

Field Trips and Parent Chaperones: A Study of Self-Guided School Groups at the Monterey Bay Aquarium

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“The school groups are running amok!” If you’re an educator at a museum, zoo or aquarium, you’ve probably heard that comment from security guards, sales clerks, visitor services staff, or other coworkers concerned about the general public’s experience. This report focuses on the meaning of “amok” as it applies to self-guided school groups and questions general assumptions about self-guided school groups.

Background

We conducted a study, partially funded by the Monterey Bay Aquarium, of self-guided school groups. At the aquarium on any given weekday morning during the school year approximately 50 to 60% of the arriving students are scheduled to participate in a self-guided “tour,” that is, they have registered to tour the aquarium led by their teachers and chaperones. They do not participate in a formal program led by an aquarium staff member. This is not unusual; most museums, zoos and aquariums admit self-guided school groups. And, like the Monterey Bay Aquarium, most places provide these groups with rules of conduct and pre- and post-visit materials.

Because self-guided groups don’t participate in a formal program, the concern at the aquarium was that the educational experience for these groups was somehow lacking. The assumption was that the aquarium could provide on-site materials or activities that would help these groups gain greater educational benefit from their visits.

When we joined the project, the aquarium was conducting a formative evaluation of a draft kit for the chaperones of self-guided school groups, grades 3 to 5. The goals for the self-guided materials were to enable the chaperones to:

- enjoy leading their groups
- use the materials to encourage and lead discussions with students
- share and encourage the excitement of discovery with students
- meet the content objectives set by the aquarium.

The draft kit proved to be difficult to use, but that’s another story. What we proposed to the aquarium, and the story we want to tell here, was to back up a bit and gather baseline data: Who are the chaperones? How are they prepared for their role? What happens while they’re at the aquarium? Who

leads the group: the chaperone or the students? Where do they go? What interactions take place? And, the big one—Does learning occur?

The aquarium agreed. In 1992 they funded a two-week study. It was short because we were near the end of the school year. We continued the study in the spring of 1994 over about a four-week period. We chose the spring in both cases because that is when most school groups visit and when most groups run amok. We figured we would be more likely to get worst-case scenarios.

Methods

We used two methods to gather data. First, we conducted a random telephone survey of teachers after they had visited the aquarium. We wanted to know how the teachers had selected and prepared their chaperones. By phone, we spoke to a total of 35 teachers (13 in 1992; 22 in 1994).

Second, we followed self-guided school groups during an aquarium visit. We randomly selected a school group (grades 3 to 5) from the list of those registered. We then called the teacher to ask permission to follow one of his/her chaperoned groups. Then, while the group was gathering at the aquarium's entrance, we randomly selected a chaperone and followed that self-guided group. We wanted to know what they did and to determine the quality of the educational experience. We managed to follow the entire "tour" of a total of 20 school groups (7 in 1992; 13 in 1994).

We want to caution you about the generalizability of this study. Our sample sizes are small (35 teachers interviewed and 20 groups followed). Our data were gathered during two different school years: 1992 and 1994. Because of our language deficiencies, we didn't follow Spanish-speaking groups, of which there were three or four in our random sample.

What we're offering here are "first impressions" that have challenged our assumptions and those of the aquarium staff, and may challenge your assumptions about self-guided school groups. Our hope is to open a discussion about chaperoned school groups and generate some interest in studying this topic further.

Discussion of Interviews

First, we'll give you an overview of the similarities among the self-guided school groups, then talk about assumptions and our perception of the reality of these groups.

At the aquarium self-guided groups have a scheduled time of arrival. All arrive late, most (75%) enter more than 30 minutes after their scheduled time. We found that many groups carpool and have to wait for everyone from the pool to arrive before they can enter. Also, lunch breaks are assigned by the aquarium on a first-come, first-served basis because of their

limited space, and so some groups that arrive late in the morning eat lunch before they enter the aquarium.

A teacher with a group of 30 students or so divides the class into smaller groups (usually 4 to 6 students per group) and assigns a parent chaperone to escort that group. The chaperone assigned to a group is usually a parent of one of the children in the group.

