Theoretical Framework & Methodology

Experiential learning has become an integral part of 4-H. At its heart, the basis of experiential learning rests in the fact that experiences matter. Many educators have agreed that without experience, there can be no learning or real understanding of concepts (Dewey, 1938; Enfield et al., 2007; Kolb, 1984). Dewey (1938) further argued that without the opportunity to reflect on an experience and apply newly learned knowledge, experiences may have misguided and miseducated learners. The five step 4-H experiential learning model guides youth to reflect on an experience and apply what they learn to new situations (Norman & Jordan, n.d.).

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the [Campus]. The Delphi method was used to gain a consensus on the opinions of 4-H educators regarding experiential learning in 4-H educational travel opportunities. Sixteen 4-H educators were selected from those nominated by state 4-H leaders in Wisconsin and Minnesota as experts in 4-H educational travel opportunities. Two rounds of Qualtrics surveys were used, the minimum number for a Delphi study (Warner, 2014). The first round survey included three open-ended questions with one for each objective. The responses were then analyzed and related items combined to create statements for round two. The second round Likert scale statements asked study participants to state their agreement level to 13 statements related to the three objectives of the study using a five-point scale. For a consensus

to be reached, two-thirds of study participants needed to either somewhat agree or strongly agree, or somewhat disagree or strongly disagree (Warner, 2014).

Findings & Conclusions

The first-round survey responses confirmed the importance of experiential education in 4-H, with one participant responding that "experiential education is a large component of all Wisconsin 4-H educational travel opportunities." Clear themes emerged after analysis of all responses. Most respondents discussed the importance of experiential education. However, analyzing the responses question by question, response by response, led to the 13 second-round Likert scale items.

Twelve of the 13 statements in the second round reached consensus by meeting or exceeding the two-thirds level of agreement. All 4-H educators agreed that youth participate in experiential learning to prepare for trips and that youth can grow through these experiences while learning from their peers. From a 4-H educator's view, the experiential learning model is used for the entirety of the trip (83% agreed or strongly agreed) from beginning to end. These findings compare with other studies that show that all 4-H programs use this model (Enfield et al., 2007; Torock, 2009). Additionally, all 4-H educators agreed that 4-H youth who participate in educational travel opportunities should learn from other 4-H members and develop college, career, and life skills. While not as clear as the first, the second objective showed agreement that there could be drawbacks to using the experiential learning model in 4-H educational opportunities, mostly time and effort to plan these activities (83% strongly agreed). Finally, the third objective proved that most 4-H educators agreed that experiential learning opportunities can be added to the front side of the trip (83% agreement on both adding interviews and including youth in the planning stages) and that another possible way to add more experiential learning opportunities is to include spaces where they can lead lessons (83% agreement). The panel did not reach consensus on one item related to objective 2: If goals and objectives are clear, there are no potential drawbacks. Fifty percent agreed or strongly agreed while 33% indicated they neither agreed nor disagreed.

Implications/Recommendations

Based on the results, it can be recommended that experiential learning should be expanded in 4-H educational travel opportunities. Noting the high agreeance level of potential drawbacks in time and effort needed, it can be suggested that 4-H educators could look at including youth on the planning side with proper adult guidance. Additionally, adding interviews before the trip can allow 4-H educators to provide another experiential learning opportunity for 4-H youth, providing more personal growth and preparing members for future experiences. However, a certain amount of caution should be noted so that the time and effort need to plan or hinder the flexibility of plans while on the trip needs to be taken.

The significant impact that this study can have is that it opens the door to discussion about how and where more experiential learning can be implemented in 4-H educational travel opportunities. It also starts a base consensus on how 4-H educators view experiential learning in different 4-H settings. The study should be repeated in additional states across a larger area of the country to confirm these results. Additionally, future studies should explore how 4-H youth themselves feel about experiential learning in educational travel opportunities and identify ways to reduce the drawbacks of experiential learning in educational travel opportunities. Finally, given the current state of society, it would be interesting to see how opinions change as we move out of the COVID-19 era and return to normalcy.

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