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A Field Trip That's Not About the Destination but the Journey

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Abstract

This Practitioner Perspective presents a middle school unit focused on designing a day-long field trip as an effective project-based initiative for advancing social and emotional learning (SEL). It considers the social and emotional competencies students develop as they navigate the complexities of this project: researching options, planning an itinerary that meets various parameters, and ultimately taking the trip. It also offers practical guidance to schools for successfully adopting this program.

Introduction

How do we learn how to collaborate, negotiate, plan, seek help, and solve problems? To lead a productive meeting? To resolve a conflict with a neighbor? To advocate effectively at a town hall? To divide household responsibilities fairly?

A tremendous body of research highlights the persistent benefits of social and emotional learning (Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2018) and the crucial role schools play in preparing students with these competencies (Jones & Kahn, 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). Yet, efforts to develop these skills in school often feel contrived.

This article describes Harlem Academy's middle school unit, "Explore," which challenges students to design a day-long field trip. We set broad parameters that steer students toward a shared goal, but there are countless possibilities for achieving it. This means students need to collaborate to understand their options, weigh competing opinions, and make decisions as a group – all while considering logistics of transportation, timing, and cost. The project is effective because it is not a hypothetical exercise. Students have a concrete reason to work together: They are going to take the trip they have planned (Berman et al., 2018).

Students work in small groups over the course of six weeks to plan an itinerary that follows basic guidelines. At Harlem Academy, each trip must include unfamiliar cuisines, an interesting landmark, an institution of learning, and two different boroughs. The activities also have to take place during regular school hours and cost no more than \$35 per person. Schools not

located in a city can select parameters relevant to their location, such as learning from a professional in the community, visiting a nonprofit or store, doing a new kind of athletic or artistic activity in a park, or planning an initiative to help the community.

Harlem Academy's Ground Rules

General Requirements

- Leave school no earlier than 9:00 a.m.; return no later than 4:30 p.m.
- Stay with your group the entire day.
- Remain within a budget of \$35/student.

What to See and Do

- Eat food (lunch, snacks, etc.) from two different cultures. One type of food should be new to at least 80% of the group.
- Visit at least one iconic landmark.
- Study an exhibit in at least one institution of learning (museum, cultural center, university).
- Spend time in at least two of the five boroughs.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has established a framework focused on five core social and emotional competencies (n.d.):

- **Self-awareness:** Recognizing one's emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior in different situations

- Self-management: Regulating one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations to achieve goals
- Social awareness: Taking the perspective of and empathizing with others
- Relationship skills: Establishing and maintaining healthy relationships and navigating settings with diverse individuals and groups
- Responsible decision-making: Making constructive, respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions

We consider each phase of the Explore unit through the lens of this framework to tease out the pathways to student growth and learning.

Phase 1: Research

Before students can sketch an itinerary, they begin with a research phase that includes splitting up the work, sifting through the possibilities, and organizing the information – all of which help to develop students' self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills.

One of the exciting aspects of this project is that there are many possible approaches, and we challenge students to develop relationship skills as they figure out how to organize group tasks. One student might suggest the group split into three sections – separately tackling cuisine, landmarks, and institutions of learning – and then come together to share their findings. Another may propose a group brainstorm, assigning one person to take notes as classmates search online and suggest ideas across all categories – and then divvying up the research evenly. Students work through these decisions to come up with a process that offers everyone an interesting and equitable role.

Even creating a system to organize the research requires social awareness as students decide which information to track. In their initial scan of the options, for example, they might note whether the landmark is near a subway stop that can accommodate a classmate in a wheelchair or whether the restaurant serves halal foods to ensure everyone on their team is able to participate fully.

Phase 2: Planning

Armed with initial research, the group comes together to identify common interests, evaluate prices, and consider transportation and timing so that they can solidify a plan. During this phase, students need to empathize with one another, communicate their preferences, listen to others' ideas, and negotiate conflict to be successful.

Again, how students organize the work is intentionally a gray area. Students often specialize during this phase, with one person managing the budget, another calculating possible routes and transportation options, another keeping track of the schedule, and another taking notes as the discussion progresses. It takes self-awareness to recognize one's strengths in taking on a role and self-management to organize the process.

We see social awareness develop when a student suggests they try Jamaican cuisine because he knows his classmate's family immigrated from there (Gehlbach, 2017). We'll see self-awareness on display when another student realizes how little she knows about the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender civil rights movement and recommends visiting Stonewall National Monument.

Finalizing the itinerary takes multiple sessions as students grapple with the logistics and problem solving needed to organize a complex trip. For instance, if they find their itinerary exceeds the budget, they may try to negotiate group rates (tapping their relationship skills) before adjusting their plan. Or if distances turn out to be too far to make it back on time, they may have to shift to a different option.

In the end, students rely on their relationship skills as they make decisions and negotiate tradeoffs. They learn when to listen, when to speak up, and how to manage their emotions. One student may make the case for a destination that matters to him, a classmate may propose a compromise, and once they see a path forward, another student may suggest a vote. "One person can't make the decisions alone," said Ava Mason, then in fifth grade. "We all have to choose where we're going together." Table 1 illustrates a sample plan.

