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Girlhood Research Project

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Final Report

Girlhood Research

Introduction

The Girlhood research project aimed to build on our previous research which looked at the impact of residential experiences on the confidence and examination success of a group of underachieving young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This project sought to extend our understanding and evidence base by building and developing on this first project. As with the previous research, we focused on a group of young students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and sought to explore how, and in what ways, outdoor residential experiences influenced and shaped a young person's sense of self, confidence, and ambition, as well as their attainment, with gender as an additional and interesting dimension to the study.

Aims and Objectives of the research

For some students who are underachieving, the classroom can become a space that reinforces negative messages connected to learner identity. Thus, moving outside the traditional learning environment may be of relevance when considering the educational attainment of students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and pertinent for practitioners who seek ways to promote attainment via Pupil Premium funding.

The key aims of the Girlhood research was to:

- Offer evidence to support the value of learning outside of the classroom, by highlighting how these types of experiences are useful in developing positive outcomes within school and, in exam and attainment outcomes.
- In turn, offer evidence to highlight implications for both policy and practice in relation to considering the classroom as the primary site of learning.
- Extend our theoretical understanding of how and it what way outdoor residential experiences impact on educational outcomes, confidence, and self-efficacy as well as sense of self.
- To provide evidence of 'value for money' for schools and funders.

The objectives of this research are therefore:

- To ensure that every young person from a socially disadvantaged background can have access to outdoor residential experiences.

- To embed residential outdoor experiences into the national curriculum to ensure these learning experiences are considered as essential and not enrichment.

- To ensure that every young person, regardless of background, can develop and to achieve their full potential.

Framework to the research

Previous research by the principal researcher suggested that how a student identifies themselves as a learner, in terms of their confidence to achieve educationally and in terms of their future career ambitions, is key in explaining their educational aspirations and outcomes (Fuller 2009; 2014). This research found that attitudes towards education and future educational and career aspirations were not directly related to actual attainment or potential to attain but were the result of a student's own understanding of her chances of success. Sociologists (Beck, 1992; Bourdieu, 1984 and Goldthorpe 1997) have long argued that the process for developing confidence and belief in an ability to succeed, alongside the frameworks young people draw on to make these assessments, are complex and myriad. These ideas are like social cognitive theories of psychologists such as Bandura (e.g., 1995), for whom self-efficacy, i.e., the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific endeavours, is in part influenced by 'seeing people like themselves succeed' alongside '*mastery experiences*' (emphasis in the original), i.e., those that provide 'experience in overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort' (Bandura 1995:7).

Our previous research used these ideas to frame a three-year project which focused on two groups of year nine (age 14) to year eleven (age 16) students. The results of the study strongly suggested that the impact of the outdoor residential visits to Ufton had been positive in terms of students' confidence and efficacy and had resulted in a statistically significant impact on formal examination results in school, when compared to the examination results of the control group who did not take part in the study (Fuller et al, 2016). The Girlhood study was framed within these ideas, seeking to extend our understanding of this area further by tracking a larger group, over a longer period.

Executive Summary

Overall, attending Ufton made a significant difference to the lives of the girls that went there. The key area where benefit was observed are summarised below:

- This decisive shift in attitudes highlights the transformative potential in Ufton Court's interventions
- Confidence in education and its value improved over time.
- Confidence in ability to achieve aspirations improved over time.
- Almost all the girls felt they were able to better manage anxiety, deal with new and challenging situations and try things they have not done before with confidence.

- Efficacy measures evidenced a great deal of confidence in an ability to speak up for self, try things not done before, and self-care.
- Much more appreciation and confidence in being close to nature.
- Attending Ufton promoted feelings of freedom.
- Improving social relationships that result from spending time at Ufton resulted in much greater confidence.

Methods

The framework adopted for this research was primarily interpretative and situated within the paradigm of symbolic interactionism. As the research was interested in meaning making and the role that experiences and reflective understandings have on outcomes, exploring these through the eyes of the student was important. However, as educational attainment was also an important outcome of the research, a mixed research design was intended to be adopted, to permit a more comprehensive picture of the area of interest.

