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Improving school attendance: can participation in outdoor learning influence attendance for young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties?

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The link between good attendance in school and academic performance has been acknowledged for some time now. However, improving school attendance for young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) or pupils at risk of exclusion can be a challenging task for educational leaders. This paper begins with a discussion of earlier studies on outdoor learning and school attendance. It adds to the discourse by presenting findings from a one-year outdoor learning programme situated within an English special school for young people with SEBD. The research reported here is part of a larger study that used an action research design. The paper concludes that although improvements in attendance can be achieved, the factors affecting attendance are complex and that improvements may be restricted to programmes that utilise an outdoor learning approach rather than being achievable across the whole school curriculum.

Keywords: outdoor learning; school attendance; exclusion; disaffected; social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD)

Introduction

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2001, 2002) regards school attendance as an indicator of academic performance. Therefore it is not surprising that, for schools educating disaffected young people, improving attendance and reducing school exclusion is a key concern. In this paper I report on how participation on a one-year outdoor learning programme (OLP) during the academic year 2011/12 affected school attendance. I also consider barriers and facilitators to participation in an OLP. The research was conducted in a local authority special school in England for learners with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). This term is also referred to as ‘disaffected’ within the literature. The research reported in this paper forms part of a larger study that used an action research design to introduce and evaluate the OLP to which this paper refers.

The effect of participation in an outdoor learning programme on school attendance

The discourse of participation in OLPs and school attendance seems to originate from a meta-analysis conducted by Cason and Gillis (1994). The authors reported nine effects from 43 unreferenced studies; no further comment is made regarding attendance.

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The link between outdoor learning and school attendance re-emerges in the alternative curricula discourse, aimed at responding to the needs of disaffected learners. Riley, Ellis, Weinstock, Tarrant, and Hallmond (2006, p. 20), discussing an alternative curriculum programme across five London secondary schools, write that the term 'disaffected' is a powerful one which can be interpreted in many different ways. When schools were asked to identify learners who were disaffected, they were able to come up with 10–15 individuals in a year group. These learners were at risk of failure through poor attendance, lack of interest in lessons, bad behaviour and absence of motivation.

Addressing poor attendance especially amongst disaffected young people has become the focus of a range of government initiatives. The DfES identified '... relationships between poor attendance in school, for any reason, and academic performance' (2001, p. 3). This link is confirmed by Hallam et al. (2007, p. 44), who in addition suggest that reducing exclusion and improving attendance are crucial for both individual learners and society as a whole.

The factors that contribute towards poor or non-attendance are complex and multi-faceted. Hallam et al. (2007, p. 45) propose the following as possible reasons:

... illness or anxiety; holidays, special occasions, outside activities; family circumstances (helping at home, family needs or desires, extreme family pressures); issues within school (the environment, school requirements, school circumstances, attitudes towards school, relationships with teachers and peers, exclusion, perceived irrelevance of the school curriculum); and attractions outside school (peer pressure, excitement of truanting, employment opportunities).

Age also seems to be a relevant contributing factor. Bayliss (1999) recognised that attendance levels reduced as learners grew older. The author attributed this to the irrelevance of the curriculum. This view is supported by Hallam et al. (2007) in their initial report on a Ministry of Defence-sponsored youth initiative known as 'Skill Force'. The initiative offered an alternative curriculum at Key Stage 4 (Years 10 and 11), for learners that had been identified as disaffected by the school, within which the Skill Force programme operated.

The Hallam et al. (2007) study found that, '... 61% of learners indicated that their attendance had improved since participating in Skill Force'. Although some learners had reported positive attendance effects, this was not reflected across the whole school curriculum. Instead improvements were limited to the alternative curriculum provision. Interviews with learners revealed that overall attendance had improved, but that this was limited to the Skill Force programme in some cases (2007, p. 61).

In a follow-up study, Hallam, Rogers, and Rhamie (2010, p. 71) report that staff perceptions of the Skill Force programme revealed high rates of perceived attendance: 97% of Skill Force staff and 79% of school staff perceived that the programme had been at least quite successful in improving attendance of participating learners, while 95% of Skill Force staff and 72% of school staff thought the programme had had similar levels of success in reducing unauthorised absence. Again improvements were limited to the Skill Force initiative, but this represented significant improvements in attendance for certain learners. In addition, the authors reported that participation in Skill Force had provided positive experiences of schooling for certain learners.

