

**Regular Paper**

## **Forty Years On: Just How Life Changing are School Expeditions?**

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### **Abstract**

Research in outdoor education and more specifically on wilderness expeditions has almost exclusively focused on short-term benefits (<5yrs) despite their findings suggesting these are “life-changing” experiences. This study examined long-term outcomes (40 years later) of three (month-long) adventurous school expeditions to mainland Europe, by staff and pupils from a high school (11- to 16-year-olds) in Scotland in the 1970s. The investigation was initiated by a call for life stories from 45 participants, followed by 10 interviews at a school reunion. The interviews revealed a transference of learning qualities attributed to the expedition, indicating a long-term impact on participants’ personal and/or professional lives, with individuals still drawing upon their expedition experiences some 40 years later. Significant themes emerging were planning and preparation, confidence, and feelings of gratefulness, which led to participants wanting to undertake service that contributes back into society for young peoples’ benefit. This study adds to the knowledge of long-range educational outcomes from school expeditions.

**KEYWORDS:** *Expeditions, educational value, personal and social development, long-term impact*

Research in outdoor education and more specifically, on expeditions has almost exclusively focused on short-term benefits (<5yrs) yet much of the rhetoric suggests that participation in a well-organised expedition can be a “life-changing” experience. There has been a tradition of conducting expeditions for exploration, research, and learning purposes emanating from the

United Kingdom for over 100 years, with famous names such as Captain Robert Scott, Earnest Shackleton, Douglas Mawson, Gino Watkins, and Wally Herbert coming to mind (Allison et al., 2011). Legitimising expeditions for an educational purpose, Surgeon Commander George Murray Levick, a member of Scott's 1911-13 Terra Nova Antarctic Expedition, founded the Public Schools Exploring Society in London in 1932 (Allison et al., 2011) when the first youth expedition took place that year to Finland. The same organization, now called the British Exploring Society (BES), still thrives today. The period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s saw the British overseas youth expedition sector move from an opportunity exclusively for the socioeconomically privileged into one serving a "much larger range of children of varying social backgrounds and academic abilities" (Grey, 1984, p.17). One example is Kennedy's (1992) 10-week overland expeditions to the Sahara Desert with inner-city youth from Liverpool, UK (who were not selected by application). Kennedy's work presented evidence that the expeditions had a major influence on the social and moral development of the members. The 1980s also marked the period when expedition research for educational or social development impacts was born (Grey, 1984; Kennedy, 1992). Two new major expedition providers were established around this time: Operation Raleigh in 1984 which later became Raleigh International (RI), and World Challenge Expeditions (WCE) in 1987, which administers upwards of 350 expeditions per year, travelling to 40 destinations with over 8,000 students every year (World Challenge, 2018). Expeditions and closely associated gap-year providers for university students, now represent the fastest growing travel sector of this century. Thousands of British youth are taking gap-year experiences and more than 200 organizations provide different expedition experiences (Simpson, 2004; Stott et al., 2015).

Well established in America also, are the opportunities for Service-Learning overseas. These opportunities have more of a social contribution focus stemming from a residential period in another country, which according to Wolpert-Gawron (2016) is "a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves." Service-Learning can be understood as an educational approach that combines learning objectives with community service in order to provide a pragmatic, progressive learning experience while meeting societal needs (e.g., see Awuah et al., 2020; Johnson & Martin, 2017; Yen & Carrick, 2021). Interestingly the opportunity for volunteering and intern postings overseas from the UK has also been available since 1998 through Global Vision International (GVI, 2021). However, while Service-Learning has relevant tangents to our educational motives, being another important way to offer young people valuable overseas experiences, in this research we are focusing on expeditions only.

To this end, while the relatively short-term benefits of outdoor education and learning potential of expeditions is reasonably well documented, our research findings suggest that participation in a well-organised wilderness expedition can truly be a "life-changing" experience.