Data collection

Data was collected via videoed interviews, observations, and questionnaires.

Ethics

In carrying out this research, all University ethical guidelines are complied with and the research itself has been reviewed, following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee, and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. In this research, the key ethical guidelines relates primarily to the informed consent of all those taking part in the research and ensuring, that in reporting the findings, no real names are used.

Sample

Initially 30 girls in years 7 (age 12) were included in the study. The school from which the students are drawn was on Special Measures at the beginning of the project but as leadership changed, was removed from this status. The school is situated in a school that serves an area of high social deprivation. Girls included in the research were selected by their school as being those likely to benefit from the aims and objectives of the research.

The range of academic ability of the students was as follows:

Set	% of sample	% of total school population
1	23% (n=26)	15% (n=4)
2	22% (25)	20% (5)
3	22% (25)	32% (8)
4	18% (21)	28.5% (6)
5	15% (17)	41% (7)

From these we can see that the academic ability of the sample group is skewed towards the middle and low attainment levels. Information on ethnicity, FSM and SEN was not made available.

Challenges with sample

With the change of leadership, staff, and natural attrition only a handful of the original year 7 students remained by year 11.

Questionnaires

Base line data was collected via survey to capture initial aspirations, attitudes to school and general levels of confidence from all year 7 students. Data for students in the research group show some interesting patterns, some of which are highlighted below:

- Almost three quarters of students had no clear future plans and almost all girls were not confident in their ability to achieve educationally.
- In terms of confidence in school, almost three quarters of this group also did not feel confident to speak up in the classroom.
- In their first year of secondary school over a third of students did not feel they were treated fairly in school and over half do not believe their efforts were recognised by teachers. I
- Self-identity was also low with most girls believing they often got things wrong, with just over half expressing feelings of uselessness and dislike of self (30%). Over half of students expressed moderate to very low levels of confidence to live up to the expectations of their parents/carers, teachers, and friends, expressing more confidence in their ability to live up to the expectations of themselves.

Such low levels of confidence are both striking and significant and are also mirrored, in some degree, in relation to making new friends and speaking to new people. An overview of the videos supports the survey data, with body language and narrative suggestive of very low levels of aspiration, confidence, and future hope of some. Interestingly, whilst

still relatively young, avoidance of money worry and risk already feature strongly in future plans and hopes for the future.

Observational Data

Clear examples of collaborative working and problem solving was evident, in both structured and unstructured times. Perseverance and endeavour were also obvious, as well as reflection and negotiation. Interviews with the girls continued to highlight that Ufton was a place to 'switch off from it all', to relax and unwind and a place to challenge yourself. The idea that opinions mattered, voices were heard, and difference accepted was again emphasized. The benefits were often framed in opposition to their experiences of school. Thus, whilst the girls clearly knew they were learning whilst at Ufton, the experience was very much a positive one.

Questionnaire data comparing year for year

The data was collected via survey to capture the girls' changes in attitudes to school and general levels of confidence by year 10 – a typically challenging year given the emphasis on GCSE examinations. A few highlights from the survey this year are:

- Nearly all the girls expect to continue their post-compulsory education.
- All but one girl expected to achieve their ambitions and secure the future work they hoped to do.
- Two thirds of the girls believed they were doing as well as their peers in their studies, with the same number expecting to do well in their final exams.
- Almost all the girls felt they were able to manage anxiety, deal with new and challenging situations and try things they haven't done before with confidence.
- Interestingly, efficacy measures evidence a great deal of confidence in an ability to speak up for self, try things not done before, and self-care.
- Whilst all of the girls felt respected, data was much more mixed in terms of feeling part of a community and belonging within school or in relation to learning and experience in school more generally.

Year 10 is typically a very challenging year, with a heavy focus on exams, future choices, and puberty. The data from the survey suggested very positive trends in terms of self-confidence, self-efficacy, and aspirations, encouraging within much more negative data for school experiences.

