

BUILDING SUCCESS THROUGH OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

Introduction

The Inspiring Learning Foundation (ILF) commissioned the delivery and evaluation of a bespoke outdoor adventure (OA) residential programme specifically designed to build children's resilience and self-confidence. The ILF is passionate about OA and the role this can have in transforming the lives of young people. The project focused on Year 9 pupils who were identified by teachers in their school as middle to low achievers with reduced confidence and self-esteem, reduced opportunities to build social and cultural capital, and a fixed mindset relating to their achievement.

These young people are termed the 'forgotten middle': they attend school regularly, are neither the highest or lowest achievers, and rarely misbehave. The Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019) is clear in its criteria for judging the effectiveness of education, clearly identifying the requirement to give all learners the "knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life". Similarly, it highlights that effective personal development is seen when the school's offer goes

beyond a knowledge-rich curriculum and provides for pupils' broader development and their future successes. This opens an opportunity for schools to review their OA provision and consider the ways in which their physical education (PE) curriculum can powerfully address disadvantage and support young people to innovate, collaborate and be creative.

ILF had a strong desire to provide a robust evidence base and rationale for developing an OA residential programme specifically designed to target forgotten middle pupils. Working with researchers from the University of Northampton, the study had two phases: 1) a review of literature to analyse and critique the current evidence base for the characteristics, experiences and needs of the forgotten middle; 2) a qualitative evaluation of children's reflections of their immersive experiences following a pilot OA programme. Reflections of the group leaders facilitating the programme were also captured to understand their training needs and recognise the opportunities presented in the programme.



How was the programme designed?

The ILF had ambitions to design the OA experience around their building blocks for success: confidence, communication, ambition, resilience, teamwork, skills, environmental knowledge, leadership and self-esteem. The pilot residential was designed to combine traditional OA activities, such as problem-solving, bushcraft and high ropes, with group sessions and individual mentoring on topics such as building rapport, body language, self-confidence and resilience.

The literature review highlighted who the forgotten middle children are and considerations for the programme to be effective. Traditionally OA instruction is focused on the physical skills and behaviours needed to achieve success. This pilot wanted to draw more attention to the holistic and real-world application of learning taking place in a group of pupils who have been identified as having low self-esteem and limited social and cultural capital. The OA instructors delivering the pilot residential received bespoke staff training on four key concepts of goal-setting, meta-cognition, growth mindset and real-world learning.

Modelling the key behaviours that are needed to build self-efficacy would be a critical part of the OA instructors' role. Therefore, the training involved experimenting with the language used during OA sessions, specifically using meta-cognition in modelling to the young people how they verbalise success, failure, challenge and reflection. The language of growth mindset was explored in reframing negative statements to empower young people to try again and believe in their ability to enact change. OA is inextricably placed in experiential learning but the transfer back to home and school is less apparent. The training challenged staff to consider examples of how the skills used on the residential could be applied further afield. These included exams, trying new things and managing tricky conversations.

Key behaviours that staff identified included praise, but offering this in ways that identify the specific values entrenched in the

ILF building blocks. For example, instead of just saying "well done", praise could be extended to, "When you tried again on the zip wire you showed lots of resilience". Emotional intelligence was identified as another key behaviour for working with young people with low self-esteem, validating how they may be feeling and acknowledging this, for example, "It's okay to feel nervous; I get nervous too so sometimes I take some big, deep breaths". This is aligned with meta-cognition, which sees staff and students verbalising their thoughts and decisions, for example, "Okay, that didn't work quite how I expected. Let's come at this from another angle: what could we try differently this time?" Staff discussed the importance of role modelling pro-social behaviours, such as eye contact, positive body language, kindness and empathy, in working on the pilot residential to support the young people to understand what these behaviours look like. Finally, the staff considered how they might encourage pupils to reflect on their learning, the activities and the skills learnt through open-ended, gentle questioning that values the young people's voices.

What impact did it have?

