



# Inspiring 'Forgotten Middle' Young People through Outdoor Adventure

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## Background

'Forgotten Middle' young people attend secondary school regularly, are neither the highest nor the lowest achievers and rarely misbehave. Although possessing different needs and talents, youngsters within this middle range of learners may be at risk of becoming marginalised in school and failing to excel in their studies. To allow these individuals to express a positive voice and build the skills required to unlock their potential, the Inspiring Learning Foundation (ILF), in collaboration with Northampton University, designed, delivered and evaluated a bespoke Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE) residential programme.

To ensure clarity of purpose, the structure of the programme was informed by the findings of a systematic literature review investigating the concept and needs of 'Forgotten Middle' young people. These youngsters are defined as 'average learners' within a typical class who may not fulfil their potential due to their low self-esteem, reduced confidence, and limited social skills. Their behaviour generally reflects a 'fixed mind set' of achievement, where they believe their abilities cannot be changed. This belief results in these young people displaying an unclear vision of their future selves, resulting in an over reliance on the guidance of others to help them progress.

This article appraises the teaching and learning practices and selected outcomes of two OAE pilot residential programmes designed to address the needs of 'Forgotten Middle' young people. Encouragingly, initial findings suggest that this expansive, vulnerable group of youngsters responded positively to this tailored OAE programme. Although more robust investigations are required across time, these outcomes provide impetus for further research. A full version of the report is available at [bit.ly/3otewoM](https://bit.ly/3otewoM).

## Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE) Programming

There continues to be a wealth of evidence which advocates the use of OAE for the holistic development of young people (1,2). Importantly, this is not just the case for able and motivated youngsters; more disadvantaged learners also perform better in a natural environment, especially when exposed to high-quality, stimulating activities (3,4). Current residential programmes in OAE advocate the use of supported risk-taking between educator and learner and between learners to generate positive outcomes and derive deeper meanings (5,6,7). This growth-orientated approach contends that the best scenario for change in OAE is one in which participants feel safe, secure and cared about. This creates a broader frame of reference for learners that may be called upon in the future during challenging situations. Furthermore, research suggests bespoke OAE programming designed to address the specific needs of young people are more impactful than more generic approaches (8,9).

In line with this understanding, two cohorts of 15 mixed gender youngsters, aged 12 to 14, were invited to attend an OAE residential programme in the UK (Isle of Wight and Yorkshire) targeted at 'Forgotten Young People'. To negate any degree of negative labelling, at no point during the recruitment of participants or intervention was the term 'Forgotten Middle' young people expressed. Rather, the opportunity for these young people to expand their horizons and build vocational and personal skill sets was continually emphasised.

## 'Forgotten Middle' Young People, Programme Aims

A review of literature of 'Forgotten Middle' young people was able to provide a theoretical base for planning the provision and to help teachers in their recruitment of youngsters. Although not a homogeneous group, these young people possess similar characteristics:

- Part of a middle quartile group referred to as 'average' achievers.
- Modest educational aspirations, indistinct self-identity.
- Low self-belief and expectations, struggle to maintain friendships.
- Over-reliance on significant others to help them achieve their goals.
- Belief that talent and skill cannot be changed by effort, therefore low motivation.
- Limited access to activities which builds their social and cultural capacity.

Teaching and learning recommended to address these issues on the programme included:

- Identifying short term achievable goals which have relevance to everyday life.
- Exposure to a wide range of social, intellectual, and moral situations.
- Avoidance of educational attainment grouping/ labelling.
- Self-directed and shared learning.
- Movement beyond a knowledge rich curriculum to one which values skills, attributes, and behaviours.
- Metacognition or big thinking exercises including self-evaluation and the effectiveness of task completion.
- Assistance to make valued judgements.

The three aims of the two pilot studies were to: deliver an OAE residential package of experiences specifically targeted at 'Forgotten Middle' young people aged 12-14; explore the young peoples' perceptions of their experiences with emphasis upon their psychological and social development; and evaluate reflections of group leaders facilitating the programme.

### Bespoke Residential Programme

Following institutional ethical approval, two 4-night residential programmes were conducted at Kingswood outdoor adventure camps. A progressive framework of skill acquisition, referred to as the Building Blocks to Success (Figure 1), infused outdoor activities such as bushcraft, archery and climbing with teaching and learning that was intended to raise learners' aspirations. The young people also developed skills relevant for employment, digital literacy and green curriculums (10). To formulate this learning and provide evidence of the programmes' impact, exercises included use of reflective diaries to set short-term goals, positive self-talk sessions, peer mentoring and positive role modelling.

Adolescence is a prime time for identity development in young people. The brain areas of youngsters associated with emotional, social and cognitive functions are particularly malleable to change, which can impact their self-concept (11). In this regard, learners were encouraged to continually self-regulate their achievement on the Building Blocks to Success framework. This enabled them to develop an understanding of their own thought processes and emotional responses in dealing with challenges and how they learned best. Self-perceived abilities are intrinsic for building positive self-identity; representing a young person's perception of what they can do (12).