Table 1*Sample Plan*

Step	Description and Address or Directions	Start Time	End Time	Cost/person
Travel	Leave Harlem Academy. Walk to the 6 train 110 th St. Station. Ride to Canal St.	8:30 a.m.	9:10 a.m.	\$2.25
Cuisine	Morning snack: Fay Da Bakery, Chinese Pastries. 191 Centre St. (Manhattan)	9:10 a.m.	9:40 a.m.	\$7.00
Travel	Walk from 191 Centre St. to Brooklyn Bridge Entrance, straight down Centre St.	9:40 a.m.	9:50 a.m.	\$0
Landmark	Walk the Brooklyn Bridge, view the Statue of Liberty (Manhattan and Brooklyn)	9:50 a.m.	10:50 a.m.	\$0
Travel	4 or 5 train from Brooklyn Bridge-City Hall to 59 th St. N or R train from Lexington/59 th St. to 36 th Ave.	10:50 a.m.	11:45 a.m.	\$0 w/MTA pass
Exhibit	Museum of the Moving Image at 36-01 35 th Ave. (Queens)	11:45 a.m.	1:45 p.m.	\$10
Travel	Walk to the corner of 34 th Ave. and 36 th St.	1:45 p.m.	2:00 p.m.	\$0
Cuisine	Sarajevo Fast Foods: Bosnian/Eastern European food (bureks, cevapi). 3718 34 th Ave., Long Island City	2:00 p.m.	3:00 p.m.	\$10.50
Travel	R train from Steinway St. to Lexington/59 th St., 6 train from 59 th St. to 110 th St.	3:00 p.m.	3:40 p.m.	\$0 w/MTA pass

Phase 3: Implementation

After weeks of planning, students quickly learn the truth in the adage, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." Students learn to be flexible, navigate unforeseen challenges, and ask for help when they need it. On a recent trip, for example, when students' original plan to ice

skate at Riverbank State Park was hampered by a rainstorm, they had to approach the staff at the park for permission to use the gymnasium for basketball instead. Another group of fifth graders got off at the wrong subway stop, and after huddling around a map for a minute, approached a passerby for help.

Table 2*SEL Competencies aligned with Phases*

SEL Competency	Research Phase	Planning Phase	Implementation Phase
Self-Awareness	N/A	Recognizing one's values and interests in advocating for specific options; Recognizing one's strengths in taking on responsibilities	Understanding one's assets as the team navigates the day and manages unforeseen circumstances
Self-Management	Setting goals for the trip; Organizing information so that it can be shared with peers and referenced in the planning stage	Managing emotions through tradeoffs; Organizing and assigning tasks; Tracking planned routes, costs, timing	Remaining flexible as plans change; Taking action to navigate challenges
Social Awareness	Considering special needs within the group	Considering peers' interests, identities as a	Understanding how to conduct oneself in

		plan is solidified; Knowing when to speak, when to listen	various settings based on social cues
Relationship Skills	Dividing group tasks so that everyone has an interesting and equitable role	Determining a fair decision-making strategy; Communicating effectively and navigating conflicts	Working as a team to accomplish a task; Asking for help when needed

Throughout the day, we also see students build social awareness as they navigate the norms of different spaces. From a quiet museum to a lively street stand selling Eastern European fast food, students continuously gather social cues to guide the way they conduct themselves.

Students not only develop as responsible decision-makers but also practice important relationship skills as they make constructive choices in unfamiliar settings and outside of their regular social groups. Succeeding through these challenges helps students understand both their own assets and the power of teamwork in a way that is lasting and transferrable to the classroom and other settings (Nilson, 2010).

Tips for Success

Scaffold. We teach this six-week unit annually during an advisory period held twice per week from sixth through eighth grade, providing progressively less support with each passing year. We expect our youngest students to take ownership of the project, but we provide additional structure and fewer choices (Simons et al., 2007). For instance, we start them with lists of types of cuisines, landmarks, and institutions of learning to help them jump into their research. During the planning phase, we often assign roles and provide worksheets to help them record information about their top options and to organize their overall planning. On the trip, we are more likely to jump in to help if we see them making a mistake. By eighth grade, we expect students to lead the work, self-organize, and navigate challenges during every stage.

Repetition. We believe in the Aristotelian ethic: “We are what we repeatedly do; Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit.” Students need plenty of repeated practice to internalize habits (Neal et al., 2006), and we intentionally make this unit the focus of several weeks and repeat it for three years. By eighth grade, students truly do have the breadth of skills needed to work in a group to plan and

implement this complex project. (As a bonus, they have also visited lots of off-the-beaten-path locales in their hometown!)

Standing back. In our role as teachers and administrators, we naturally take the lead. From the minutia of announcing, “OK everyone, line up so we can get started” to picking up tickets for admission to a museum, we tend to drive the social interactions, leadership, and decisions that make an activity succeed. This unit calls for us to step back and empower students to rise to these tasks.

It is tough to let your students jump off at the wrong subway stop – especially when you know they are on a tight schedule. The advisor’s role, however, should be limited to safety, not perfect orchestration of the plan. Some of the best learning happens when there is an actual challenge to navigate – when a student has to call a museum to say their group will be late, when they need to work with the transit authority to figure out a problem with their subway pass, or to make a last-minute backup plan when the restaurant they planned to visit was unexpectedly closed. It is in those moments we see true collaboration, leadership, help seeking, and problem solving.

Conclusion

The core focus for this trip is for students to learn and grow. A serendipitous benefit has been an unexpected feedback loop. We often see a student who can be difficult in the classroom demonstrate tremendous leadership during the trip. As educators, it is an important window into how the structures of middle school can be challenging for certain personality types, obscuring assets that we mean to value and celebrate. Each year, this trip is a chance to step back and observe, helping us to bring these realizations back to our traditional middle school environment. It pushes us to challenge our assumptions, to develop new opportunities for students to leverage these strengths, and ultimately to be better educators (Jagers et al., 2018).

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