



ViewPoint

Let's no longer talk 'ratios'.

*Gemma Periam,
HedOutdoors, Te Kauwhata.*

'Ratios' is a term that has been used simplistically to describe an instruction and supervision structure in an outdoors setting.

I'm advocating we no longer use the term but instead talk 'supervision structure' or 'leadership structure.' The question the person in a school who is approving a safe and effective EOTC event should ask a teacher is: "What is the supervision structure you need?" not "What ratio do you need?"

Having facilitated numerous professional development opportunities in safety management and programme planning for people who work in or with schools, I usually arrive at the 'ratios' conversation sooner rather than later. I also soon get frustrated at people's traditional understanding of 'ratios' getting in the way of them grasping an understanding of the currently accepted meaning of ratios.

Ratios are still understood by many to be a relationship of two numbers (that is, supervisor/leader

number to participant/learner/client number), that there are set ratios for a given type of activity, and that the set ratio is applied regardless of any situation specific factors. I share two examples of these understandings.

A teacher at a recent course commented, "My school's ratio for trips outside the classroom is 1:10 but for activities involving water it is 1:4." They went on to describe the difficulty they had applying these.

An instructor at an outdoors forum filled with outdoor sector experts stated as part of an argument; "I have to work to set ratios of 1:4 for kayaking."

It is widely accepted that applying a recommended set ratio for an activity may not lead to safe practice, although such ratios are useful as a starting point or 'ball park' guideline. For example most of us recognize that the general level of supervision required for water activities is significantly higher than for a bush activity.

The current understanding of ratios is described in Safety

and EOTC: Guidelines for good practice (Ministry of Education 2002: 28) -

"A ratio compares the number of skilled/experienced supervisors with the number of novices involved in an EOTC event."

Likewise in Outdoor Safety: Risk management for outdoor leaders (Haddock 2003: 101) -

"A ratio is the number of experienced people compared to the number of inexperienced people involved in an outdoor activity."

Both resources go on to state ratios are hard to prescribe and can vary considerably according to a number of factors present for any given situation.

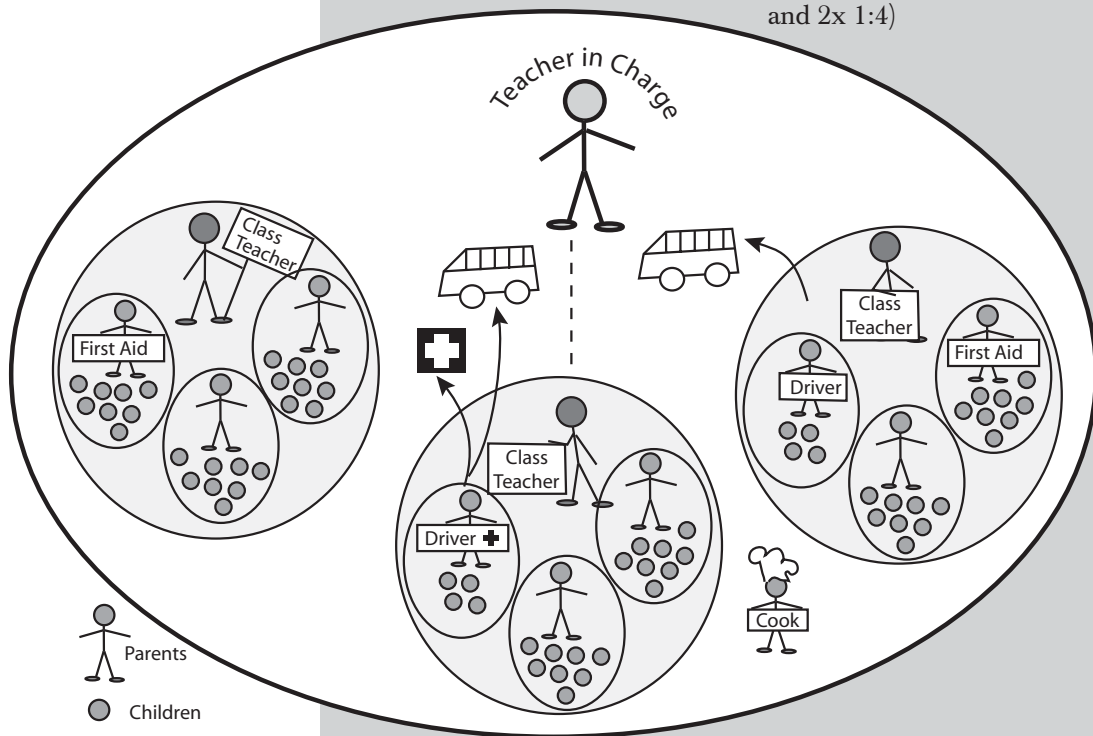
But even these explanations of ratios still suggest we boil everything down to two numbers separated by a colon. For me that still oversimplifies things. Here are two examples of supervision structures. They are in fact several sets of ratios. In the first example the ratios are 'all over the place' and the supervision structure is continually altering.