Challenges with questionnaires

It was not possible to get data in year 11 due to a lack of response from school.

Video interviews

Data was extracted from a series of 24 videos filmed at Ufton Court. 12 videos were filmed on each occasion featuring interviews with groups of between two and four girls. Most participants were interviewed in both sets of videos on their first and second visits to Ufton Court.

31 girls were interviewed in the first set of videos, 21 in the second. At least 15 participated in both waves of interviews (unfortunately lack of information about the names of 4 pupils in one of the first batch of interviews means that it is not possible to definitively identify them in the second set, so it is possible that the number of participants in both batches of interview is closer to 20).

These interviews ranged in duration from just over 3 minutes to 13 minutes long and were structured around a series of open-ended questions asked by the interviewer. In the first batch of interviews these questions covered how they were settling into Secondary School, their favourite subjects, what their aspirations were, how they felt others saw them, their worries and excitements about the future and what they felt about Ufton Court. The second set of interviews were also built around a series of questions covering similar themes; what makes a successful life? What do you need to be successful? How easy do you think you will find it to be successful? The importance of other people's support and how might their visits to Ufton Court help them to achieve these successes. In most cases these questions were asked in the same order, using the same phrasing, but there were exceptions to this.

The semi-structured interview strategy allowed for the gathering data largely within the same broad themes within and between each interview group but at the same time provided the flexibility for the students to extend the discussion in their own directions when they chose to.
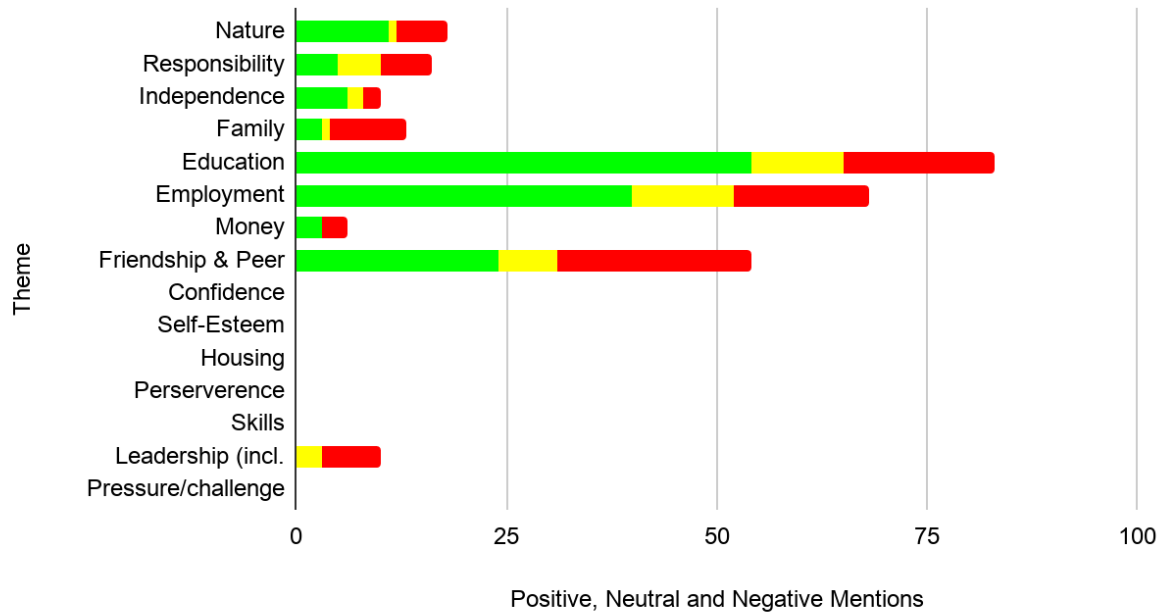
Watching the videos, it has been possible to code the content thematically with a number of key themes emerging across the interviews. Some of these themes were introduced through the planned questions (education, employment for example) whilst others emerged more spontaneously (nature, independence for example).

