

Research notes

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Bringing the classroom to the countryside: evaluation of 'Countryside Live' events

Summary

This document summarises the findings of an evaluation of two **Countryside Live** events funded by the Countryside Agency in partnership with the Countryside Foundation for Education. The events took place in March 2005 at Haydock Park Racecourse, Merseyside and Staunton Country Park, Hampshire and involved some 4,000 school pupils. The evaluation was based on pre-event proformas for participating schools, telephone interviews with non-participating schools, observation during the events, and follow-up interviews with participating staff and pupils several weeks after the events.

When questioned, pupils and teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the content and organisation of the events. Follow-up interviews with pupils suggested that **Countryside Live** had been a learning experience for many. Benefits for staff and other adults, however, were less clear, and there were few examples of schools carrying out curriculum-focused follow-up work after the event. The funders and organisers of **Countryside Live** should be encouraged by the findings of this evaluation. One aspect of the event that could be strengthened in future years, though, is the provision for teachers and support for follow-up work.

Main findings

Participation and preparation by schools

- Staff in non-participating schools reported three main reasons for non-attendance: lack of fit with school plans and curriculum commitments; transportation costs; and pressures on head teachers. The most important implication is that schools need more advanced publicity about these kinds of events in order to be able to plan them into their programmes of work.
- Participating schools were attracted to **Countryside Live** by the out-of-classroom experience and the opportunity to raise pupils' awareness about countryside/environmental issues. More specifically, secondary school teachers valued the curriculum links, primary colleagues noted factors such as cost and proximity and special school staff emphasised the hands-on practical activities.
- There was very positive feedback from teachers who attended the pre-visit briefing. The opportunity to gain a flavour of what the day would involve

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and where it would take place was valued by almost all respondents. Staff were particularly appreciative of the teachers' handbook, the tour of the site and the risk assessment.

- Although most teachers at the pre-visit briefing expressed an intention to undertake preparatory work, in practice this tended to take the form of brief discussions or planning activities about the day. There were few examples of countryside-related curriculum work being carried out before the event.

Pupils' and teachers' experiences of the event

- Pupils and teachers reported overwhelmingly positive experiences at both events. There was a great deal more enthusiasm and affirmation than criticism and complaint.
- The aspects of **Countryside Live** that were particularly appreciated by pupils and teacher included: the opportunity to see and interact with many different animals; the chance to do and see things that were completely new; the practical hands-on activities; the enthusiasm and helpfulness of many exhibitors; the variety and choice of what was on offer; and the professional organisation of the day.
- Where there were issues or difficulties, these concerned: the passive nature of some of the stands; difficulties with crowding and queuing; the inappropriate communication styles of some of the exhibitors; the lack of refreshments; and the conduct of journalists. When asked about possible improvements, teachers and pupils made suggestions relating to: content and activities; organisation; and provision for teachers.

Impacts on pupils, teachers and schools

- The follow-up interviews with pupils in case-study schools suggested that **Countryside Live** had been a learning experience for many. Participants reported learning new ideas about animals and wildlife, farming, food production and rural careers, and developing skills relating to crafts or recreational activities. In some cases, there was also evidence of secondary school pupils developing more positive views of the countryside and primary school children overcoming fears of certain animals. The value of the one-to-one conversations that children had with 'expert' adults was noted by teachers.
- Benefits for staff and other adults were less clear than for pupils. Several staff saw the day as being primarily about pupil (as opposed to teacher) learning, and some also felt that, from an adult perspective, it was interesting rather than informative. Where benefits were reported, though, they included: ideas and information for future teaching; knowledge and understanding about countryside issues/careers; and improved relationships with pupils and parents/ancillary staff.
- In terms of impacts on countryside-related teaching, the evidence was again more mixed. There were few examples of schools carrying out curriculum-focused follow-up work after the event, and most teachers were not optimistic about the prospects for enhancing rural issues and countryside visits within their curricula. This was usually because schools were already doing a considerable amount of this kind of teaching and/or they felt restricted by factors such as curriculum pressures, transport costs and health and safety fears. One issue, however, that was related specifically to **Countryside Live** itself was the lack of useful teaching resources available during the day. Most teachers interviewed simply reported not seeing any, or found what was on offer to be unsuitable for their pupils.

Recommendations

For organisers

1. The funders and organisers of **Countryside Live** should be encouraged by the findings of this evaluation. The feedback from participating staff and pupils was overwhelmingly positive, particularly in terms of the scale and organisation of the day, the quality of what was on offer and the benefits that accrued to pupils.
2. The pre-event briefing should remain an integral part of the initiative, but could be used even more specifically to stress the importance of curriculum links and the need for preparation and follow-up work. This could draw on examples from schools within this report. Consideration should also be given to extending and formalising the pre-booking system.
3. The marketing of future events should provide schools with as much advanced notice as possible, and stress the out-of-classroom experience as well as the opportunity to raise pupils' awareness about countryside/environmental issues. Publicity materials might also take account of the more specific pull factors reported by secondary schools (curriculum and vocational links), primary schools (cost and proximity) and special schools (hands-on practical activities).
4. In terms of the overall content of **Countryside Live**, the organisers should give some thought to the calls from teachers for greater coverage of sustainability/environmental concerns, countryside careers and recreational activities.

For exhibitors

5. One aspect of the event that could be strengthened in future years is the provision for teachers. We would suggest that exhibitors think carefully about the messages they are trying to convey to teachers, the quality of the resources they are making available to them and the age range /curriculum subjects they are targeting.
6. In the light of the feedback generated by this evaluation, we would encourage all exhibitors to make their stands as interactive and hands-on as possible. It is important to provide some activities that are appropriate for lower primary children, special school pupils and upper secondary students. The value of making clearer links to children's urban lives and interests should also be noted.

For schools

7. Staff in special, primary and secondary schools should be confident of the potential value of an experience like **Countryside Live** for their pupils. Examples from this evaluation include: learning new ideas about animals and wildlife, farming, food production and rural careers; gaining skills relating to crafts or recreational activities; developing more positive views of the countryside; and overcoming fears of certain animals.
8. Staff must recognise, though, that they have a role to play in enhancing the impact of the day. The need to capitalise on the **Countryside Live** experience through careful planning of curriculum-focused preparatory and follow-up work is critical. So too is the need to ensure that teachers, support staff and other adults accompanying pupils on the day help to forge links between the exhibitors' interests and the worlds of their pupils.

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Research methods

The evaluation was qualitative in approach and used a range of data collection methods to generate insights into the effectiveness and impacts of the events. The main sources of data were as follows:

- telephone interviews with staff in 10 non-participating schools;
- proforma for school staff attending the pre-visit briefings;
- observation of the **Countryside Live** events;
- follow-up telephone interviews with three event exhibitors;
- follow-up telephone interviews or case-study visits to 20 participating schools, involving 11 staff telephone interviews, 18 face-to-face staff interviews and nine pupil group discussions.

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Further information

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