Also acknowledged within the Hallam et al. (2010) study was that learner drop out would be an inevitable part of any type of programme aimed at reaching disaffected learners. The reasons for this may go beyond those that the individual learner has control

over; chaotic family life, unsupportive parents, or the need to care for family members. In recognising these factors the Skill Force personnel believed that they were more successful with students at risk of exclusion, rather than those whose behaviour had already deteriorated beyond that point.

Also worth acknowledging is that the type of activities used in OLPs are not enjoyed by everyone, as demonstrated by Fox and Avramidis (2003). In their study the authors reported that a learner with behavioural difficulties developed strategies to avoid participation in the OLP they observed.

Accepted within the discourse of outdoor learning and school attendance is the link between poor or non-attendance and low academic achievement. Bayliss (1999) attributes this to curriculum mismatch, suggesting that academic-orientated curricula do not engage learners with SEBD. The Skill Force programme is an example of how outdoor learning can be used within schools to provide an alternative for those that do not engage with the current curriculum. The emphasis of learning to work with others on the Skill Force programme contrasted with the students' prior experiences in school. Skill Force staff reported that a '... focus on teamwork was crucial in this process' (Hallam et al., 2007, p. 61).

The Skill Force programme cited above is one example of alternative curricular programmes that utilise outdoor learning approaches. Such programmes can positively affect school attendance, although this may be limited to programme participation alone. It is now my intention to report the conclusions that I drew from data collected during a one-year OLP.

Research context

The research was conducted within a secondary (11–16 years) special school in England. The learners attending the school all had statements of special educational need for SEBD or autistic spectrum disorders. The school population at the time of writing was 35 learners. This is small compared with the national picture for SEBD provision in England, with a population of 12,895 learners educated within special schools (DfE, 2012).

The OLP ran on Tuesdays throughout the school year and incorporated a residential element each term. OLP was also linked to an Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN)-accredited programme. Accreditation offered two advantages: firstly it provided the learners with an acknowledged award, and secondly it meant that OLP staff were allocated time within school for reviews, planning and skill development with participants. The aim of the OLP was to improve the way that learners worked together and to increase their self-confidence. Specific programmes' aims were based on targets contained within the Statements of Special Educational Need for each participant (see Appendix 1). Attendance was initially regarded as an indicator of participant response towards outdoor learning. I made the assumption that poor OLP attendance reflected a dislike of the outdoor learning approach. As reported below I found that many factors influenced learner attendance on the OLP.

A mixture of outdoor learning activities including problem-solving, forest schools, high challenges, climbing, navigation, hill-walking, cycling, caving and camping trips were experienced by OLP participants. The activities were intended to be progressive in terms of both increasing challenge and skill development. (Appendix 1 provides further programme details.)

This paper is written in the first person because the work represents part of a larger personal reflective journey, following in the interpretive tradition. Conducting the research required me to adopt a new role as practitioner/researcher. All roles have their advantages and disadvantages and I found that my practitioner status made it possible for me to gain access to the research context and to recruit participants from within. An outside researcher may have found this difficult, for child protection reasons. My familiarity with the learners meant that reactivity was reduced; however, balancing the pressures of my employed roles against the time I had for data collection at times proved challenging.

Research methodology

This paper is situated within a larger study using an action research design frame. Action research is regarded as a practitioner-led process with a focus on improving personal practice. It involves a spiral of self-reflective cycles; beginning with planning a change, then acting and observing the process, followed by reflection on the action and re-planning. The approach has similarities to the action reflection cycle (plan, do, review) commonly used in experiential or outdoor learning programmes. Establishing an OLP was the main action of my research; its conception came as a response to addressing learning targets contained within the statements of special educational need. Dominant themes that emerged from an audit of the statements were 'improving the ability to work with others' and 'improve learner self-confidence'. A programme of outdoor learning seemed an appropriate response given these target areas.