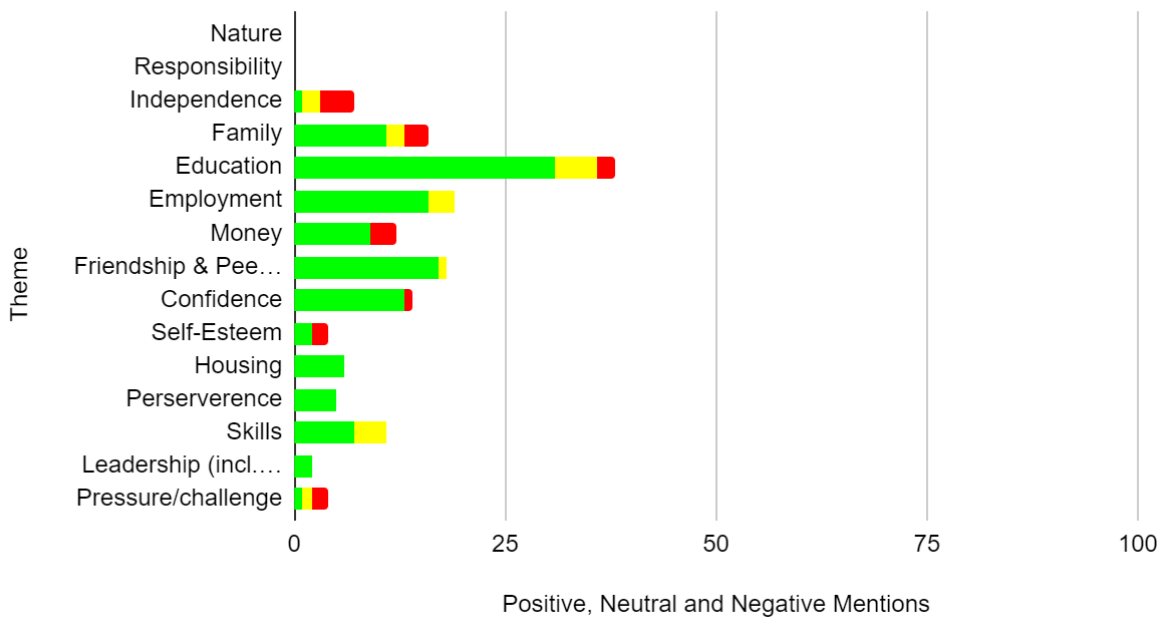## Positive, Neutral and Negative References to Themes
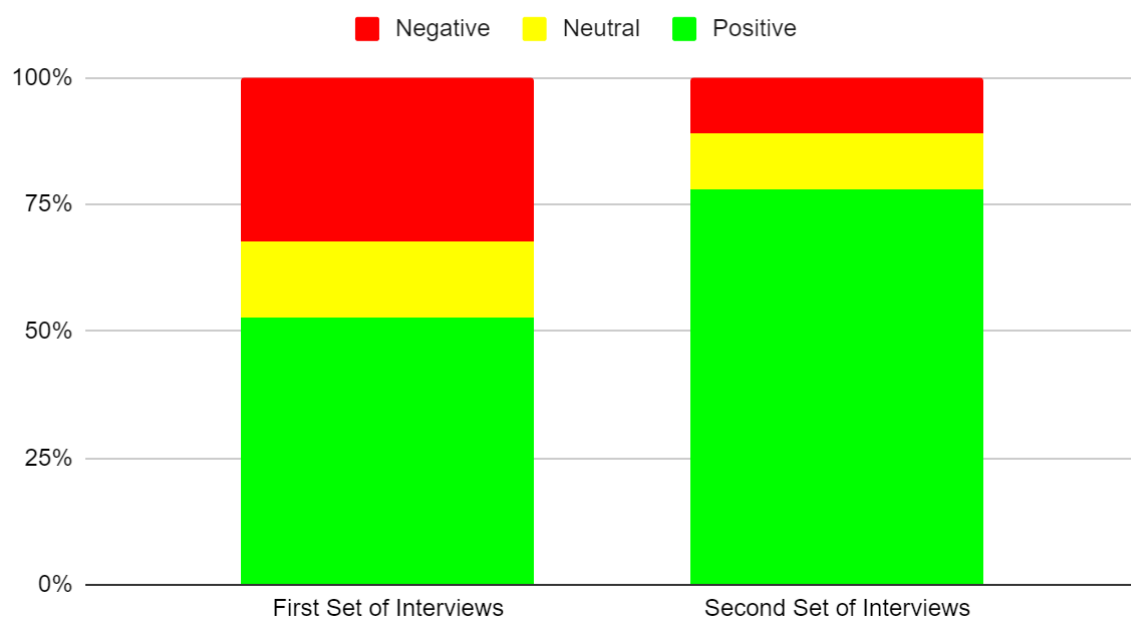
We found that engagement with the identified themes was appreciably more positive in the second set of interviews. This was also visible in the body language and demeanour of the pupils during the second set of interviews with fewer girls hiding behind their hands/hair and more confident, straighter postures and gaze in evidence.