## Research on Youth Expeditions

With the upsurge in the numbers of expeditions came corresponding research on different aspects of the experience such as: expedition stress (Watts et al., 1992); personality and coping strategies (Watts et al., 1994); reflection (Allison, 1998); personal, social and technical skills (Stott & Hall, 2003); rites of passage and critical elements (Beames, 2004a; b); the construction of identity (Beames, 2005); self-confidence (Beames & Stott, 2008); control and conformity (Beames & Pike, 2008); coping skills (Sheldon, 2009); volunteer work, cultural sensitivity, and environmental responsibility, psychological considerations, regulating practice, conducting research and accessibility (Allison & Beames, 2010); and resilience (Ewert & Yoshino, 2011). These personal attributes developed by young people participating in expeditions are understood to evolve through an increased ability to effectively manage their emotions, thoughts, and behav-

ious, particularly in challenging circumstances (Allison & Von-Wald, 2010; Stott et al., 2016). A useful systematic review of research on youth expeditions was undertaken by Stott et al. (2015) which confirmed the need for research using larger samples and for research into the medium (5-20 years) and longer-term impacts (> 20 years). Bobilya et al. (2011) conducted a relatively large mixed-methods study that added to the growing body of research investigating the characteristics and outcomes of the Outward Bound-type wilderness experience and, in particular, the Final Expedition. Their findings also supported the youth development literature (American Camp Association, 2006), which indicated that these types of outcomes are what young people need in contemporary culture (e.g., responsibility, leadership development, self-reliance). Furman and Sibthorp (2011) explored the transfer of expedition behaviour skills learned during a 14-day adventure course with the National Outdoor Leadership School. They described expedition behaviours as a component of leadership, an essential component of working as a team, or as a means to encourage positive group dynamics, all of which contribute to youth development. Sibthorp and Morgan (2011) advocated for adventure-based programming as a model for positive youth development. However, a key question that has still not really been fully addressed is, "to what extent the lessons are transported into other life contexts and whether these changes are long-lasting or short-lived" (Daniel, 2003, p. 5; Wassong, 2013).

Unlike traditional education, experiential learning that takes place on expeditions, views knowledge as an evolving, lifelong process where students recognise what works for them in different contexts (Allison & Von-Wald, 2010; Ord, 2012). Daniel (2003, p.iii) explored the long-term significance of a spirituality-oriented, Outward Bound-type wilderness expedition and found that "90% of the participants believed the experience had made a difference in their lives." However, clearer evidence of the impact of expeditions in the longer term is still scarce and a number of previous studies have noted the need to observe the benefits attributed to expedition participation over extended periods of time (Daniel, 2003; Hattie et al., 1997; Stott et al., 2015; Wigglesworth & Heintzman, 2020).

Empirical studies exploring the influence of expeditions over more than five years after the experience are rare, with one notable exception to date being the work by Takano (2010) who carried out a 20-year retrospective study of the impact of Raleigh International expeditions on Japanese participants, aged 18-25. Takano found that the vast majority of respondents (99%) considered their expedition experience to be significant in their lives, and 96% answered that this experience had influenced their lives. Her study also identified perceived key elements of the expeditions that generated the influences, such as a diverse group of people, age of participation and the natural environment. Where the present study differs from Takano (2010) is the extent of long-term revisiting, 40 years, being double that studied by Takano, and also the age of the participants (in this study they were 13-15 years old at the time of the expedition). Daniel's (2003, 2007) research on the 20-day Outward Bound-type wilderness expeditions, revealed how for one-third of all 388 respondents, the significance of the trip had increased over time. Life significance was reportedly enhanced most often by the following three factors: (a) how new or unique the experience was to the informants, (b) the timing of the event in informants' lives, and (c) the extent to which expedition memories were connected later to other life experiences.

The influence of wilderness expeditions for learning within an educational context is usually attributed to two factors. Firstly, wilderness expeditions can provide rich environments where people encounter new situations, face new challenges and meet new people. Secondly, the psychosocial stage that explorers are going through is also crucial, as wilderness youth expeditions typically take place when participants are in adolescence and young adulthood, when questions about identity, meaning and motivations arise (Allison & Von-Wald, 2010; Allison et al., 2011; Takano, 2010).

## The Expedition Experience for Learning

Following Daniel's (2003) investigations, Gassner et al. (2006) researched Outward Bound Singapore's Classic 21-day Challenge course and concluded that the expedition experience had long-term impact on past participants' personal and professional life, years after the experience. Asfeldt and Hvenegaard (2014), exploring perceived learning and lasting impacts on university-based wilderness educational expeditions, observed that 88% of students perceived an evolution in their learning after their expedition experience, with regard to self-awareness, group living, and greater appreciation of the lived experience. It is striking from the extant literature that there are no long-term studies of expeditions with school groups where the participants already know each other beforehand (hereafter called "intact" groups). This is a notable gap given the opportunities for involvement in an expedition and the educational opportunities for cross-curricular connections to other topics and project-based learning which have gained popularity in recent years (Thorburn, 2017).

