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Parent Perceptions of Outdoor Learning in the Kids in the Woods Program

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Abstract. Research shows that exposure to the outdoors is beneficial to children and can improve the learning experience for students. The Kids in the Woods program in Gainesville, Florida provides 6th grade students with opportunities to learn science through a series of outdoor activities during their regular science classes. The article reports on an evaluation of the Kids in the Woods program. We surveyed parents/guardians of students participating in the program to examine the impacts of the program and to better understand parent/guardian perceptions of the program and of outdoor learning in general. Results indicate that parents/guardians observed positive changes in their children and had largely positive perceptions of outdoor learning and the Kids in the Woods program. Lessons learned and recommendations for using parent surveys as a tool in program evaluation are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Exposure to the outdoors has been shown to have far-reaching benefits for human health and well-being (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). In addition, the outdoors can be an excellent environment for learning. Research shows that experiences in nature can improve academic learning for many students (Kuo et al., 2019). Many successful educational programs involving outdoor learning have led to observed improvement on standardized tests (American Institutes for Research, 2005; Danforth et al., 2008) and decreased behavior problems (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998; National Environmental Education and Training Foundation [NEETF], 2000).

Many extension programs and school-based science programs include an outdoor component. For example, 4-H-sponsored school gardens link science and math curricula to outdoor classrooms (Cater et al., 2012). Other programs promote science learning in wildlife habitat sites on school grounds (Galloway et al., 2006) and in natural schoolyards (Nelson & Shaw, 2013). Numerous examples demonstrate that outdoor lessons can be a valuable supplement to traditional classroom instruction. As interest in incorporating the outdoors into education grows, it is important to better understand the impacts that these programs have on student learning.

The Kids in the Woods program provides sixth-grade students attending a public middle school in Gainesville,

Florida, with valuable outdoor science-learning experiences. Students go outdoors on the local schoolgrounds and to a nearby nature park during their regular science classes throughout the school year. Program activities include three week-long modules related to birds' feeding behavior, erosion and deposition of a nearby creek, and the benefits of urban trees. Activities are hands-on and interactive and reinforce science learning in the classroom. The program is a collaboration among the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Forest Service, the University of Florida, and other local organizations.

The purpose of the study was to examine the impacts of the Kids in the Woods program on student learning, to better understand parent/guardian perceptions of the program, and to better understand perceptions of outdoor learning in general. Parents/guardians can provide unique insight into changes in their children resulting from different educational approaches and programs. In addition, parents are key to gaining support for novel educational approaches, such as outdoor science instruction. Understanding the impacts of outdoor learning and capturing parent/guardian perceptions of outdoor learning can be useful to educators and program administrators who want to improve the educational experience for students.

METHODS

Participants included parents and guardians of all sixth-grade students enrolled in a public middle school. All sixth-grade students in the school participated in the Kids in the Woods program during the 2017–2018 school year, and all parents who provided their child’s science teacher with an email address received the electronic survey.

The study used a survey developed by Kids in the Woods program partners. The survey included nine questions, with one additional question for parents/guardians of students in advanced science classes (see appendix). The survey was a combination of yes/no and short-answer questions focused on changes that parents observed in their children and their views on the program and outdoor learning.

The survey was distributed electronically via Qualtrics software to approximately 350 parents/guardians. Parents/guardians were sent a link to the survey by their child’s science teacher via the school’s email system for parent-teacher communication. The survey began with an informed consent page. No identifying information was collected, and participants were assured anonymity. The survey was sent one time after completion of all Kids in the Woods program activities in April–May 2018. It took participants less than five minutes to complete.

RESULTS

A total of 47 responses was returned, or approximately 13% of the roughly 350 parents/guardians who were sent the survey. However, some participants did not answer all questions. The survey showed that parental perceptions of the program and perceptions of outdoor learning were very positive. Thirty-six out of 37 parents/guardians responded that their child enjoyed the program (Table 1). One hundred percent of parents/guardians responded that they think it is good for kids to spend time outdoors, and 95% reported that kids should learn outdoors at school (Table 1).

Several questions asked about changes observed in their children as a result of the program. Eighty percent of parents/guardians reported that they thought the program had increased their child’s scientific knowledge, and 84%

reported that the program had increased their child’s interest in the local environment, comfort in the outdoors, and interest in science (Table 2).

Responses to open-ended questions were also largely positive. One parent/guardian reported that “this program makes science fun and exciting.” Another commented that their daughter “is more enthusiastic about science than ever before.” One comment expressed what many of the parents noted: “Every time my son gets a chance to leave the classroom and walk in the park, he comes home with stories about what he saw. These activities help to enrich his love of science and nature.”

The final question, sent only to parents/guardians of students in advanced science classes, asked, “Did the Kids in the Woods program influence your decision to enroll your child at Middle School XXXX?” The question aimed to help the school assess the influence of the program on enrollment in the school’s advanced program. Twenty-one parents/guardians responded to the question, indicating that approximately 50% of participants who returned the survey were parents/guardians of students in advanced science classes. Four selected “Yes” and 14 selected “No,” indicating that the program did not influence most parents’ or guardians’ decisions to enroll their children in the advanced program.