First Batch of Interviews

Chart: Horizontal stacked bar chart showing Positive (green), Neutral (yellow), and Negative (red) mentions by Theme. X-axis: "Positive, Neutral and Negative Mentions" (0 to 100). Y-axis: "Theme".

- Nature
- Responsibility
- Independence
- Family
- Education
- Employment
- Money
- Friendship & Peer
- Confidence
- Self-Esteem
- Housing
- Perserverence
- Skills
- Leadership (incl.
- Pressure/challenge

Second Batch of Interviews

Chart: Horizontal stacked bar chart showing Positive (green), Neutral (yellow), and Negative (red) mentions by Theme. X-axis: "Positive, Neutral and Negative Mentions" (0 to 100). Y-axis: "Theme".

- Nature
- Responsibility
- Independence
- Family
- Education
- Employment
- Money
- Friendship & Pee…
- Confidence
- Self-Esteem
- Housing
- Perserverence
- Skills
- Leadership (incl.…
- Pressure/challenge

The semi-structured nature of the interviews centred the girls' responses around the theme of the future and being undertaken within an education context (on a school trip, with peers and teachers from school) it is no surprise that **Education** was the most common theme identified across both sets of interviews. It was raised in both positive and negative lights, particularly in the first set of interviews where the pupils were discussing their start at Secondary School, one girl's downcast expression, drop of the head and simple "No" in response to being asked if she was enjoying Year 7 being the clearest example of this. Negative responses to the theme of education could be seen in the first batch of videos with subjects disliked and this fed into some of the responses to questions about what the girls wanted to do or be in the future as the exchange below illustrates:

> *Interviewer*: ...so not far from being a vet?
>
> *Pupil*: No, but I don't wanna to do Science...
>
> *Interviewer*. Hmm.
>
> *Pupil*:...or Maths.

Most responses, however, regarded education in a more positive light. Many girls talked of enjoying school subjects with Art and Drama emerging as clear favourites. One group of interviewees used this as an opportunity to speak enthusiastically about a Drama activity they had just undertaken at Ufton Court.

In the second set of interviews there was a widespread acceptance that education (and qualifications) was key to achieving goals and aspirations with many of the participants identifying "a good education" and especially "good GCSEs" in their answers to the question "What do you think makes a successful life?".

Similarly, having a "good job" was a common answer to the question of success in life. **Employment** was the second most identified theme after Education across both sets of interviews. It was viewed more positively in the second set of interviews, being recognised in every group as a component of a successful life. There was, however, little elaboration about what constituted a job beyond a few references to it paying well. This contrasts with the first set of interviews where more time was spent discussing specific potential careers and job options. However, work and jobs in general received a more mixed reaction in these first interviews with some job suggestions provoking negative reactions.

Pupil B: She says she wants to be an astronaut [laughs]

Pupil C: No I don't!

Interviewer: Do you know who Tim Peake is?

Pupil B: No. [shakes head] Never heard of him.

