

# 'Outdoor education prepares pupils for GCSEs'

By Helen Stringer on 03 September 2018

Adventure-based activities build resilience and confidence – the ideal preparation for the GCSE years, writes one head



"Why should a dip in a cold lake help prepare our students for GCSEs?"

This question was put to me, in emphatic terms, by Year 9 students recently as we toiled uphill, soaked to the skin, at the end of the "jog and dip" challenge at Outward Bound Centre in Ullswater. I was too wet and out of breath myself at the time to answer the question properly, but here are my reflections on why an immersive (no pun intended) experience of adventure learning makes an ideal induction to the GCSE years.

Experts agree that encounters with the great outdoors are very good for you. Sadly, though, the great outdoors has become the great unknown for most young people. According to a study commissioned by the National Trust six years ago, in the

past generation, the "radius of play" for children outside has declined by 90 per cent, while the percentage using their local patch of nature for play has gone down from over a half to under a quarter.

Evidence of the detrimental effects of this "move indoors" on children's physical and mental health is stacking up alarmingly. The cardio-respiratory fitness of children has, for example, declined by about 10 per cent in a decade, while the increase in mental health problems among five- to 16-year-olds (to a current incidence of about 10 per cent) has provoked calls to action from across the caring professions. Fresh air, the aesthetic balm of interacting with greenery and the emotional impact of connecting with wildlife, by contrast, help to build physical and mental strength.

More specifically, outdoor education is especially good for you. Witness the recent research, based on the outdoor-orientated curriculum at Gordonstoun, which showed that outdoor experiences, such as hiking and wild camping, have an "overwhelmingly positive influence" on students' personal growth and development, as well as on academic attainment.

There are many reasons for this – foremost being the emphasis on self-reliance coupled with team-work, the strengthening of resilience through physical challenge and the development of healthy attitudes towards risk-taking.

## **Outdoor activities build resilience**

Programmes such as those run by Outward Bound (founded by Kurt Hahn, who also founded Gordonstoun) offer opportunities for building self-awareness, personal responsibility and resilience that are well-nigh impossible to replicate in the classroom.

Opening our senses to awe and wonder, we realise that nature is immense and impersonal (just think of the weather). It cannot be negotiated with, no matter how much we wish it. We learn to shoulder our rucksack, take a deep breath and keep walking up the mountain.

In a similar way, many aspects of the public world that young people are preparing to enter at this time are impersonal and won't bow to our preferences – the public exam system, of course, and, later, the employment market. We must learn to shoulder our responsibilities, take a deep breath and keep walking towards the next challenge.

## **Digital detox**

Simple measures, such as allocating groups randomly for working and camping, foster teamwork and resilience under pressure when roles are not meshing seamlessly and tempers start to fray. This is the bread and butter of leadership training, and will pay dividends in Years 10 and 11 when things aren't going to plan on the biology or geography field trip, perhaps, or during drama practical rehearsals.

Adding to the mix, a digital-detox element – a full working week without phones or tablets – also has a big effect. Though daunting for many, this provides a vital opportunity for every participant to assess how far her phone serves her rather than the other way around. After getting through the "pain barrier" of separation, the reality that life without the digital ghost limb is possible and might even (in small quantities) be desirable could be calmly considered.

Freed from the screen's magnetic force, students spent time looking, thinking and being. The benefits of periods of solitary thought – even daydreaming – to our cognitive and emotional development are only just beginning to be widely appreciated but, once sampled, they are unmistakable.

The expedition – a 36-hour camping and hiking adventure in wild terrain and at the mercy of the elements – offers the kind of rite of passage that anthropologists say is helpful in marking the journey from childhood into young adulthood. All the key ingredients are there: the temporary separation from normal society and an element of ordeal followed by a return to ordinary life with a new perspective and broadened shoulders. Beyond this, the group builds a store of shared memories that are treasured for years to come.

It is hard to think of a better way to prepare young people to take the plunge into the GCSE years.

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