Participants in the study were selected from learners that were about to begin the OLP. This initially consisted of a small group of learners as they began Year Eight. The number of participants increased during the study period from four to six as new learners joined the school. (Ages ranged between 12 and 13 years.) No learners refused to be research participants.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the research project was obtained from the University of Birmingham ethics committee. The project with the exception of the residential elements occurred within normal curriculum time. My initial intentions were to hold a meeting for parents and a separate meeting for school staff to explain the project, what participation involved and how I was going to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of all the participants, but these ran into difficulties. Each parent made excuses for not attending on the day of the meeting, although previously they had agreed to attend. In order to seek their consent I took the alternative tack of either visiting parents at home or meeting with them when they came into school. Consent was eventually obtained. This highlights the difficulties of working with disadvantaged families. Consent from staff within the research context proved easier to obtain.

The research was conducted in line with the University of Birmingham Code of research practice and the school's own safeguarding policies. Additional ethical considerations were given to ensuring that emotional and physical safety of participants was ensured throughout all outdoor learning activities. This even included providing clothing to ensure learners were warm and dry when they failed to bring the requested spare clothes.

All participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the research without any consequence.

Analysis

The constant comparative method was used for data analysis: the technique utilises an inductive process to generate a data-driven theory (Glaser, 1965). This is regarded by Thomas (2009, p. 198) as the analytical method that ‘stands behind every technique in the interpretive paradigm’. The process involves going through the data again and again (this is the constant bit), comparing each element, phrase, sentence or paragraph—with all the other elements (this is the comparative bit). There is nothing more complicated than that.

The constant comparison method, unlike other qualitative data analysis methods, is ‘... concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting (not provisionally testing) many properties and hypotheses about a general phenomenon’ (Glaser, 1965, p. 438). Some of these properties may be causes, but unlike other data analysis methods they might also be conditions, consequences, dimensions, types, processes, and so forth, and they should, like other methods, result in an integrated theory. The method can be applied to any kind of qualitative data within the same study, including observations, interview transcripts, documents and even articles. Using this approach allowed me to apply it across all my qualitative data, but in doing so I was aware of Glaser’s cautions that the method still depends on the skills and sensitivities of the analyst. Therefore, the method is not designed to guarantee that two analysts working independently with the same data will achieve the same results, unlike quantitative methods. Rather, the method allows for the vagueness and flexibility that aids the creative generation of theory.

The constant comparative method is briefly described in four stages by Glaser (1965, p. 439):

- (1) Comparing incidents applicable to each category.
- (2) Integrating categories and their properties.
- (3) Delimiting the theory.
- (4) Writing the theory.

The process is one of continuous growth: each stage transforms into the next, although each stage remains in operation throughout the analysis, informing subsequent stages until analysis is completed.

In the next section I intend to demonstrate the types of data collection methods employed and the subsequent data produced. Data analysis from a selection of different sources was used. This is referred to as triangulation and is used as a way of considering alternative perspectives. Thomas (2009, p. 111) sums it up, suggesting that viewing from several points is better than viewing from one.

Triangulation

The use of triangulation is the hallmark of the good social researcher, according to Thomas (2009, p. 111). Stripped to its basics, Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 266) suggest that triangulation is supposed to support a finding by showing that independent measures agree with it or, at least, do not contradict it. Of course this poses the problem of what to do if the different views do in fact contradict each other. Should this occur, the authors suggest that, like a good detective, some pieces of data will build a stronger case than others. The use of different types of measures to capture data about the same situation helps prevent this from occurring.

Table 1. Type of data collection methods used.

Source	Type of data	Purpose of data
Learner attendance data from school management system	Statistical	Quantitative analysis—compares attendance with non-OEIP
Research diary	Statistical	Quantitative analysis—compares individual learner attendance for OEIP sessions and attendance on residential trips
Field notes	Textual account	Qualitative analysis: • Primary coding—positive and negative indicators of attendance. The primary codes were decided prior to the coding • Secondary coding—sub-categories of the primary categories. The secondary codes emerged from the data
Learner Questionnaire 1	Statistical	Quantitative analysis: Do the learners enjoy OEIP?
Research diary	Textual account	Qualitative analysis: • Primary coding—positive and negative indicators of attendance. The primary codes were decided prior to the coding • Secondary coding—sub-categories of the primary categories. The secondary codes emerged from the data
Interview transcripts from learners	Textual account	Qualitative analysis: • Primary coding—positive and negative indicators of attendance. The primary codes were decided prior to the coding • Secondary coding—sub-categories of the primary categories. The secondary codes emerged from the data

Note: OEIP, Outdoor Education Intervention Programme.