**Green** - I've made clear progress and feel like I have achieved this building block. Little help needed.

**Amber** - I've done well, but things can be improved with help. Need to work on this.

**Red** - I've found this building block difficult and require more help to achieve it.

Reflect on your achievements and thinking about how you have progressed with each building block. Write in significant achievements and areas for improvement. Shade the box in colour(s) reflecting your progress.

Figure 1: Building Blocks for Success diagram and key

To promote the importance of hard work and effort in achieving successes, facilitators were trained to use and model the language of personal growth (i.e., growth mindset, positive adaptation, empathy, failing forward, grit, emotional intelligence). Achievement of learners' building blocks were celebrated in terms of the processes experienced and strategies undertaken to meet their goals - such as positive collaborative learning - and not necessarily the outcomes.

### Young People's Perceptions

Personal testimonies from young people suggested that their initial feelings of nervousness, excitement and in one case even resentment, progressed to perceptions of personal and collective achievement. The use of reflective workbooks and group leader discussions led to reports of enhanced verbal and non-verbal communication, improvements in confident decision-making and personal ambition.

Daily reflections of the Building Blocks to Success mechanism were largely positive for structuring young people's achievements, although the leadership block was seen as less important than others. Practical outdoor activities were able to build rapport and adaptability, especially in climbing and bushcraft activities. Young people's responses in relation to success using the building blocks included:

#### Confidence

"Trusting what you know"  
 "When you can speak to people and join in"  
 "Is when you aren't nervous"

#### Ambition

"Wanting something and working towards it"  
 "Be the best I can be"  
 "When you are curious about everything"

#### Teamwork

"I took in everybody's ideas"  
 "Helps me make friendships in the real world"  
 "Working together to help do the work"



Within their workbooks, the youngsters were given 8 statements to rate their feelings of the programme (detailed below). Ratings ranged from 0 (not at all true) to 4 (true all the time). All 30 of the young people rated seven statements either 'somewhat true' or 'true'. Upon questioning, their ratings were, on the whole, illustrative of positive shifts in their perceived capabilities. In respect to statement 2, all learners rated this 'true all of the time', demonstrating the ability of learners to find significant opportunities to express themselves.

1. I feel confident in what I am able to do and my choices.
2. I feel able to communicate successfully with everyone on this course.
3. I feel ambitious and as though I have goals to achieve when I leave this course.
4. I am able to work with others successfully in a team.
5. I feel good about myself and my abilities.
6. I have built skills and knowledge on this course so far.
7. I feel as though I can decide on what I want and lead others.
8. I know I can pick myself up again when something is difficult.

When asked what they had learned to prompt these ratings, the young people acknowledged that they had learnt skills (i.e., lighting a fire, cooking, and climbing) acquired knowledge (i.e., finding a voice, how to work in a group) and developed attributes (i.e., trust, resilience). Expressing their goals for the future, young people said: "Taking part in more things", "to feel confident and use my voice", and "to make more friends". Realistically, they also recognised they would require help taking on leadership roles and communicating verbally and in writing.

### Facilitators' insight

All facilitators completed an online survey concerning their experiences on the programme. They described ways in which their preparatory training had supported the young people - specifically modelling, building relationships, adapting to their needs and listening. Comments in relation to their connection with the youngsters included: "encouraging the participants to fill in their success logs and helping them understand they're better than they think and celebrating who they are" and "they had a really good week, had fun, made new friends, some found that they can talk in front of people better than they used to". Facilitators also made some recommendations, commenting that while the Building Blocks to Success mechanism was useful, it was complex and not focussed on a particular conceptual theme. They also commented that alternative methods were needed to record the young people's journeys, as written records were often difficult to implement and capture.

### Conclusion

In relation to the aims of this project, these unique findings suggest disengaged youngsters known as 'Forgotten Middle' young people benefitted from these bespoke OAE programmes. In line with previous OAE research, data shows learners were able to build their thinking and emotional capacity, promote positive self-identities and help them to value different ways of learning. They also highlight the importance of a targeted, relevant OAE curriculum to enable young people to respond to the increasingly complex demands of today and future society. Nonetheless, caution is needed in the interpretation of these results. Although they provide insights into short-term changes to the learners' perceived capabilities, there are limitations in terms of their generalisability across populations of similar young people and lasting impact.

To build upon the promise of these findings and respond to any short-comings, future OAE research should incorporate

methodologies which concentrate upon the needs of young people across different timeframes, transitions, experiences, cultures, stressors and contexts. This may form part of multidisciplinary approaches to build the knowledge and cultural capital young people need to succeed in life. This will invariably involve parents, schools and teachers who are best placed to understand the educational and broader needs of vulnerable groups of young people. These could include 'Forgotten Middle' young people or the current phenomenon of 'Ghost Children' – young people who are severely absent from school since lockdowns were necessitated by the pandemic. In this way, OAE can be recognised as an important and valuable intervention strategy which can help to target needs and formulate policy and evidence-based practices ▲



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