

WINTER WONDERLAND

Heather Tufts reflects on the impacts of a winter expedition and how it might help young people develop essential life skills



Author profile

Heather Tufts worked for eight years at Bewerley Park Outdoor Education Centre, where she gained the knowledge, skills and qualifications which led her to her current job – a mile down the road at Nidderdale High School – where she has worked for the last three years. Here, she works with young people over a sustained period of time to assist their long-term development, while inspiring a lifelong love of adventure and wild places. She also teaches mountain skills to adults at Glenmore Lodge.

The ethos behind NiddVenture

At Nidderdale High School in North Yorkshire, the NiddVenture programme is more than just an extracurricular activity, it's a foundation of the school's educational philosophy. Taking advantage of our beautiful rural surroundings, NiddVenture was developed to address the needs of the ever-growing number of children whose developmental requirements are not met by the traditional education model, as well as to provide outdoor education opportunities to all students. This was based on the beliefs that outdoor adventure and activities that challenge perceived limits can inspire, motivate and provide life-enhancing developmental opportunities.

NiddVenture has been in existence for over three years and is continuing to flourish with an ever-growing list of educational opportunities that take place as part of the regular school day and as extra-curricular activities. As well as traditional outdoor education, an array of other opportunities have been developed to give true responsibility and empower students as valued members of society. These include: a regular service of grocery and pharmaceutical deliveries to elderly residents on our NiddVenture fleet of delivery bikes; cooking and gardening for the elderly; a community bike maintenance service; dry stone-walling; work experience in local shops; and delivery of outdoor education activities to local primary schools with Nidderdale High students acting as trainee outdoor instructors.

NiddVenture has been especially transformational for those children with specific additional learning needs. These students regularly shine when given true responsibility and when placed in an environment in which they can display their many strengths. The unique nature of some of these projects and interventions allows us to attempt to meet needs that cannot always be catered for in a mainstream class of thirty young people.

All students also have the opportunity to participate in the following to ensure that outdoor opportunities filter down throughout the school: NiddVenture Rewards Trips, where a day of outdoor adventure is granted to recognise good behaviour choices; field studies and challenge days that incorporate outdoor learning into the traditional school curriculum; The Duke of Edinburgh's Award; after-school trail running and mountain biking clubs; and adventurous trips both locally and further afield to the Scottish Highlands, for those students who show interest in further outdoor adventure.

Our first Scottish winter trip

A recent winter mountaineering expedition to the Cairngorms was designed as an opportunity to extend and expand the horizons of seven students who had already displayed their resilience, fitness, commitment and ability to cope with challenges and adverse weather on our summer trip to the Scottish Isles of Eigg and Rum. As well as participation in the school's Duke of Edinburgh programme and regular attendance at the after-school trail running club, these students also had to complete an application form, attend an interview and participate in a fitness test to gain their much sought-after place on this inaugural trip. They also had to agree to abide by the strict 'No Phones' policy.

The activities undertaken on the winter trip are not often available to school-aged children, especially from state schools, and they certainly made the most of every opportunity presented to them. From ascending and descending mountains in deep snow, to walking on ice and learning winter mountaineering skills, to snowball fights and the Team Nidd Winter Olympics - personal achievement, pushing beyond comfort zones and plenty of fun were firmly on the list.

Why a winter expedition?

The decision to focus on winter mountaineering skills and remove students from their normal environment was deliberate. The winter mountain environment presents unique challenges that require heightened awareness, thorough planning, preparation and discipline. By dealing with these conditions, students learn to assess risks, take personal responsibility, develop greater resilience and appreciate the importance of real teamwork. The Scottish winter mountain landscape is also one of extreme natural beauty and it was hoped that this new environment would inspire, empower and assist a highly motivated group of students in realising their potential.

In comparison to many school trips, the cost of this expedition was minimal. It was designed to be affordable to all by using basic self-catering accommodation, preparing all our meals from scratch as a team (with a focus on creating healthy, nutritious food) and through the use of our own school minibus for transport. Additional financial assistance was available to any young person who required it, to ensure the opportunity was available to all. All participants also had access to the school's array of high-quality outdoor clothing and equipment, which ensured lack of suitable kit was not a prohibitive factor in participation. This trip aimed to convey the message that outdoor adventure and the enjoyment of the natural world is one of the most affordable pleasures.



Reflections from the expedition

The expedition was transformative for the whole team. Dulcie, one of the participants, reflected, "I absolutely loved being in the Cairngorms and it taught me that you often have to get out of your comfort zone in order to get the best experience possible".

Jack, now in his final year at Nidderdale added,

“The scenery and beauty of the Cairngorms is unmatched. From the towering peaks of the Cairngorm mountains that we climbed, to the beauty of the trees on our evening walks. This trip has made me see the beautiful places that the national park has to offer and has offered me a chance to work with one of the most amazing teams that you could ever want to have by your side.”

Student Ellie described how the whole team felt at the end of the trip, "it's the most magical, unforgettable experience I've ever had. I can't put it into words how amazing it was".

One of the trip parents expressed,

“My daughter still has the twinkle in her eye now. I know from personal experience how transformational these kinds of adventures can be for young people. I am sure youngsters from Team Nidd will take the resilience, skills and memories from this trip forward with them throughout their whole lives.”

From a Trip Leader's point of view, witnessing the students' enthusiasm, resilience and superb teamwork on this trip highlighted the value of real outdoor adventure and its immense ability to teach valuable life skills. It was an incredibly special trip to share with this team and I am very grateful to have been given the opportunity by our enlightened Headteacher, Kath Jordan, to turn a vision into reality. It's an absolute pleasure spending time with such a committed, caring and enthusiastic group of young people and a huge joy to see them growing as adventurers and valuing all the life enhancing opportunities available to them.

Looking ahead: the lasting impact

The skills and insights gained from this expedition are intended to serve as a stepping stone for students' future endeavours. Wherever life takes them, the resilience, confidence and teamwork developed on this trip will surely prove invaluable. In the long term, this trip may also contribute to providing these students with the interest, knowledge and skills to tackle important environmental and sustainability issues as they progress into adulthood.

To continue this journey, the planned next step is to show the recent winter trip team what is possible locally and sustainably, without the need for dependence on adults or private vehicles. For this reason, we will be using public transport to reach the start of our next adventure. The team will be walking from school to the local bus stop, catching a bus and train into the heart of the Yorkshire Dales and walking back to school over a weekend, camping along the way. The team will be responsible for the planning of the route and trip logistics, in an attempt to empower them with the knowledge that they are capable of creating their own adventures. It is hoped that this will then extend to the team planning their own adventure in the summer, unaccompanied by adults.

The recent NiddVenture winter trip and forthcoming adventures, exemplify Nidderdale High School's commitment to using outdoor learning as a powerful tool for personal growth. By challenging young people through real, uncontrived outdoor adventure, it is hoped that they will be empowered to navigate the complexities of life with confidence and happiness and continue exploring, learning and contributing positively to society.

Acknowledgments

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