For this article my qualitative data sources consisted of a reflective research diary that I always wrote after each OLP session, a field-notes diary, transcripts of interviews with learners and staff on the OLP, and transcripts to responses from questions posed to whole-school staff. Data were collected in various forms: hand-written diary and field notes, voice-recorded interviews and hand-written question responses. For greater detail, refer to [Table 1](#).

Analysis of the data sources led to the construction of a theoretical framework which is presented in the following section.

Results and discussion

My results demonstrated that learner attendance on the OLP days was higher for the young people that were not presented with barriers to participation, such as the withdrawal of a guardian's consent (Learner A) and school exclusion (Learner D). Learner I was an exception, with the OLP becoming the day of lowest attendance for the young person. The attendance figures, taken from the school's information management system, also showed that another form of alternative educational provision 'construction' was well attended by Learner H. Out of my small group of participants, two dropped out.

Following data analysis I returned to the literature for comparison. Fox and Avramidis (2003), reporting on an outdoor education programme, observed two learners whose attendance on the programme was poor. The poor attendance was attributed to learner refusal, illness and the school preventing a learner attending due to violence and absconding behaviours from other off-site activities. The programme was limited to 13 hours spread over six afternoons. The authors therefore recommended that further research of a longer duration was required to establish the effects of outdoor learning on behavioural and academic outcomes. Whilst the Fox and Avramidis (2003) study did not specifically consider attendance or engagement in outdoor programmes, I argue that such factors are necessary if personal change is to be effected and positive views of schooling achieved.

The Hallam et al. (2007, 2010) studies also found that attendance on the Skill Force programme was affected by illness and issues from within the school. In addition, the authors also concluded that anxiety, holidays, special occasions, family circumstances (helping at home, family needs or desires, extreme family pressures) and attractions outside school (peer pressure, excitement of truanting, employment opportunities) were contributing factors.

My own findings concur with those of the above studies. During the OLP I observed 'drop out' by two learners, each for a different reason. The first drop out occurred because of an action by the school. Learner D demonstrated an increase in absconding from the school premises and in the severity of his challenging behaviour. The change in behaviour corresponded with a change of head teacher. The increased disengagement from the learner resulted in the school reducing Learner D's timetable, effectively barring his participation in the OLP. Whether the changes in Learner D's behaviour were attributable to the change of leadership or to some other factor remains uncertain.

Learner I was the second participant to drop out. He was a late starter on the OLP, joining a term into the programme. Initially he responded positively, even attending an overnight camping trip. But on return from the Easter holidays, Learner I would stay off school or make up excuses to avoid participation: 'Learner "I" made up a story about a bad ankle to avoid coming with us today' (Research Diary 3) and "'D" & "I" both made up excuses to avoid today's activities. Unsure why?' (Research Diary 3). In this case the drop out could be attributable to three causes; the strongest explanation was choice of activity. Learner I had expressed his dislike of water and the activities following the Easter holiday were water based. Other possible reasons relate to low self-concept and communication difficulties. Learner I was often unable to express his anxieties and used rehearsed avoidance strategies.

Drop out therefore seems inevitable with any type of programme aimed at reaching disaffected learners. Often the reasons go beyond those that the individual learner has control over, such as chaotic family life, unsupportive parents or the need to care for other family members. Similar to the observations of Fox and Avramidis (2003) I observed a participant that, although expressing verbally a desire to take part in outdoor activities, would shy away or become violent to avoid participation when the time occurred. This led me to consider whether the learner may not be psychologically able to engage with the outdoor process at that particular moment. Maslow (1971) identified stages of need in a hierarchical structure; for a person to be ready to learn, their primary needs of love, security, stability, food, drink and shelter must be met. It may be that such needs are lacking at times for learners with SEBD, thus preventing their engagement. As practitioners and educators, it is worth bearing this in mind. I would also suggest that consideration should be given to the selection of learners before enrolling them on OLPs. This may help to reduce drop out.

