

Abseiling at 5, rafting at 10, what do we do with them when they are 15¹? Why pursuits might seem like an obvious choice for outdoor education?

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Abstract

Are students being introduced to pursuits based outdoor activities at a younger age? This article examines some of the broader influences on outdoor education that might be contributing to this trend. These include the high profile of adventure, the emphasis on self-esteem and character building and finally the risk and safety management focus of outdoor education. The article concludes by highlighting some of the ways these work to privilege pursuits based outdoor education and limits questioning assumptions that underpin outdoor education.

Introduction

Recently I was talking to a contractor whose main business is providing climbing and abseiling experiences for schools and other organisations. He commented that he no longer does any abseiling with secondary schools as the students have all done it in primary school. When I relayed this story to a colleague he commented that his son, who had only recently started school was going to be doing some abseiling with the school. Certainly schools appear to have greater access to outdoor pursuits such as abseiling and many teachers I have spoken to consider that outdoor opportunities have much to offer in terms of curriculum enrichment and personal and group development for students. But I began to wonder about broader influences on outdoor education in the school context and how these influences might be contributing to the shape of outdoor education programmes schools run.

Schools and outdoor providers taking five year olds abseiling and ten year olds rafting will, no doubt, have well argued reasons for doing these things. The intent of this article is to raise some questions about some of the things that might be influencing decisions to include pursuits in an outdoor education programme. This may seem like a somewhat strange question, as pursuits are so obviously part of the outdoors. But pursuits based activities are only one of many things that could constitute an outdoor education programme. I would contend that there is little inherent in abseiling or rafting that make them particularly applicable to a school's outdoor education programme, but there are numerous factors that support the inclusion of these sorts of activities in outdoor education and also the apparent shift down the year groups that might be occurring. A secondary aim of this article is to contribute to the call to re-orientate the discussion away from risk narratives, which has dominated outdoor education (Brookes, 2002) and reinsert pedagogical narratives into outdoor education.

The increased visibility of pursuits in outdoor education

As already stated this article is in response to anecdotal evidence about both the increase of pursuits in outdoor education and the increasingly younger age groups being introduced to pursuits. This apparent increase may largely be due to the visibility and 'high impact' nature of activities such as abseiling and rafting, and in fact two-hour excursions to the local park to gather material for an arts project may be the dominant mode of outdoor education that

¹ I am not highlighting abseiling and rafting for any reason, you can insert any pursuits based outdoor activity into the title.

occurs. Currently the information available as to the numbers of schools offering some form of outdoor education, let alone the numbers of students participating is limited and often quite contradictory (Lynch, 2002). There is no data available as to the range of activities schools offer in their programmes and if or how these activities might have changed over time.

One of the enduring features of outdoor education in New Zealand over the last 150 years is that the teachers who are involved in outdoor education are often enthusiastic outdoors people themselves and are committed to developing and running the programmes (Lynch, 1998a). Schools take varied approaches to the provision of outdoor education. Pip Lynch (1998b) suggested that by the 1960s field trips were well established in most schools and boomed through 1981 to 1995 for years nine to thirteen, reaching its “zenith in 1989 and has since apparently declined in just as spectacular a fashion” (p.201). She stated that the educational restructuring of the 1980s is one of the reasons for the decline in outdoor education after 1989. The continued focus on risk and safety management might also be contributing to schools withdrawing from outdoor education due to compliance costs and concerns with liability. At the same time there appears to be a trend amongst some schools that continue to offer outdoor education to be offering pursuits to younger age groups than may have occurred in the past.

One could argue that a greater range of outdoor pursuits are being offered to more students now is due to a greater number of teachers having outdoor pursuits skills and the increased availability of outdoor pursuits providers. With the plethora of outdoor pursuits and recreation courses available at Polytechnics and Universities across the country, it seems safe to assume that students from these courses have gone on to teach or to establish businesses that contract out outdoor pursuits. Alongside this, outdoor education is now one of the seven key learning areas in the Health and Physical Education (H & PE) curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999) and pursuits have become more focused on assessment and qualifications, particularly at the senior secondary level.

Increased availability of skilled staff and a place in the H & PE curriculum is only two elements that might be contributing to outdoor education seemingly becoming more pursuits focused and younger and younger students being offered the opportunity to participate in pursuits. Four areas that contribute to the way outdoor education is understood and in particular how outdoor pursuits are viewed are discussed in this article. These are first, the current high profile that ‘adventure’ enjoys in New Zealand and across all spectrums of the media. Second, the outcomes focus of outdoor education research (McKenzie, 2000). Third, the notions of character building that permeates the outdoor education literature (Brookes, 2003). Finally, the way risk and safety management may actually work to increase the profile of pursuits in outdoor education. There are many other influences that contribute to the outdoor education in New Zealand schools, but these four seem particularly topical at the moment. This article aims to offer an interpretation of outdoor education to stimulate debate and raise questions, rather than offering a definitive reading of current practice.