Observing the impact of an educational experience 40 years on, and what explorers attribute to it, can inform how to foster more significant learning experiences that impact people's lives. The findings of this study will have practical implications not only for expedition programs and organizations but also for youth organizations, leaders, and educators who are seeking to foster personal and social youth development in the longer term. This study will also provide awareness about the perceived value of participating in these types of programs over a lifetime. Therefore, aiming to gain a better understanding of the perceived long-term impact of expeditions on participants, this research utilised a retrospective design, collecting life stories from 45 people and then interviewing 10 former participants of three (one-month-long) adventurous school expeditions to France and Switzerland, carried out by staff and pupils of a high school in Scotland in the 1970s. This research potentially offers a valuable contribution to the emerging youth development and experiential education literature. Only a small number of retrospective studies exploring the effects of outdoor activity programs and educational expeditions have been published and thus, provide a valuable insight to understanding how expeditions might influence participants' lives in the longer term.

## Aims

This research aimed to address two main questions:

- What were the participants' memories of their motivation to get involved and take part in the expedition?
- What are the perceived personal benefits of taking part in the expedition in terms of personal and social development over the last 40 years?

## Methods

### Context of the Study

A retrospective design was adopted in this study that was based around a 40-year reunion organized by the Principal Teacher of Physical Education at the school who designed, planned, and led the expeditions. The reunion took place in mid-June 2016. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted about these recollections from the 1970s to interpret the meaning of this type of experience from a qualitative standpoint (Greffrath et al., 2008; Martin & Leberman, 2005). This study was conducted with Scottish participants of three (one-month-long) canoeing and mountaineering expeditions that travelled from central Scotland, overland by minibus, and were based in the south of France, then Switzerland, Austria, and Spain in 1975, 1976, and 1977. The participants of these expeditions were high school students, many of whom were members of

the school's canoe club. The expeditions were organised by the staff members in the Physical Education department and from five other subject departments within the school. Some partners or spouses of the participating staff members also participated. It is important to note that there was a year-long preparation stage during which all participants—students and teachers—were training in canoeing skills, building their own canoes, taking part in local competitions, weekend canoeing and hill-walking trips around Scotland, as well as taking part in fitness sessions such as circuit training. All participants of the expeditions were required to keep a logbook to record daily activities and events. For each expedition, teams of pupils were assigned key roles of responsibility that included checking minibus tyres, oil and fuel levels, packing the minibus roof rack, packing and maintenance of the trailer, menu design, shopping and cooking for staff and peers, tent maintenance, and boat care/repair. Pupils either kayaked on rivers or walked on mountains most days, except on rest days. A book was compiled, edited, and home-published for the 40-year reunion (in June 2016) by the expedition organizer, which provides route plans, distances travelled, activities, diaries, budgets, and photographs of all three expeditions, also incorporating 45 two-page life stories contributed by the participants.

## Participants

Prior to the reunion, 45 participants were asked to provide their “life story” in a short two-page narrative, since the expedition they took part in (1975, 1976, or 1977). These life stories were compiled into the aforementioned book. Ten participants (five males and five females) who had been pupils on one or more of the expeditions were selected to take part in a semi-structured interview ( $n=10$ ; age 53–55). Details on selection of interviewees is detailed below. Ethical approval was obtained from the lead authors' institution at the time of the study. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent accompanied with and explanatory information letter which set out the context for participation and their freedom to withdraw at any time.

## Document Analysis

Two types of data were analysed; life stories written by expedition participants prior to the 40-year reunion, and interview transcripts. Six general themes were provided as prompts for the two-page life story to incorporate: key life moments, interesting events, funny events, CV stuff, and a lasting memory from their own expedition. All participants of the expeditions were also asked to provide a picture from their time at school along with a current picture. These short narratives were read through and data extracted by the researchers into a summary table. This initial data influenced the development of the interview questions and allowed researchers to better familiarise themselves with the participants. Moreover, having to think about past experiences in their own time well in advance of the interviews, allowed the participants time to recall and reflect on the experiences more accurately (Chawla, 1998). It was anticipated that having some prior knowledge about the participants would help the researchers to establish some empathy with the participants, enabling a positive rapport with people who they would meet for only a short period of time (McAdams & McLean, 2013). All researchers were involved in this process of data collection and the identification of themes.