Table 2. Learner attendance (%) for a complete academic year (September–July).

	Learner A	Learner B	Learner C	Learner D	Learner H	Learner I
Monday	100	88.9	69.2	62.5	48.6	77.3
Tuesday	96.15	92.3	89.3	70.55	70.5	60
Wednesday	96.05	85.5	85.75	71.05	78.9	84
Thursday	100	83.35	82.15	51.25	39.75	72
Friday	100	86.75	66.7	42.65	47.05	71.75

Note: The OLP ran on Tuesdays.

During analysis, I realised that my lack of a comparison group meant that I was unable to compare the effect of attendance on the OLP with overall school attendance. Therefore, I made a comparison of attendance on OLP days (Tuesday) with the remaining days of the school week (see Table 2). I found an overall positive trend on OLP days if barriers to participation were taken into account. Learner A had issues with consent that would prevent attendance. Learner H attended a construction programme on a Wednesday that he really enjoyed, which is reflected in the attendance figures. Finally Learner I, discussed earlier, avoided OLP and Tuesdays were actually his worst-attended day.

In addition to attendance I also monitored the punctuality of the learners, who often travelled a considerable distance to school using public transport. As a consequence they often arrived several hours late at school. I found that on OLP days punctuality actually improved or the learners would arrange to be picked up on the way to an activity to avoid missing it: ‘The school received a phone call at 09.00 asking if “B” & “H” could be picked up outside the Supermarket in town because they were running late and didn’t want to miss OLP’ (Research Diary 2); ‘On another day, “B” arrived at 10.30 having over slept but still came in’ (Research Diary 1); and ‘Later in the day whilst sitting around a camp fire, “B” admits that he wouldn’t have come into school today if it had been science’ (Research Diary 1). These incidences demonstrate that the learning activities had value to the participants and that the young people were beginning to develop trust with OLP staff or they would not have tried to make collection arrangements.

In addition to the above observations, I recorded several examples of learner excitement. This led me to include the theme as a separate category in the theoretical framework presented in Figure 1. ‘On return to school the head teacher informed me that “A” was buzzing after his day out, saying it was the best day ever’ (Research Diary 1), and later in the year consent was obtained for Learner A to go on a camping trip: “Th” told “A” this today, the response was that “A” leapt out of his seat jumping into the air with his fist held high shouting “YES”! He was so excited; it was impossible to tell him any more details’ (Research Diary 2). Towards the end of the programme a big breakthrough came with Learner H, a young person who had not shown interest in anything for 18 months at the school, with the exception of the construction programme. His first glimmer of interest on OLP was noted: “H” was very pleased that it was going to be archery today. This is a big step for him to admit that he is interested in something’ (Research Diary 3). Later, after just cycling down a long hill: ‘Today learner “H” was really animated, talking about how he had missed the fallen branch partly blocking the descent. I had never seen him so excited’ (Research Diary 3).

To find out whether the young people had enjoyed learning in the outdoors, I constructed a questionnaire. Responses to this were positive and reflected a real enjoyment of being in the outdoors. The learners spoke of the sense of space and freedom that it