Interviewer: He's an astronaut, he's an English astronaut in space at the moment

Pupil A: Well, yeah, but that stuff about him is just boring.

Interviewer: Really?

Pupil A: I find it boring, not interesting.

Interviewer: Going to space is boring?

Pupil B: [laughs and hold her head in hands]

Pupil A: Yeah,[laughs] it's boring.

After further laughter, fidgeting and questions about the recording of the interview, the girls elaborated:

Pupil A: It's just boring stuff about space.

Pupil C: You just float about, that's all you do.

Pupil A: I just find it boring.

Pupil B:...and you can die.

A few moments later Pupil A stated that she didn't like Science, not for the only time in the interviews a dislike of a particular school subject is projected into the future to reject certain career paths.

In the second set of interviews, however, this rejection of career paths based on school subject preferences no longer emerged in the girls' comments. Jobs, or "good jobs", remained a key element identified as defining a successful life. It was still strongly linked to education, there was a persistent association between education - and good GCSE grades, in particular (Higher and Further Education were only mentioned by three interviewees) - and the ability to get a good job.

Only one interviewee in the first set of videos raised **money** in response to the question about their aspirations, by the second set of interviewees this had become a more common concern - with it being raised in response to the question about successful lives in five of the groups. Money was, however, raised as a worry across both sets of interviews.

Interviewer: What's going to stop you being successful?

Pupil A: Paying all that money.

Pupil B: Like...if we...like...don't have that much money...like...it's gonna be harder.

By the second set of interviews **housing** had become an issue related to money and success. Whilst "moving out" had been mentioned by a couple of the pupils in the first interviews, having a house had become a common element of a successful life by the second visit to Ufton Court. This in turn linked to some of the worries about money mentioned above in the form of concerns about being able to "pay the bills" that some of the girls were raising.

In the first set of interviews the girls tended to focus on the novelty of being **closer to nature** than normal. Some of these initial reactions were mildly negative with several pupils bringing up their fear or dislike of spiders when asked about Ufton Court. During one interview the three girls spent over two and half minutes distracted by an earthworm.

Pupil C: There's a worm!

Pupil B: Where?

Pupil C: There!

Pupil B: Where?

Interviewer: Don't worry. He's alright there.

Pupil B: [shrieks] Wriggle wriggle wriggle!

Preoccupied by its presence the pupils scuffed their feet on the ground and kept their eyes firmly fixed on the worm's direction of travel. For other participants, however, the chance of being closer to nature was viewed more positively.

> *Pupil C*: It's nice to ...like...get away from...like...roads and...like... cars and everything
>
> *Pupil A*: Like...cities
>
> P*upil C*: Yeah...like towns and everything.

A few the girls made a link between being able to go for walks in the forest and a feeling of greater **freedom**.

Social and **Family Relationships** were also a major topic of discussion across all the interviews. When talking about both friends and family during the first batch of interviews these themes produced strong positive and negative views. Fears were expressed about leaving their families and about their family leaving them in the future. This degree of insecurity was underlined by the negative views expressed by some on the prospect of starting their own family or having children. Yet, by the second set of interviews, having a family was identified in most of the groups as part of a successful life and was viewed positively. Relationships with family and their influence on future aspirations and expectations were complex producing both positive and negative reactions alongside more nuanced remarks. A number of pupils identified family support as being important to achieve their goals. Others, however, noted that a lack of support may be an obstacle:

> *Pupil C*: If they tell you that you can't do it, then you'll start to think that you won't be able to do it...
>
> *Pupil B*: ...yeah, and you'll have a low self-esteem about yourself.
>
> *Pupil A*: You'll be less confident with what you want to do with your life.

Some of the interviewees expressed similar feelings with a determined, yet at the same time somehow resigned, stance that they did not need other people's support and that they would just have to get on with it by themselves. Friends, peers, and social relationships were a major theme in both sets of interviews. Notably the first batch of videos contained equally positive and negative perspectives about friendships, whilst by the second set, this discussion had become almost entirely positive with several

students making links between social relationships and self-confidence. As we shall see below, this was often raised when discussing their experiences at Ufton Court.