## Researchers' Reflective Biographies

A key feature of this research was the opportunity to interview participants at the very school they attended where their friendships and relationships were contextually bound by peer-group, teachers and location—this would be a valuable snapshot from people in a group which would soon disperse. Consequently, for expediency and to reduce the imposition upon this nostalgic social setting, the team of four researchers conducted two or three interviews each, during one morning of the weekend reunion. In preparation for this fieldwork episode, each researcher

produced a short reflective biography, approximately 300 words long, that was shared within the research team. This exercise allowed the research team to better familiarise with each other, providing a degree of confidence in shared research expertise and congruence in their background for adventure education. Fernald and Duclos (2005, p. 362) recommended this proactive stance to ensure “the team has a common understanding of the project and be able to hear all voices towards a sense of unity.” A further benefit of the researchers’ reflective biographies was in the post-interview transcription and analysis phase, providing some insight for understanding each other, in order to cohesively interpret, and make inferences about participant voices in this group enterprise (Lordly et al., 2012).

## Interviews

Semi-structured interview questions were developed based on reviewed literature and themes identified within the document analysis. The questions were focused around:

1. The perceived benefits of the pre-expedition preparation
2. Participation in the final expedition
3. Continued involvement in physical activity throughout one’s life
4. Personal and professional development
5. Individual learning

There were further probing questions about their motivation to join the school’s canoe club and their training and preparations before the final expedition. For example, these included asking participants how this experience has affected, if at all, their involvement in physical activity, taking up new challenges in life, overcoming difficulties in life, and finally, if there are any other influences the expedition experience had? The schedule was piloted with two people; one male one female, who attended similar expeditions 20 and 5 years ago, respectively. Ten participants and four reserves were identified based on the life stories they provided and information about whether they were attending the reunion meeting in June 2016. In selecting the potential interviewees, we were mindful of getting a balance of males/females and a range of career types, although no specific criteria beyond this were applied, and we accept that this could have introduced bias. Once potential interviewees were selected, the reunion organiser (and Principal teacher who led the expeditions) confirmed whether they were attending the reunion. When all interviewees were identified, they were randomly allocated to the researchers, then the researchers read the life stories of the assigned participants. All participants of the expeditions were first contacted one month prior to the study. The second contact was made two weeks prior to data collection when they were provided with an information sheet that explained the objectives of the research, the interview plan, and a letter of invitation. The third contact was made five days prior to the study when participants were given the lead interview questions that were designed to help facilitate recall and prompt reflection. The interviews were conducted during the reunion weekend in Scotland when the organizer had allocated a specific time for us to be at the venue and rooms to conduct the interviews. All 10 participants completed an informed consent form at the beginning of the interview. Each interview lasted approximately half an hour and was recorded for later transcription. All participants of the reunion who were not selected for the interviews were asked to provide their contact details if they wished to be contacted in the future for potential follow up study.

## Analysis: Coding and Data Handling

Themes from the participants’ life stories were entered on to a Microsoft Excel summary table, helping to devise the interview schedule and allowed researchers to better familiarise

themselves with the participants of this study. Data from these brief life stories were not used beyond this to make any deeper inferences; these were made later from the interview data only. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed, after which interviewees' names were removed and replaced with the letters A-J to anonymise the analysis from this point onward.

The researchers transcribed the main themes by identifying codes and assigning labels (Ayres, 2008). Saldana's (2016) work on coding with qualitative data was a central reference for the research team, helping us to make decisions about inferences, codes, themes, and categorizing in the more extensive transcripts that followed. Saldana (2016) reminds us that just as a title represents or captures a book, a film or a poem, a code captures a datum's primary content or essence. Saldana (2016, p. 4) explains that:

In qualitative data analysis, a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or "translates" the data (Vogt et al., 2014, p. 13) and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum, for later purposes of pattern detection categorization, assertion of proposition development or theory building.

Faced with growing quantities of data to analyse in the transcripts, the researchers followed the 6-step process set out by Braun and Clarke (2006), who, amongst other useful guidance, reminded the research team not to jump to early conclusions with initial data coding. Their protocol systematically moves from familiarizing with data, generating initial codes and themes, working towards defining and naming themes—and then reporting. The reporting phase was a particularly interesting element to this project, with each researcher first "reporting" to each other, whereupon we discovered the common ground in our interpretations from the in-depth interviews, toward more unified themes and outcomes to report back to the 40-year reunion group and more formally in peer-reviewed publication.

