

**Raising Achievement through Outdoor Experiential Learning? A case study of Scottish secondary school students.**

North Lanarkshire Council suffers from a history of severe socio-economic deprivation. Over the years this climate has had a detrimental impact on the aspirations of the young people who live there, leaving many with limited prospects. In 1997 the Education Department launched their Raising Achievement initiative in each of their primary and secondary schools with the aim of increasing the potential of each of their students. This study focuses on the evaluation of one facet of the overall Raising Achievement initiative; The Aiming Higher with Outward Bound programme.

The Aiming Higher with Outward Bound programme was specifically designed to raise achievement levels in 14 – 16 year old students through their participation in a five-day residential Outward Bound course. Every year since 1997 over a period of 15 weeks from October to February, almost 1000 students from a cohort of approximately 4000 take part in the programme. When it began it was one of the first programmes of its kind to be implemented in secondary schools in Britain. Consequently, the programmes evaluation provided an exciting opportunity for original evaluative research to be conducted.

The programmes evaluation combined a selection of methods in order to give breadth and depth to the research. A life effectiveness questionnaire (LEQ) (Neill, 1997) was administered to all 14-16 year old students in six mainstream secondary schools. The sampled schools were selected from the population of 26 mainstream secondary schools. The LEQ was administered on three occasions (pre, one month post and three months after the conclusion of the Outward Bound programme), over two years of the programme and involved over 800 pupils. Follow-up group interviews were conducted with a sample of students who had attended Outward Bound (n=53). The 5-14 national guidelines concept of 'dispositions' provided a broad overall framework for analysis. The dispositions also made it possible to relate the findings to the practical context and to reinforce the link between the experiential outdoor approach and the mainstream approach to education.

The findings pointed to positive overall effects (in terms of the students perception of their social and academic skills), for those who participated in the programme. These effects were reflected in increased confidence and social skills within the students, which they believe has given them the ability to perform better in certain academic areas.

This study, when considered in relation to the current educational climate, suggests that there is a place and a need for an increased outdoor experiential approach to education, an approach that might rest quite comfortably within the current context of the 5-14 national guidelines. This would allow students to gain a breadth of knowledge and experience that would benefit them in a variety of ways, most importantly in terms of making their experience of education increasingly meaningful and relevant to the community and wider society in which they live.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### **How the research began**

The debate surrounding education has progressed over the last twenty years from, ‘whether schools are getting better or worse’ to ‘whether current provision is good enough for the challenge now facing us as a society’, as charted by Hopkins (2001: 179). Perhaps now at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the time has come to consider ways in which we can ensure that current provision is not just good enough but the best that it can be. This could be achieved by providing an education system in Scotland that remains relevant to today’s student in order that young people are able to achieve their full potential and become successful members of society.

Hopkins comments reflect the underpinning theme of the study, which supports both the current education system in Scotland and the belief that it could be further enhanced by an increased outdoor experiential approach to learning. To this end the study has sought to evaluate the effectiveness of an increased experiential approach and to consider how this approach rests with the current system in Scottish schools.

North Lanarkshire Council’s Aiming Higher with Outward Bound programme has been used as the focus of the case study as it intended to raise student’s achievement levels through an outdoor experiential approach to learning. Therefore in retrospect the case study provided an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the theoretical argument in terms of current educational practice. As part of the Aiming Higher with Outward Bound programme approximately 1,000 students out of a cohort of almost 4,000 students participated in a five day residential Outward Bound course. The programme began in 1997 and the evaluation started the following year. This study presents the full evaluation of the programme and considers its relationship to the current 5-14 National Guidelines for the curriculum (Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS), 2000).

### **The study overview**

A strong guiding force throughout the study has been North Lanarkshire Council Education Department, and Outward Bound Scotland, by way of the Aiming Higher with Outward Bound programme. The roles of North Lanarkshire Council and Outward Bound in the study have been as the provider of the overall programme and provider of the specific outdoor and

residential experience, respectively. Initially the programme provided the source of the case study and latterly it provided an opportunity to consider how this type of experiential approach to education could compliment the current education system within Scotland.

The study fell naturally into two main sections, the initial theoretical consideration and the evaluation of the case study. The theoretical aspect of the study deals with a literature review and analysis of various approaches to education, broadly encompassing progressive education, experiential education, multiple intelligence theory and student centred learning. The first part presents the rationale behind the need for an increased experiential approach to education. Within which the current education system is considered in relation to past literature and research in order to determine the exact role of experiential learning in schools. This role is also specifically defined in terms of practical methods. These methods are explored through the use of the case study, which examines how outdoor experiential learning has been implemented as part of an educational initiative in secondary schools in North Lanarkshire.