According to our phone interviews, teachers recruit about half (53%) of the parent chaperones by requesting help, usually via a letter sent home; about a third (32%) of the parents ask to chaperone, unsolicited by the teacher; about 19% are chosen specifically by the teacher.

Most teachers (66.5%) prepared the chaperones by distributing the aquarium-provided "Suggestions for chaperones" sheet. About a third (35%) of the teachers met with the chaperones before the trip. About half (45%) said they provided logistical information and rules; only 14% provided content information. Worksheets were provided by 16% of the teachers. (Our observations showed that about 38% of groups had worksheets.)

Upon entering the aquarium, each small group heads off on its own. The amount of time in the aquarium varies widely—from 55 minutes to 140 minutes, with most (62%) spending about 90 minutes. Most groups (85%) visited the current temporary exhibit ("Jellies" in 1992 and "Mating Games" in 1994).

Discussion of Observations

Now, our assumptions and observations.

Assumption 1: Chaperones are there to have a good time and let kids run amok.

Observation

Chaperones are conscientious. It may have been because they were being watched, but the chaperones we followed took their roles seriously. They tried to keep the children from interfering with the experience of other visitors. They were sometimes too restrictive, often assuming the children couldn't touch when they could. They did their best to answer questions or find the answers by reading interpretive labels and/or talking with staff. And, if the teacher had them on a schedule or gave them an assignment, they followed orders.

Assumption 2: Chaperones are (or are supposed to be) substitute teachers.

Observation

Chaperones are parents. In almost all cases the parent chaperoned a group that included his or her child and at least one or two friends. They interacted with the students in ways that suggest more of a family group than a teacher working with students. According to teachers the main reason

(68.5%) parents chaperone is to be with their kids. The second reason is to see the Monterey Bay Aquarium (57%). The third reason cited (41%) was because parents wanted to be involved in their child's education/learning experiences.

Assumption 3: Self-guided groups need help to stay "on task," that is learning.

Observation

Chaperoned school groups are "on task." That is, learning occurs in ways similar to those of family groups. If one observes chaperoned groups from a traditional education perspective, then the chaperoned groups seem to be "off task" for much of the time. They don't stay very long at each exhibit, they're not being directed, and they're spending a lot of time interacting with one another. If one observes chaperoned groups from the perspective of the current research on family groups and learning (see References & Readings), self-guided groups seem to be "on task" for much of the time. They discuss amongst themselves and with the adult chaperone what they're seeing and experiencing, they ask questions, they offer points of view or insights or personal experiences. They also use the resources available, in particular identification labels, usually those above the windows, and docents or staff.

Instead of furthering basic science skills (an aquarium goal), the groups are very much involved in social process skills and current theories in social psychology hold that social interaction enhances learning (Litwak, 1992). Social groups, and family groups in particular, are the primary learning environment for humans (Falk & Dierking, 1992).

Assumption 4: Worksheets facilitate learning in chaperoned school groups.

Observation

Worksheets interfere with the social interactions and maybe learning, too. We didn't test the students on content learned, so I can't comment on that. We did observe groups with worksheets (38%) and without worksheets (62%). We found that while filling in the worksheets group members spoke less to one another, looked at the exhibits less, usually gave up on the worksheets during their tour and didn't spend any more time in the aquarium than groups without worksheets. Because of the importance of conversations from a social psychology perspective (Litwak, 1992), We're starting to think that worksheets are more of a detriment than an aid to learning.

Summary

So what does "amok" mean? The meaning depends on your perspective. We were pleasantly surprised at the positive interactions we observed while following chaperoned self-guided groups. We were also surprised, probably

naively so, at how closely self-guided groups resemble family groups, although they're not identical because of the similar ages of the children and lack of "history" between most of the children and the parent chaperones (Taylor in Falk & Dierking, 1992). After listening to the groups' conversations, we found no evidence that the groups were running "amok." In fact, we found quite the opposite.

As educators, we can help facilitate learning within chaperoned groups by "responding to visitors' natural experiences" (Korn, 1994) and focusing on learning within a social group, instead of offering techniques, materials or kits that impose a more traditional education perspective of learning. And as educators, that's hard for us to say.

References

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