Two concerns were voiced in the responses to open-ended questions. One parent expressed concern about the environmental impact of allowing students to go into a local creek, fearing that students were contributing to erosion. Another parent mentioned safety concerns about taking students near trees. There were no directly negative comments about the program or outdoor learning.

DISCUSSION

Results from the survey indicate that the responding parents/guardians had largely positive perceptions of the Kids in the Woods program. Although the sample size was relatively small, the parents/guardians who responded to the survey reported that their children enjoyed the program. Responses to the question “Do you think that participating in the program increased any of the following for your

Table 1. Responses to Yes/No Questions on the Parent/Guardian Survey

Question	% Yes	# Yes	% No	# No	% Not sure	# Not sure	Total
Overall, did your child enjoy his/her experience?	97.3%	36	0.0%	0	2.7%	1	37
Do you think it is good for kids to spend time outdoors?	100%	40	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	40
Do you think that kids should learn outdoors at school?	95.0%	38	0.0%	0	5.0%	2	40

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Table 2. Responses to the Question “Do You Think That Participating in the Program Increased Any of the Following for Your Child?”

Item	% Yes	# Yes	% No	# No	% Not sure	# Not sure	Total
Interest in the local environment (e.g., trees, birds, parks)	83.8%	31	10.8%	4	5.4%	2	37
Interest in science	83.8%	31	5.4%	2	10.8%	4	37
Comfort in the outdoors	83.8%	31	2.7%	1	13.5%	5	37
Interest in spending time outdoors	73.0%	27	13.5%	5	13.5%	5	37
Scientific knowledge	80.6%	29	5.6%	2	13.9%	5	36
Success in class	66.7%	24	11.1%	4	22.2%	8	36

child?” suggested that parents/guardians associated the program with positive changes in their children. More than 70% of parents/guardians reported that they thought participating in the program increased their child’s interest in spending time outdoors, and 80% reported that they thought the program increased their child’s scientific knowledge (Table 2). One of the goals of the Kids in the Woods program is to promote interest in the outdoors and the local environment. Another goal is to help students understand the scientific process. While this study did not directly test these changes in students, it does suggest that the parents/guardians who responded to the survey observed changes in their children and attributed those changes to participation in the Kids in the Woods program.

The results of the survey also indicate that parents/guardians in this sample were supportive of outdoor experiences and outdoor learning in general. One hundred percent of parents/guardians responded that it is good for kids to spend time outdoors. Although it is difficult to generalize to the larger population of all parents and guardians in the United States, the results from this sample are a small step in understanding perceptions of outdoor learning in a school setting. A survey with a larger and more diverse sample of parents/guardians would be a valuable addition to the literature in this field. Many extension professionals, teachers, and informal educators have long recognized the benefits of outdoor learning for students. Parents and guardians play an important role in school curricula, and it is important to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their perceptions of outdoor learning.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the course of the study, we learned several practical lessons about using parent/guardian surveys in program evaluation. The response rate for the survey was approximately 13%. The response rate may have been higher with some changes to the study design. The survey was sent to parents/guardians during the final two weeks of the school year. After speaking with teachers and parents, we realized that this is a

busy time of the school year for parents/guardians. We think that we could have encouraged additional responses by sending the survey earlier in the school year and by sending it a second time. Asking teachers to encourage students to tell their parents/guardians about the survey also may have also improved the response rate. We recommend sending surveys to parents/guardians at least one month prior to the end of the school year and sending it two or more times.

The survey was sent to parents/guardians by their child’s science teachers through the school’s established platform for teacher-parent communication. Using the established system of communication between parents and teachers was an effective way to direct parents/guardians to the survey. In addition, the anonymity of an online survey allowed parents/guardians to freely express any concerns or thoughts about the program.

Overall, the study was successful in using a parent/guardian survey as part of an evaluation of the Kids in the Woods program. The results from the survey captured some of the impacts of the program on student learning and the perceptions of the program held by parents/guardians. Although few studies use parent/guardian surveys, they can be a useful tool to measure the impacts of educational programs.

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APPENDIX A. SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Have you heard about the Kids in the Woods Program? (Select yes/no/not sure)
2. Where did you hear about the program? (Select all that apply)
3. Please share any comments that your child or others have shared with you about the program.
4. Overall, did your child enjoy his/her experience? (Select yes/no/not sure)
5. Do you think that participating in the program increased any of the following for your child? (Select yes/no/not sure for each item)
 - a. Interest in the local environment (e.g., trees, birds, parks)
 - b. Interest in science
 - c. Comfort in the outdoors
 - d. Interest in spending time outdoors
 - e. Scientific knowledge
6. If yes, please explain.
7. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for the program?
8. Do you think it is good for kids to spend time outdoors? (Select yes/no/not sure)
9. Do you think kids should learn outdoors at school?
10. Did the Kids in the Woods program influence your decision to enroll your child at Middle School XXXX? (Select yes/no)