The second half of the study considers the case study evaluation and discusses how effective the Aiming Higher with Outward Bound programme has been both in terms of achieving its specific aims and in terms of demonstrating how effective an experiential approach to education may be. Recommendations in relation to the specifics of the Aiming Higher programme are given, as are broader theoretical recommendations relating to the alternative approach to education as well as further research in the field.

Following this introduction, Chapter Two of this thesis considers why there is a need to improve upon the Scottish education system and considers the commitments that have been made towards improvement in relation to the 5-14 National Guidelines (LTS, 2000). The potential for educational improvement is finally considered in relation to the influence of educational theorists and philosophers such as Dewey, Montessori, Friere and Gardener through a discussion of their aims for education. This Chapter provides an introduction to broad theoretical basis upon which this study has been constructed.

The aim of Chapter Three is to define exactly what is meant by an experiential approach to education. This Chapter narrows the scope of the study and sets the parameters for the thesis. In contrast to the broad theories discussed in Chapter Two, this chapter grounds the study within the context of outdoor experiential learning as a specific approach to learning. This chapter presents the results from a thorough review of published research that considered the effectiveness of an outdoor experiential approach to learning in a variety of settings. Thus

helping to better understand how this approach could be implemented within schools in Scotland. Finally, consideration was given to the way in which this approach to education has been developed in relation to the current education system.

Chapter Four provides an example of how an outdoor experiential approach to learning works in practice, which further helps to put the theory in context. This chapter acts as a natural break between the theoretical aspect of the study and the case study evaluation. The Aiming Higher with Outward Bound programme is introduced here and considered from the perspective of North Lanarkshire Council, through a discussion of their aims and objectives. The programme is then considered from the perspective of Outward Bound. The Aiming Higher with Outward Bound programme involves a five-day residential personal and social development course at the Loch Eil Outward Bound centre. Each year approximately 1000 students are selected to take part in the programme.

Chapter Five considers the logistics of the Aiming Higher with Outward Bound programme. The secondary schools and students involved in the programme, the selection process and the course content are all discussed in this Chapter. The logistics of the programme have had direct implications in terms of research design. Therefore it is important that each aspect of the programme is introduced at this stage.

Chapter Six considers the research design by looking at the various methods employed to ensure that the research was effective, original and reliable. Various techniques such as group interviews, self-report instruments, participant observation and individual interviews were employed in the overall research design, and the specifics of each are discussed in the separate evaluation chapters. This chapter considers the broad overall design and the way in which the various individual approaches fit together and complement one another in relation to the overall design of the study. The concept of dispositions, taken from the 5-14 National Guidelines for the Curriculum (LTS, 2000) are introduced and discussed in relation to an experiential approach to learning. The concept of 'dispositions' is central to the evaluation process for two main reasons. Firstly the concept has been used as the overall framework for analysis of the findings and secondly it has allowed the overall results to be understood in terms of contemporary educational aims and objectives.

The first evaluation chapter, Chapter Seven discusses the method, implementation and results from the 'self-report instrument'. This Chapter provides an overview of the experience for the majority of the fourth year students, in each of the sample schools. The Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (Neill, 1997) was administered to this cohort (n=800) on three separate

occasions; before, immediately after and again three months after the five day residential at Outward Bound. The findings demonstrate a positive overall effect from the experience, which appeared to be influenced by the individual schools. However, these findings are better understood when considered in conjunction with the findings from the qualitative analysis of the case study.

Chapter Eight highlights the process that the students go through whilst on the course. Samples of students (n=6) were observed during two weeks of the fifteen-week programme, in order to gain an insight into the opportunities for personal and social development. Individual interviews were carried out with the aim of discovering how the students felt when they were immersed in the experience. The findings demonstrate that the programme provides substantial opportunity for positive development consistent with the concept of 'dispositions'.

The final research approach the group interviews, are discussed in Chapter Nine. These interviews were carried out during March 2000 in each of the sample schools (n=53). The findings demonstrate that following the programme the students felt that they had developed in terms of self-confidence and social skills, which they believe has helped them to perform better in their schoolwork. Their development was found to be consistent with the concept of 'dispositions'.

The findings from the previous three evaluation sections are considered in Chapter Ten. They are presented and analysed under the headings 'provision', 'process' and 'impact'. The overall findings are discussed in relation to the 5-14 National Guidelines (LTS, 2000) in order to relate the outdoor programme back to the aims of mainstream education. The limitations of the study are discussed in this Chapter.

The final and concluding Chapter makes recommendations for the future of the scheme. This chapter also discusses the implications for the broader context of outdoor experiential learning and considers avenues for future research.