Once the thematic analysis was completed, the researchers met and discussed the emerging themes. It rapidly became clear that the interviewing, transcription, and multiple listening and reading of the interviews had led to identification of consistent themes. This more grounded approach to data analysis, shared between researchers each possessing very good knowledge of the subject area, negated the need to apply intercoder-reliability scores which are used when a number of research assistants may be tasked with aspects of data analysis. This decision on data processing, especially for the manageable quantity of data in this study, increased the trustworthiness of the analysis, credibility of the findings, and helped to decrease researcher bias (Campbell et al., 2013). The life stories were really a means of selecting participants to become the ten interviewees. Thereafter, interview data was the main focus for analytical attention.

## Findings

Five main themes emerged from the interview analysis: confidence and independence; planning and preparation; teamwork, group bonding and friendships; gratefulness and service, and optimism, effort and perseverance.

### Confidence and Independence

The expedition experience gave confidence and bravery to do other challenging things later in life, even when fear was present such as when traveling, doing other expeditions, or even returning to school. The wild-water rivers paddled in France became a metaphor to confront challenges. The expedition allowed them to be open to challenges, push boundaries while having fun. For example, Participant A commented:

The expedition gave me more confidence and I ended up hitch-hiking through Europe. I realized during the expedition that I was capable of all sorts of things. I was quiet and introverted before but gained a lot more confidence during the expedition.

Participant F said:

I'm absolutely clear in my mind that these experiences were formative in a positive way, wanting to take on different challenges. I have done so many different things in my life now. When I came back [from my expedition] I decided to go back to school with a more mature attitude.

## Planning and Preparation

Prior to the expedition there was extensive preparation that included “building the canoes, getting physically fit and acquiring the skills to canoe in white-water rivers. There was also extensive planning regarding the campsites and where they were going to go [route planning]. Everything was carefully organised” (Participant C). This being a familiar recollection that several participants took from the expedition experience and carried into their lives. Participants also reported learning:

The importance of planning first and foremost and that's something that I've taken with me through the rest of my career. Planning and organization was key. Remember, this was all done in the days before the Internet—learning some language skills was important' (Participant J).

Participant B explained how “the expedition taught me that with good preparation, planning and hard work, you can achieve pretty much whatever it is you want to achieve.” Participant E said,

I like to have plan A and plan B, you know? It makes me an organized person. And the expedition taught me that I could be disorganized too. So, if you want something to go well you have to commit to the preparation.

## Teamwork/Group Bonding and Friendships

Every person in the group had a place. During the expedition everyone had a task, and usually the task would be related to the strengths of the students. All the participants had responsibilities in their expedition group. For example, it may be to plan a menu, buy food, or cook meals for others. More generally, everyone had a job, such as packing the roof rack, checking engine oil, tyre pressures, and so on. There was a supportive structure of working with buddies to complete tasks, everything was done in pairs or small groups. Leaders created the conditions for the expeditions to succeed, but students had tasks to complete and took ownership of those tasks. They had a strong sense of independence by being away for a month and having to speak another language to achieve what they needed to do. Participant H stated:

Everyone was given their own responsibilities; we all knew what we had to do. During the expedition we took turns buying the food and planning the meals. Handling foreign currency at the supermarket—we had to learn to manage within the budget. Looking out for each other, you know?

There were vivid memories for participant J who recalled to one researcher,

There was always something to do. For example, we had been divided into groups for cooking, buying food, and budgeting [...] But we also had responsibilities for packing the bus, maintaining the trailer, packing the roof, packing the boats, repairing the boats and things like that. Everybody had a role to play.

Participant I reported,

We were left to do it. The teachers expected you to step up. You were not spoon fed. You had to do the shopping. Everyone had to eat what you made. It was like an initiation. We went as young children, but we came back like adults.

There was a strong sense of group bonding and group cohesion that emerged from the data. Participants took care of each other. There was a feeling of a microcosm of care and a strong sense of “constituted family” between the expedition members. Courage and confidence in each other were common inferences from all the researchers after the interviews, drawing upon comments that showed; feeling part of a group, feeling cared for, belonging, feeling supported. Participants also had a sense of mission and a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves, as has been reported in other studies into significant life experiences. For example, Participant A stated:

You are only as strong as the weakest person and sometimes, I was one of the weakest canoeists and youngest of the group. It was a team effort and they had to make sure that I got through, that made us a team. That pride of being in a team of achievers made me feel I was part of something significant.

