

Children gain benefits from field trips to farms, study shows

September 29 2014, by Alison Barbuti



Farm visits are dispelling children's deep ignorance about where the food they eat comes from and helping teachers deliver a wide spectrum of the national curriculum, a new study has shown. The trips, set up as part of the Government's Educational Access scheme, challenge many children's belief that milk comes from bottles and that bread comes from a packet - something even those from rural areas struggle with. But despite campaigns to encourage primary school visits to farms, trips are often dependent on individual teacher's enthusiasm and funding is limited.

Research by Kingston University in London shows farm visits are important to challenge ignorance and misconceptions about farming. Report author Dr Frances Harris, from the Faculty of Science, is now

calling for a new push to get more schools to take up these hugely beneficial visits. The research shows the Government needs to provide extra money and training to promote the scheme.

Interviews with farmers, teachers and parents found farm visits helped address basic gaps in knowledge. "Some haven't a clue about agriculture and the countryside," one farmer said of [children](#) visiting his farm.

"They still think milk comes from bottles, even in [rural areas](#). There are still real basic problems to overcome like children thinking there is only one type of cow, not varieties." Another was astounded by some of the questions such as children muddling sheep and goats. "Children don't read books like we do, with cows and sheep - instead they have playstations."

The visits challenged traditional stereotypes of farming and according to one farmer overcame the "get off my land" perception. Another said a child visiting her farm had not expected a woman to be a farmer "especially one who is blonde, bubbly and young".

Hands-on visits seemed more effective than textbooks, Dr Harris said. Teachers found children learned from handling small animals, one reported "life-moving" experiences for her class. The visits also fitted in with many areas of the national curriculum including literacy, numeracy, science, art, design and technology, ICT, history, geography, PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education), citizenship and religious education). "They soak it up at that age," one farmer said. And the learning was passed on to parents. "By talking to them, they then start asking adults, so we are inadvertently educating adults too." A parent said her son "wouldn't stop talking about it" and 54 per cent of parents said they had learned something from their child's farm visit.



Dr Harris said there was evidence their children's trips influenced some parents' consumer behaviour, with 16 per cent of parents saying that they would now be more prepared to change how they chose their food, to buy more local, seasonal or organic products.

"It is clear that farmers have made a huge commitment to open their farms to visitors, especially school children," she said. "Despite the range of supporting programmes, such as through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and the Higher Level Stewardship, this is often done at a personal cost. Farmers struggled to make contact with teachers to initiate new visits and without a keen champion within a school it is difficult to set up school visits. If a particular teacher moved on, the link with the school often collapsed."

The study calls for:

- The Government to encourage more schools to take up farm visits by facilitating links between farmers and schools;
- Farm visits to be included in teacher training and continuing professional development programmes;

- Funding to support repeat visits to farms so children can go at different times of the year and learn about the changing seasons;
- A reallocation of funding and efforts spent on developing educational material placed on the web to promoting more direct teacher engagement.

Provided by Kingston University, London

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