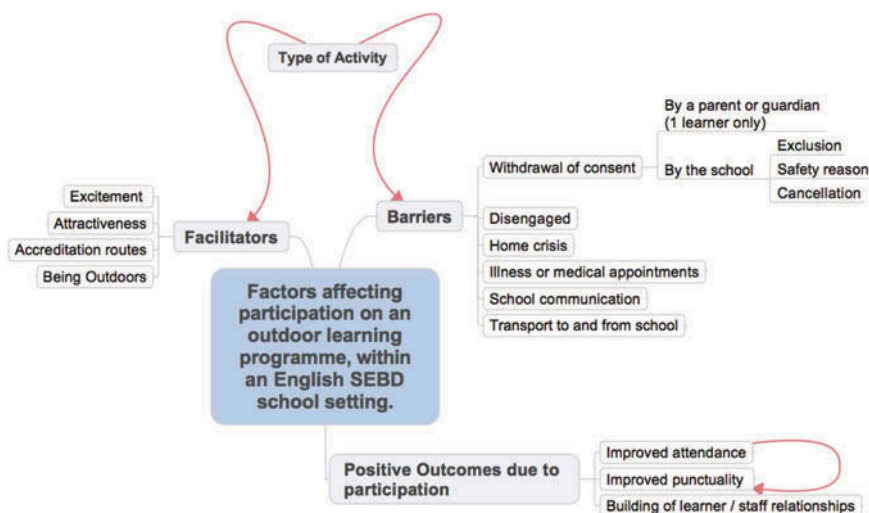


Figure 1. Theoretical framework showing barriers and enablers to participation in an OLP within an SEBD school.

gave them. Learner A referred to ‘the peace of nature’ (interview transcripts). Henry (2006) suggests that physical activity and walking in nature are important strategies for individual reflection. This possibly occurs because people are removed from the pressures of everyday life. In addition, Henry (2006) refers to the longer-term beneficial effects from physical activity and time in nature, suggesting that time in natural surroundings helps people to see things in perspective, thus making them happier. Ungar, Dumond, and McDonald (2005) also found that group work conducted in natural settings improved well-being in at-risk children. The authors further suggest that it may also mitigate the impact of risk factors that they face.

The ability to offer learning that was accredited was felt by OLP staff as an important element of the programme. The gaining of awards was seen as a way of helping the learners in later life and gave some credibility to our work as practitioners. I was therefore keen to elicit from the learners the importance they attributed to accreditation routes such as ASDAN. Again a positive response was recorded from questionnaire returns, although in practice I was unable to recall any moments when the lure of an award helped refocus a learner’s attention to a particular task.

What became clear during my analysis was that people in authority often formed barriers that prevented participation in the OLP. Learner A, who was in the care of the local authority, in particular struggled the entire year with consent. At times this would be granted and then later withdrawn: “‘A’ was really upset at breakfast club, because he can’t go on OLP today with us’ (Research Diary 2). It seemed to OLP staff that the occasional withdrawal of consent exerted additional pressure on the young person, at times isolating him from both his entitled curriculum and his peers. Medical appointments for this learner were also arranged on OLP days, further preventing his attendance on something he clearly enjoyed.

I likened exclusion from the OLP by the school as another form of withdrawal of consent. Unlike within other special educational need categories, learners with SEBD are often excluded on the grounds of their special educational need:

The previous day in school there had been some disruptive behaviour from many of the year groups, in response to the change of Head teacher I suspect. As a result the Head teacher decided to exclude 'B', 'H' & 'D' for 2 days. (Research Diary 2)

Later in the year: "'D" has been placed on a reduced timetable due to the extremeness of his behaviour. This will mean he misses OLP in the future' (Research Diary 3). These incidences above are representative of exclusions that occur as a result of the learners' special educational needs.

In acknowledging the extreme behaviour presented by learners with SEBD, it is understandable why exclusion occurs. On occasions, OLP staff had to agree that some learners with high incidents of absconding presented too great a risk to take on outdoor activities; the school might also have been seen as negligent by outside agencies should an incident have occurred. Additional categories preventing participation in the OLP included incidences of 'illness', which are inevitable; 'Home crisis'; and 'Transport to school':

'C' not in today, he has had some sort of issue over transport to school. (Research Diary 3)

'B' & 'H' have returned to school today (1 week after school break ended) there has been some concern over incidents on the estate that they live on concerning them and they were worried that there might be repercussions of this on the public transport they now use to get to school. (Research Diary 2)

My theoretical framework (see [Figure 1](#)) reflects the categories that emerged during analysis and at the literature review stage. The factors preventing participation in the OLP I termed 'Barriers', whilst the factors that encouraged participation I termed 'Facilitators'. The category 'choice of activity' fluctuated; some activities became barriers, while others were facilitators. Due to the nature of this influence upon attendance, the category is represented as 'floating'. Hill-walking was strongly disliked, possibly because it provided the greatest physical challenge. Other activities moved in and out of favour with the learners as the year progressed, the weather changed or the mood of the young people altered.