Adventure is everywhere

Adventure does seem to be everywhere. It is very difficult to buy fruit juice, open a bank account or go on holiday without doing this through some form of adventurous activity. How many times have students said to you that camp would be boring if they did not do the latest adventure activity to be televised to promote some product, whether it is an extreme sports event, clothing, or a car? The impact of this constant exposure to ‘adventure’ and to the concept of ‘living life to the max’, or ‘being on the edge’ might be quite subtle. But it does work to raise the profile of adventure and outdoor pursuits.

Cloke & Perkins (1998) examined the impact of adventure tourism in New Zealand and how this has not only contributed to changes in the landscape through the construction of adventure facilities, but how it has also contributed to changes in an understanding of nature-society relations. Although Cloke & Perkins' (1998) article is concerned with tourism rather than education, I contend that neither teachers nor students are immune to constant exposure to the particular forms of adventure that adventure tourism epitomises. The influence can be significant considering that “New Zealand outdoor recreation...is still developing alongside of,

and in interaction with, significantly commercialised touristic activity” (Cloke & Perkins, 1998, p.186). The infrastructure that has come with the ‘adventure industry’ opens up many opportunities for activities that might not have been so readily accessible to school groups ten or fifteen years ago.

Self esteem as an outcome of outdoor education

There is a wealth of research on the beneficial outcomes of outdoor education. Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards (1997) and McKenzie (2000) have undertaken meta-analysis of the research in outdoor education. Both Hattie et al. (1997) and McKenzie (2000) stated that much of the research has focused on outcomes but there is very little that examines the relationship between outcomes and the programme characteristics that contribute to these outcomes. Both these meta-analysis identified the activities as key to the outcomes. McKenzie (2000) suggested that as the same outcomes are achieved across a range of activities, there is some quality of outdoor adventure activities that are responsible for the outcomes, rather than an activity itself. She summarises the qualities identified in the research as including the challenge of the activity creating a state of uncertainty or dissonance, which, when students are introduced to in a sequential way leads to experiences of success or mastery, in turn producing the positive effects attributed to outdoor education.

Martin & Priest (1986) encapsulated this relationship neatly in the concept of the ‘Adventure Experience Paradigm’. Drawing on ideas of optimal arousal by Ellis (1973, cited in Martin & Priest, 1986), flow from Csikszentmihalyi (1975, cited in Martin & Priest, 1986), and Mortlock’s four stages of outdoor journeys (1984, cited in Martin & Priest, 1986), they identified that a combination of risk and competence were central to creating a sense of challenge. They hypothesised that if students experience a balance of perceived risk and perceived challenge they were likely to have a peak experience. “Martin and Priest (1986) proposed that the goal of an outdoor adventure experience for an individual is to reach peak adventure ...since this is the realm in which you can experience flow and the most positive benefits of adventure experiences” (Priest & Gass, 1997, p.46).

This model or various permutations of the ideas contained within this model are prevalent in outdoor education. The Adventure Experience Paradigm may be useful for explaining and understanding aspects of outdoor education. But it also privileges certain ways of thinking about outdoor education. The focus of this model is the experience of the individual student and activities that are perceived to involve risk and skills based competence, that is, individualised pursuits. This in itself may not be problematic, but when it becomes the dominant way of understanding outdoor education then skills based pursuits are positioned in a privileged position over activities with a different emphasis.

Models such the Adventure Experience Paradigm do little to explain the learning that occurs in the group setting that is common to outdoor education. Concepts of outdoor education orientated around this model privileges a focus on the individual student and also outcomes associated with self-esteem and self-confidence related to individual action. Research has been limited on the non-activity elements of an outdoor education programme that might contribute to both positive and negative outcomes for students, or on the curriculum enrichment function of outdoor education, for example.

Character building as an outcome of outdoor education

The concepts contained within the Adventure Experience Paradigm are supported by numerous other discourses that underpin outdoor education. One of these is the notion of character building. Much like the concept of the Adventure Experience Paradigm, character building draws on ideas of challenging experiences leading to positive outcomes. Andrew Brookes (2003) argued that character building is a remarkably pervasive and uncontested concept in outdoor education, despite considerable research in a number of fields that questions the whole notion of character and character building. One of the reasons he suggested that character building has such an enduring hold on outdoor education is that it is a composite term that includes such things as ‘personal development’ and ‘self actualisation’ rather than something that is easily researchable and measurable.