Confidence and **Self-esteem** had become important themes for the interviewees by the second set of videos. Along with related qualities such as **resilience** and **independence** these were topics of conversation in all the second batch of interviews. There was a universal recognition that these were necessary qualities for success and were frequently cited as potential obstacles to be overcome. Almost every group in the second set of interviews raised increased confidence as a way in which they thought Ufton Court helped them. A few the girls noted relationships and the support (or lack of it) from others as factors in shaping their self-esteem and confidence. This recognition illustrated a notable development from their views in the first set of interviews when asked how others would describe them. Whilst many of the responses took a negative view of themselves, one word that occurred repeatedly leaps out - "bossy". This was explicitly used ten times across the twelve interviews, and never positively. A couple of girls also mentioned that others saw them as "mouthy", again this was not viewed positively. In the second set of interviews, when reflecting upon their Ufton Court experiences several of the respondents raised the development of teamwork and leadership skills as a key benefit. This decisive shift in attitudes may point towards the transformative potential in Ufton Court's interventions.

Summary
At first glance, access to money is a major concern of the interviewees. Money, in and of itself, was raised on several occasions, as were themes closely related to the ability to access money such as having a good job and being able to afford housing and independence in life. Whilst Ufton Court is not able to alter the material circumstances within which these girls the ability to acquire economic capital, for example via employment, can be framed by the possession and accumulation of other forms of capital, in which Ufton Court *can* intervene.

Educational capital, in the form of credentials such as GCSEs, is one form of capital that can be exchanged via attaining the required qualifications to enter chosen career paths. We saw above how several the interviewees were already beginning to close off certain pathways due to a perceived "dislike" of school-based subjects such as Science. However, there was an almost unanimously positive take on the activities that were Ufton-based, with some respondents making links between these as more favoured school-based subjects such as Drama. The change of environment and context that Ufton Court offers was clearly building more positive relations/engagement with some school-based subjects. As one interviewee put it when noting that her experience at Ufton Court had opened her mind to new career paths:

Erm...it helps you...like...'cos Ufton Court, they have so many jobs you can do it'll help you...like...decide what job you wanna do.

Activities undertaken at Ufton Court were linked by the interviewees to the development of teamwork/leadership skills and in boosting their self-confidence. The more positive view on the role of social relationships exhibited by the girls by the second set of interviews, and the recognition of the opportunity Ufton Court was giving them to develop skills in this area, highlights the work that can be done in enabling participants to be better equipped for the acquisition of social capital. What at Ufton Court manifests in the chance to "make new friends" and "become more confident" has the potential to develop social capital in the form of "network sociality" (Savage, 2015) and the ability to forge new social ties outside of their immediate circles. With these new, expanded, social ties further opportunities to acquire social, cultural, and economic capital may present themselves beyond those present within existing social circles and networks.

We saw in the first set of interviews how for several the girl's proximity to nature was a novelty. This novelty - the presence of insects, sleeping in a cabin etc. - assumed a more positive character in the later interviews with some of the girls seeing the chance to feel "free" in the spaces that nature provided. We also saw how the chance to learn new skills and try new things was valued by many of the pupils. These developing attitudes are a crucial disposition in the acquisition of cultural capital. Cultural capital, in the form of "tastes" and the ability to "appreciate" and engage with (Savage 2015) diverse activities, in turn is displayed in the confidence and familiarity with which one navigates activities and spaces of different social status. This "ease" is a vital disposition for social mobility and for successfully journeying an ever more competitive world.

Limitations:

There are several factors which may account for some of the data we see, in addition to maturation and possible influences from puberty on levels of confidence. These are:

- It was not possible to get into school to carryout interviews.
- Changes in school priorities and staff changes were challenging in arranging visits and retaining the research sample group.
- Staff changes meant a lack of continuity and commitment to the project.
- Despite agreement and assurance, final exam data was not provided.
- We received a non-response to requests for year 11 survey data.

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