When asked about lasting friendships, it was clear that none of the participants interviewed had stayed in touch with other expedition members, unless they had met before the expedition (i.e., they were school friends before the expedition took place). However, many also reported that they can “just pick up where they left off no problem” or “stories, banter, and culture all come back.” In essence, they did not feel that 40 years had passed. For example, Participant B said:

I left school straight after that expedition. I kept up with it [canoeing] some years, but we didn’t have social media like now. I moved overseas, came back again, moved overseas again, so I haven’t kept up with people from that time. It’s amazing, because yesterday it was like we were transported back 40 years. Although the emails started 16-18 months ago [for the reunion event] I immediately felt part of the same group again. The jokes, the humour, and memories we shared meant that it has been easy to integrate on this weekend. It’s like we’ve been away for only 2-3 years, not 40 years.

## Gratefulness and Service

Several participants commented that currently young people do not have the opportunity to undertake trips like this since there is too much administration and Health and Safety red-tape for schools to organize. For example, Participant C said:

Just found the whole thing a very valuable experience. We were fortunate we had such good staff at school who were prepared to give up their free time. Very nearly 1:1 ratio. Staff had to give up time for training as well. 44 people out of 56 responded. More than half here today.

Participant J, acknowledging the teachers’ efforts, revealed they,

have a tremendous respect for the teachers because of what they did. I have kids of my own and the hoops you have to jump to do anything, it’s so difficult nowadays, they were brilliant; they did great and did us proud.

While Participant E reflected with more caution:

I am sad that school children today don’t have the same opportunities that we had, thanks to an energetic group of teachers. Their life was for the school. Today teachers are not prepared for risk-culture, what we experienced may be just too much for teachers nowadays?

Several participants believed in the importance of helping the next generation. They found different ways of volunteering and giving back to community through teaching, volunteering,

mentoring, other forms of service or being involved in their own children's school planning. For example, Participant D stated:

I became a volunteer volleyball coach because for the next generation you have to put something back. I coach in my community. It's about trying to instil that encouragement that I got [from school] because it creates a sense of community and belonging, and the teachers did that.

Participant G explained how they wanted to make the opportunity they had at school, in some way available to others,

When my children were at school, I was on the Parents' Committee because I wanted to influence the school to create better opportunities. They are all latent things, but drivers behind it.

### **Optimism, Effort, and Perseverance**

A theme running through all the interviews was learning an attitude associated with optimism, effort, and perseverance. This took different forms depending on the individual. For example, upon realising the value in transferring the effort in one situation to another, Participant H explained:

I take the same approach with other things, if you want to achieve a result, you must put the effort in beforehand. You just must plan and think ahead, you must do X, Y, and then Z to achieve it.

Similarly, participant C reasoned about their coping mechanisms from this outdoor expedition experience,

The resilience you learn being outdoors really added to my education back then and since. These things are massive learnings from the whole time we worked together. That will never leave me.

These quotes across the data sets from all four researchers, illustrate the attribution of a willingness to work hard and put in the physical effort to succeed, and that this effort creates an optimism that it is possible to achieve dreams, or turn aspirations into reality. Individuals reported this happening in other aspects of their lives including work, family, and recreation activities. One individual reported that this personal learning was the main focus for his volunteer activity with youth groups for 20+ years where his main motivation was instilling an optimistic attitude and a willingness to try new things and not look for shortcuts.

### **Discussion**

The general purpose of our research was to enquire whether expedition experiences that were part of mainstream education for these participants 40 years ago made any lasting, life-changing impact. Our study findings are broadly in agreement with those of Daniel's (2003, 2007) from the Outward Bound-type expeditions discussed above. Allison and Von Wald (2011) concluded that expeditions may provide a useful context for personal and social development and in particular, exploration of values. There is no doubt that our findings in this study affirm that positive personal and social development, as reported by the interviewees 40 years on, was at least partly attributable to their school expeditions. This study differs from others that have examined the short-term (<5 years) (e.g., Allison & Von-Wald, 2010; Allison et al., 2018; Stott & Hall, 2003; Stott et al., 2016) or longer-term impacts of expeditions (e.g., Beames, 2003; 2004a; 2004b; Takano, 2010) in that in many previous studies, it was commercial organizations (or charities) that planned the expeditions and recruited the leaders and young participants.