Brookes (2003) stated that even if character building is a myth this does not necessarily imply that “programmes based on ‘character building’ are harmful; the opposite may be true” (p.21). One of the things I would argue though is that the notion of character building supports a view of outdoor education being primarily about individual development and that this is achieved through some form of challenging activity. Character building also supports the prevalent idea that an activity will potentially do the same thing for most people regardless of the “cultural, social, historical, and geographical contexts” (Brookes, 2003, p.22). An assumption can be made that abseiling will ‘work’ in the same way for five years olds as it might for 15 year olds.

Risk and safety management

The final area that I would like to examine in this article is that of risk and safety management. Safety management over the last decade has dominated outdoor education in New Zealand, as it has in other countries. I do not want to debate the merits of this, but rather consider how in a somewhat perverse move, the focus on risk and safety has increased the profile of pursuits within outdoor education.

The work of Grant Davidson (1992) has been seminal in the area of safety management in New Zealand. In response to a need identified by managers of outdoor education programmes he developed a Safety Auditing Instrument that assessed the safety of the programme and compared it to industry standards. The Risk Analysis Matrix System (RAMS) is a component of this auditing instrument that has entered into everyday use in many outdoor education programmes, be they pursuits based or not.

RAMS was developed primarily to aid in the risk management of outdoor pursuits activities in an outdoor centre context and does not lend itself so well to considering the safety management of the two-hour excursion to the park to collect material for an arts project. Talking to teachers, RAMS is a tool that is commonly used to document their safety management practices. I am not suggesting that RAMS has caused teachers to change their practices. What I do suggest though is that RAMS has contributed to the way we talk about and think about outdoor education, and it is a tool that suits pursuits more comfortably than other forms of outdoor education.

This sits in a wider frame of outdoor education being couched in terms of risk narratives (Brookes, 2002). When the discussion turns to outdoor education, one of the questions that very quickly arises is, ‘how safe is this activity?’ And the companion question to this is ‘how can we make it safer?’ The increased focus on safety has contributed to an increased awareness of the need for staff with current skills and also to the development of systems that ‘make’ an activity safer. The question that emerges is has the focus on safety reduced the ‘perceived’ risks of an activity, therefore an activity is offered to a wider range of students than would have been ten or fifteen years ago. Hence abseiling for five year olds and rafting for ten year olds.

If not pursuits, then what?

I am not arguing here that there is anything inherently wrong with a pursuits focus in outdoor education. Pursuits do have a place in outdoor education. But I suggest that we need to be asking a wider range of questions about what we offer students as part of outdoor education. As long as we keep asking questions about the outcomes of outdoor education associated with personal development, challenge, risk and safety we will continue to get information that confirms and supports models such as the Adventure Experience Paradigm and a pursuits focus of outdoor education.

A body of research is beginning to emerge that suggests that outdoor education is much more complex and rich than existing models and theories might suggest. Lee Davidson's (2001) findings from her study of a group of students in a year 13 outdoor education programmes suggest that “the meanings participants make of their experiences, and the value they derive from them, exceed those that may conventionally be sought and measured as an improvement in self-concept” (Davidson, 2001, p.11).

Leberman & Martin (in press) raise a number of questions about the use of challenging activities as a means of enhancing participants learning. They compared two groups of adults; one was an Outward Bound Czech Republic Intertouch course and the other an Outward Bound course in New Zealand for female inmates. The findings from both of these groups was that although the physical activities might have been the most challenging for many of the participants, they felt they learnt the most from other aspects of the courses. These included creative activities, having to work together as a team, and the reflection that was part of both programmes. Leberman & Martin (2003) point out though that this learning may not have occurred without the activities. Their findings question the assumption that being physically challenged and pushed out of one's 'comfort zone' promotes growth and learning that underpins much of outdoor education literature and practice.

Outdoor education is complex and there are many competing demands and pressures on teachers to develop and provide programmes for their students. There are a number of things working to privilege pursuits based activities over other forms of outdoor education experiences. These include the saturation of 'adventure' images that surround us and the way outdoor recreation is tied into not only the images but also the infrastructure that supports these images. The ongoing focus on outcomes such as self-esteem and 'character building' that permeate much of outdoor education rhetoric tend to foreground the role of challenging activities as the means of achieving this. The risk discourses that drive much of the discussion around outdoor education also help to keep challenging activities sharply in focus. I suggest that these are contributing to what appears to be the use of challenging activities with groups of younger and younger students.

This is not to suggest that there is anything inherently with the activities themselves. But along with Davidson (2001) and Leberman & Martin (2003) I suggest there is a need for a great deal more research on students' and teachers' subjective experiences of outdoor education. The current lack of research in this area, particularly in a New Zealand context, limits the ways in which we not only make decisions about what to include in an outdoor education programme, but also makes it difficult to question some of the assumptions that underpin the decisions we do make.

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