Conclusion

I found that the learners within my study looked forward to OLP sessions and this remained a positive aspect of their curriculum. This was reflected through improved attendance, improved punctuality, increased efforts to make it into school on OLP days, moments of excitement and improved behaviour during the OLP.

Surprisingly I found that the learners faced many barriers to their participation. External to the school were transport issues, home crises and withdrawal of consent by guardians. Internal barriers put up by the school included the exclusion of participants from the OLP and cancellation of the OLP when participant numbers were reduced. I likened these to 'withdrawal of consent' because the outcome for the learners was the same.

One learner, possibly because of the type of activity, demonstrated drop out, although it is difficult to know whether this was the real reason. Learner I joined the OLP late due to a transfer from another school. His presence affected the group dynamics and he had also missed the progression experienced by the initial participants in the programme.

My findings were similar to those of Hallam et al. (2007, 2010), who found that factors affecting school attendance are complex. However, schools offering alternative

learning programmes can improve attendance, even if this is limited to the alternative programme. In addition, I propose that schools and legal guardians need to carefully consider their actions, in order to remove barriers that preclude participation on intervention programmes for disaffected learners. The impact can be seen in the following quotes taken from my second research diary: “‘A’ was really upset at breakfast club, because he can’t go on outdoor ed. today with us. His guardians are still preventing him attending OLP’, and at the end of the school day, ‘the school medical assistant told me that “A” had begged her and also the Head teacher to try to resolve the situation for him’.

Implications of this study

This study shows that school leadership teams need to consider the impact of excluding learners from intervention programmes. In one sense it could be argued that the positive response to the OLP reflects a greater need for offering OLPs and that the resulting improvement in attendance can possibly be used to change attitudes towards school.

Linking accreditation routes to OLPs provides a means of reflection, essential in experiential learning cycles, and has the potential to establish positive academic experiences.

Future work

The story of the OLP began before the period that this paper reports. The initial cycles of action that led to the conception and implementation of the OLP remain unreported. It therefore remains for me to report the remaining parts of the story. I also feel that other practitioners using OLPs in school contexts should be encouraged to share their reflections on attendance and participation to help construct a more complete picture in this area.

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Author biography

Alan Price is a part-time doctoral researcher at the School of Education, University of Birmingham, UK. During the day he is employed as a teacher for learners with special educational needs. His research interests relate to how outdoor learning can be used to promote personal and social skill development amongst learners with special educational needs.

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Appendix 1. Programme aims and structure

Programme aims

- To improve participant confidence.
- To improve the skills needed to work with other people.
- To reduce incidents of crisis behaviour when faced with new challenges.
- To improve school attendance.

Autumn term

The programme began with a different activity each week for the first half of the term. The idea behind this was to give the learners a taste of what they would be doing over the year. This included some simple problem-solving, off-road cycling, sailing, canoeing, a hill walk and obstacle course with a zip line.

The second part of the autumn term was dedicated to Forest schools, during morning sessions. Learners used tools, created a fire pit area with seating, built dens and cooked on an open fire. Afternoon sessions included tree-climbing, archery, orienteering and off-road cycling. These were used to increase learner motivation.

Residential 1 (one night using bunkhouse accommodation). Activities included cycling and a first cave trip.

Spring term

The first part of the term focused on high challenges. Learners visited the climbing wall each Tuesday and worked through an AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance) climbing award. Again other activities were used to stimulate interest, these included indoor caving, archery, crate-stacking, and a different obstacle course.

The second half of the term was used as preparation for Residential 2. Key themes were navigation, tent pitching and using camping stoves. Some of these elements also led to AQA awards.

Residential 2 (one night camping). Day walk to campsite, star-gazing and caving.

Summer term

The first half of the term focused on gaining confidence on the water. This included sailing, improvised sailing, canoeing, kayaking and raft-building. The activities mostly occurred at a local sailing centre, but canoeing was progressed to include canal and river journeys.

The final half term was preparation for Residential 3. Increasing the learners' walking distance and load-carrying, in preparation for a mountain climb. High-ropes course, problem-solving and off-road cycling activities were also included to increase challenge and give leadership opportunities.

Residential 3 (four nights camping). Included a mountain day (Cadair Idris), gorge-walking, climbing and beach time.