The expeditions that were the focus of this study were organised within one school, similar to the expeditions reported by Kennedy (1992). The participants were recruited from within the school, who for example had membership of the canoe club, hill-walking club, or pupils with a sporting aptitude or were highly motivated, whereas participants for WCE, BES, and RI expeditions apply from all over the UK or even from international destinations. Of course, these organizations charge considerable fees (£3000-£5000 in 2018), so this tends to favour those who (or whose family) can afford it. It could be argued that the participants in these types of [commercial] expeditions, therefore, differ from the pupils selected from within the school in this study. Nevertheless, both types of expedition use their own way to select participants and this should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings. In other words, if highly motivated, able, enthusiastic, confident young people are selected to go on these expeditions, we should not be too surprised when we find these traits coming out in follow-up research.

Utterances identifying the main themes were expressed with confidence in the interviews; they were not hazy memories, they were vivid and lively recollections. Consequently, through the process of collecting and analysing the data, there was a strong sense that the participants “wouldn’t have missed the expeditions for the world.” These were strong formative experiences that lay latent in some for many years and thus, seemed to be a highly valued aspect of their education. For some participants, this sense of value was in hindsight, or “now they think about it, yes” as one participant commented, while for others it was a springboard into a life of adventure. For example, many of the participants did not return to any outdoor activities until later life, as parents or even grandparents, when they “naturally” bought a canoe or confidently set off to the hills with their offspring. However, there were a minority who stayed with the activities from the expeditions in the 1970s and became high-level, national competitors or coaches by the 1980s. Either way, the majority of participants expressed an intuitive need to turn to outdoor activities with a confidence that for them made it the obvious choice of what to do in life (specific activities) or how to do in life (approach to challenges). When they recalled what they had achieved at 12 or 14 years of age in France, there was no hesitation that they wanted to do similar outdoor activities and travel with their children, now that seemingly, they had a very good reason to take it up again. The participants reflected on how the staff provided them with opportunities to learn about problem solving and personal development, situation management and self-reliance that extended far beyond the bounds of the school, into subsequent personal and business lives.

The participants reported how language, identity formation, coping in the outdoors, and the social and logistical issues around problem solving, were all key ingredients of learning from the expeditions. For all the participants there was an evolution of role definition and personal responsibility that they communicated to each other during the expeditions. The stories of travelling in the minibus were always recalled with a wry smile, 16 teenagers on bench seats traveling through the night to Dover, over the English Channel of a night ferry and on down through France. So, if the expeditions were so good, why did they stop? From a logistical point of view, it can be understood why they stopped; money, staffing, time, insurance and so on. From an educational point of view, however, it seems there is a great deal of value in what is being evidenced from this research. A problem for mainstream schools currently may be that these kinds of valuable educational experiences may not directly improve the examination results in the short term (e.g., Caves & Balestra, 2018). The life-changing effects that are long term are clearly evidenced in our data. They can start at school but go far beyond the school gates in later life. This raises a series of interesting dilemmas for the future planning of education, such as, how can short-term education have long-term impact in a person’s life (Hargreaves, 2007)? Is it the role of schooling to have any impact in a person’s life above getting exam results (Caves & Balestra, 2018)? If this is the case, for exactly what are pupils being prepared (Seth & Rhodes, 2017)? Is the life of a school pupil now just a series of examinations from a school’s perspective (James, 2015)? Might this be what schooling strives for now—accounting for success in the limited gaze of public scrutiny,

league tables and a myopic view of what counts as success in education? (Black, 1998; Hazelkorn, 2008; Klemenčič & Mirazchijski, 2018; Osman & Warmer, 2020).

From the richness of participants' stories in this study, it can be questioned whether some schools have lost sight of the person and refocused on institutional survival in this media-driven and risk-averse climate that has been developing over the last 40 years. These school expeditions were certainly life-changing for them, but how "life-changing" might only be assessed in qualitative terms, as truly valuable educational outcomes may be beyond the objective, quantitative measures and key performance indicators against which education now seems to be measured.

## Limitations

First, in general terms, while it is tempting to believe from reading the life stories that this group is more likely to have undertaken international travel and to have continued their interest in sports and outdoor pursuits, without a carefully selected control group (of ex-pupils who did not go on the expeditions), it is difficult to make any significant conclusions from the life stories themselves. Even if it were possible to somehow demonstrate that the expedition members had lived different or more adventurous lives than a control group, it may not be possible to attribute any differences to participation on the expeditions. For instance, it could be that the expeditions attracted the more adventurous pupils to take part in the first place.

Second, we selected and interviewed only 10 of the 45 expedition participants who submitted their life stories. A further group (of ~ 30) did not respond to invitations to submit their life story and attend the reunion. Therefore, our study is subject to the usual uncertainties associated with sampling and selection of the 10 to be interviewed, and we acknowledge this as a potential weakness in our research.

