



# School trips: the inclusivity issue

Teachers may exclude children dealing with various illnesses or challenges from excursions 'for their own good', but these are the young people who need them the most, argues **Alex Yates**

**L**ast summer, we sent a group of Year 10 and 11 pupils on an Outward Bound trip to Aberdovey in Wales. Nothing too unusual about that, except that the group sitting on the bus was made up of pupils with anorexia, anxiety disorders, post-psychosis and depression.

For many professionals, the idea of taking such a vulnerable group of pupils on a week's Outward Bound course would seem foolhardy and destined to fail, so why bother taking the risk?

Young people with mental health challenges (we prefer the term "challenges" to "problems") often feel helpless in the face of their difficulties. This can, in turn, leave teachers feeling slightly helpless about knowing what to do. Many teachers feel that, by referring a child to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), they have done their job and it is then a matter of waiting for the various psychiatrists, therapists or psychologists to sort the problem out. At the Royal Free Hospital School, where I work, we feel it requires more than that.

## 'Beneficial stimulus'

Our experience as a special school is that, in the face of health struggles, an appropriate degree of academic or social challenge (the right amount of positive stress or "beneficial stimulus") actively supports recovery. Attending school and taking part in school life can prove as important to the recovery of young people with mental health challenges as re-engaging in working life is to adults facing similar challenges. Our aim, therefore, is to normalise and include such children in activities, and for our staff to provide an effective bridge between educational and psychological help.

To set any appropriate challenge we must ask: what does this young person need academically or socially to make progress? How much "stretch" is appropriate? What is the right goal to set? How can we help and support them in achieving that goal? As teachers we tend to have access to the answers to these questions. The trick is not to throw our hands in the air but to think analytically,

The task is to drill down to the particular needs of an individual young person, and to model perseverance and determination as we support their efforts to achieve. Trips can be a great way of meeting these aims.

Many teachers planning an Outward Bound course might instinctively prefer not to take young people who are unwell, "for their own good". In this way, young people with mental health challenges can be quietly and literally left behind. Such "exclusion through kindness" exemplifies how teachers can unwittingly sideline young people with psychological difficulties because, in truth, they believe that they, as teachers, lack the skills to work with them; the idea being, that young people such as these need "experts".

But teachers are experts; experts in the development of young people. Teachers know what steps a particular young person needs to take to develop and they usually know how to help them take the steps that are essential and integral to recovery.

## Careful planning

Obviously any trip of this type needs careful planning. We used EVOLVE, an online tool that our local authority employs as a key part of its own safeguarding procedure for overnight trips. For the trip to Aberdovey, pupils were individually risk assessed and other professionals were consulted. A member of the hospital's CAMHS team attended. They required additional training in providing out-of-hours technical medical advice. All the school staff who attended were keen to go but I made the decision as headteacher to offer a small financial incentive for their commitment to the week and this is written into our pay policy.

The trip was a huge success in terms of the young people and their development but also as a model of success for future groups. It will, for example, inform discussions with clinicians here in the future and provide us with evidence for each new cohort that this kind of "adventure" is possible. Although one member of the group had to return early, this was already planned for and managed effectively by staff without having a major impact on either the young person or the wider group. Staff focused on what they had already achieved rather than on what they were not going to be able to do.

We have already booked again for this year: this time in the Lake District. The yearly summer trip for the day school is already becoming an objective that our young people can work towards and we are glad we took that initial "risk".

*Alex Yates is headteacher of the Royal Free Hospital School in London*

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