Staff who delivered the pilot residential reported that the young people gained many positive experiences throughout the residential, including improving relationships and increasing their teamwork, confidence and self-appraisal of strengths. They felt they were able to use the building blocks to success models particularly well in facilitating pupils' resilience and self-esteem.

"Seeing the difference from day one till the last day, building a positive relationship with the young people and seeing them every day makes a big difference."

"They had a really good week and enjoyed being here, also they made new friends."

"They can talk in front of people better now than they used to."



Through the medium of reflective workbooks, the young people reported an overall positive and enjoyable experience. They found the OA activities rewarding and personally challenging. They felt that they had developed their skills represented by the building blocks for success and that these provided an effective framework to build on. Initially they described their feelings as nervous and excited and, as the week progressed, they were able to identify attributes such as teamwork, resilience, confidence and leadership. For example:

- Confidence is... *"When you can speak to people and join in."*
- Communication is... *"The way you talk and hold yourself."*
- Ambition is... *"When you are curious about everything."*
- Resilience is... *"Not giving up."*
- Teamwork is... *"Working together to help do the work."*

The young people also reported that they developed new practical skills in activities such as bushcraft, cooking and climbing.

Considerations and next steps

The responses from the group leaders and pupils indicated areas for further development of this pilot OA residential. The considerations are threefold. Firstly, training of staff to facilitate the reflective activities should take into consideration their prior experiences of working with young people. The nuances of teaching versus instructing mean that attention to concepts such as learning needs, cognitive development, attention and engagement may provide a more structured approach to the one-to-one meetings or taught sessions.

Secondly, the accessibility of the reflective, paper-based workbook could be developed to offer a more inclusive approach. For example, it could be digital or provide a multi-modal way of representing understanding. This might take the form of other reflective activities, such as circle time, performance, film-making or other means of expression.



Finally, the long-term sustainable impact of this project needs to be measured. Consideration might be given to maintaining a relationship with the young people, their parents and the teachers, for example, through return visits, day trips or pop-up activities on their school site. ILF is currently planning a follow-up intervention to take place at Dearne Valley Kingswood in autumn 2023. The theme is based on growth mindset, one of the characteristics identified in this pilot study. Designed as a four-day OA residential experience, the young people will be supported by staff to explore their mindset. They will take part in questionnaires, role play, sharing activities and problem-solving through a staged process encompassing setting goals, dealing with setbacks, making plans and achieving your goals. The aim is to use the medium of OA and the power of 'yet' to raise aspirations and build resilience.

Conclusion

This pilot OA residential project is considered an overall success. The literature review identified real-world outdoor learning, growth mindset, meta-cognition and goal-setting as areas to be embedded into OA programme design and staff training. The young people reported overall positive experiences, describing the residential as rewarding and personally challenging and stating that they had developed skills in relation to the building blocks for success, as hoped for in the initial idea and design by ILF.

There is much to learn from this pilot in terms of supporting the forgotten middle pupils throughout their educational journey. Schools and teachers have a vital role to play in the development of young people and their outcomes. Young people in today's secondary schools will see a radically different world when they leave compulsory schooling. Changes to national and global employment patterns mean that many school leavers will be employed in jobs that do not currently exist. It is, therefore, imperative that any education system supports young people to develop skills, knowledge and attributes that are future-proofed. This includes offering skills for employment, digital literacy, 'green' curricula and transferable skills, with a move away from knowledge-based curricula that can be detrimental to young people's future needs.

OA meets these criteria by impacting positively on young people's attitudes, emotional wellbeing, beliefs, self-perceptions, and social and cognitive capabilities. Examples of outcomes, many of which seem to be retained over time, include independence, confidence, self-esteem, locus of control, self-efficacy, coping strategies, interpersonal skills and improvements in long-term memory and problem-solving capacity. Importantly, this is not just the case for able and motivated youngsters; under-achievers also perform better in a natural environment, especially when exposed to high-quality, stimulating activities. Schools can support pupils to respond intelligently to the increasingly complex demands of growing up today.

The full report can be found at: <https://bit.ly/3otewoM> ■

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