## Future Research

It would be informative to be able to repeat this study in other schools, or educational contexts, where similar expeditions have been included as part of the school's curriculum or extracurricular activities such as Kennedy's (1992) Sahara Desert trips from Liverpool. This is theoretically possible in the UK, for example, where many UK Local Education Authorities own Outdoor Education Centres in remote areas, from which individual schools may have mounted expeditions, even overseas. Similarly, in the 1970s and 1980s, some secondary schools in the UK (for 11- to 16-year-olds) ran Mode 3 CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education) qualifications in Outdoor Pursuits, which were 2-year programmes of practical and theory and included journeying experiences. If our research protocol here were visited upon such a group from back then, might similar themes emerge? Might that generate more evidence for deep learning in other contexts? A distinctive feature of the school-based expedition is how the experience may be intrinsically linked to the educational aims of the school itself, perhaps some holistic aspiration of the school for its pupils to be better prepared to take their place in society? Other UK-based organizations, who admittedly have developmental aims outside of those from mainstream education, are the British Exploring Society, Raleigh International, and World Challenge Expeditions. While these are UK-based organizations, they do operate expeditions all over the world and often included non-UK participants. These are three of the most well-established overseas expedition providers in the UK who bring together non-intact groups (i.e., participants from various backgrounds who do not know each other before the expedition). There are many other organizations worldwide who also offer ad-hoc expeditions or overseas residential experiences such as the Scout and Girl Guiding movements, or universities (Anderson et al., 1974; Chapman, 1944; Sandon, 1924), Outward Bound, the National Outdoor Leadership School in the USA, various clubs and societies (e.g., The Explorers Club; The Eagle Ski Club) and in the UK, the Brathay Trust, where groups of people who may already know each other (intact groups) come together

for expeditions and residential experiences. These offer potentially fruitful avenues into which this research could be extended in future.

## Implications for Professional Practice

This research has clearly highlighted the significant, impactful, lifelong learning that a one-month-long school summer expedition to a foreign country have brought about. In addition to the intrinsic value of an educational expedition while at school, there is the innovative statement that the expedition as an undertaking makes for the school toward broadening the scope of the experiences on offer. Consequently, this changes the expectations of their pupils as they progress in life. In recent years, there has been a great deal of emphasis in higher education on internationalizing the curriculum (Altbach, 2015; Foster & Anderson, 2015; Jones & Brown, 2007; Knight, 2013), with some universities even developing a toolkit to help staff embrace internationalization (Churchill & Fletcher, 2009).

The findings from this study add initial evidence to support the value of an overseas experience as a key part of a fully rounded education. They also provide evidence for the importance of involving young people in decision making and planning of educational experiences; taking ownership and being learner-centred, rather than a consumption model of education (i.e., being something that is “done to” young people).

## Conclusion

This glimpse into participants’ lives after such a profound educational experience in their school-based expeditions brings two unique perspectives to this research: 1) the 40-year period over which that glimpse spans, nearly double that of other longitudinal studies in the literature, and 2) that this is a pre-existing or “intact” group from the same school setting, the expeditions being part of a programme offered in mainstream education. That is, many other comparisons of personal development research from expeditions have come from commercial providers or exploring societies, comprising non-intact groups coming together for reasons other than [school] educational outcomes. A standout emerging story was that all the interviewees reported a high level of personal confidence in their lives currently, to turn to outdoor pursuits for personal and social developmental reasons with their families and/or making volunteering contributions to charities or societies. Even as grandparents, they would take off to the hills, get in a canoe or go and explore the countryside without hesitation. There was an inherent sense of freedom to take part in these activities which they saw would be as available to them now, as much as they were in the past. Across the 45 life stories and 10 interviews, there were resounding accounts of transferable outcomes from the educational expeditions they were on, which were distinctly enabling, confidence building and empowering. Learning qualities such as critical curiosity, resilience, and resourcefulness (Claxton, 2007) were not only honed and taught in the training and expedition phases of their schooling, but acted upon throughout their lives, as they face various challenges. Connections were being made to link the expedition learning to coping and opportunity seeking attitudes in later life. In closing, what can be emphasized or “called for” is the need for more long-term, retrospective studies about learning through school-based, educational expeditions, especially where personal privilege or wealth are not the means to access such valuable curriculum-based opportunities. We believe these findings add significant evidence to support the value of the expedition experience as a key and valuable part of a fully rounded education.

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