Example 1. Year 5/6 Social Studies Camp – Rotorua

A group of 64 students, 9 parents and 4 teachers went on a camp for four days. So is that 13:64 (or 1:5) or 4:73 or what? Activities included visits to Rotorua Museum, Whakarewarewa, Buried Village (including walk to the waterfall) and the local city thermal park. Accommodation was at a holiday park in a large hostel type facility.

The following diagram represents the supervision structure that was put in place as a result of teachers' collaborative planning to maximize learning and safety across the range of activities undertaken.



Y5 and Y6 Social Studies Camp – Rotorua

Teacher-in-charge had responsibility for overall supervision of the programme and had no students to directly supervise. It was their role to respond to any problem or crisis and ensure it was managed successfully. (1:77)

Cook. A parent with considerable experience cooking in commercial kitchens for large groups. No students under their direct supervision.

First Aid Officer. A parent who was bus driver and a trained current volunteer ambulance officer was the designated first aid person. He had a group of four students only. The class teacher would take this group when he had to deal with any first aid situation. Other teachers and parents had a range of first aid knowledge and experience, two with current certificates. (1:77 or is it 3:77)

Three teachers. Each was responsible for a class of students. If a parent required assistance or to be released the teacher would step in for that parent's group. When the two parent bus drivers were driving the teacher would supervise their group. If a problem or crisis occurred the teacher for that group would respond initially and communicate to teacher-in-charge if the problem could not be managed at that level. (1:24 and 2x 1:20)

Eight parents. Six parents were allocated eight students each to directly supervise and be responsible for during the four days. Two parents who were also bus drivers had four students allocated. Groups of students were formed and matched with parents who had the skills to supervise them. For example two ex-teacher parents were given groups with more troublesome students. (1:8 and 2x 1:4)

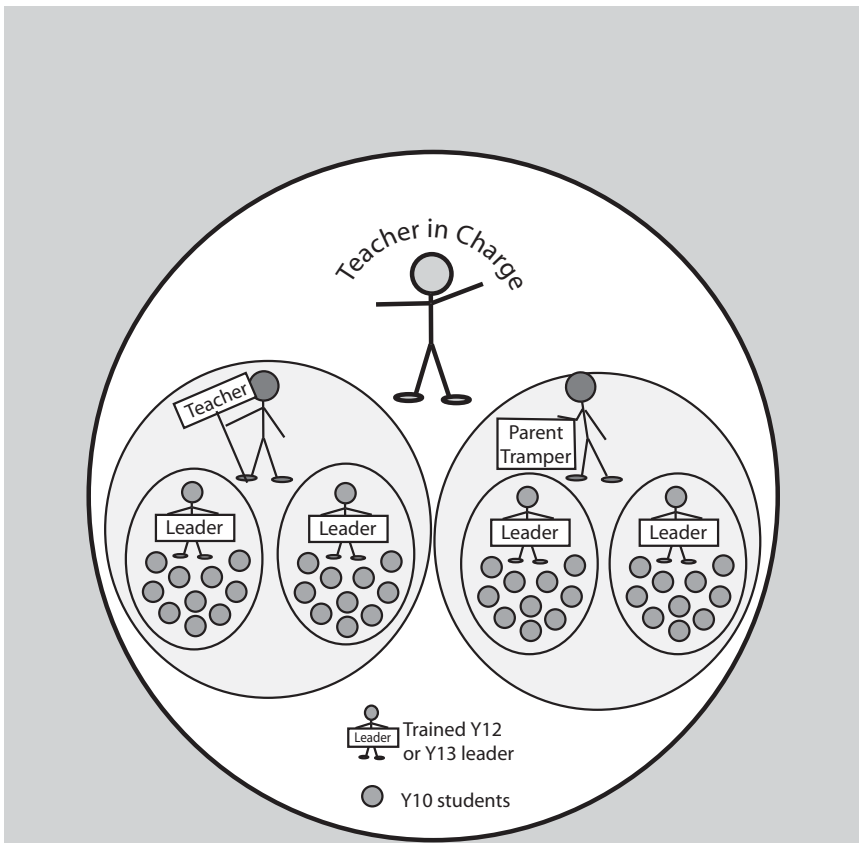


Example Two. Year 10 day tramp – Hunua

Each tramping group was made up of 40 Year 10 students, 4 Year 13 leaders, teacher in charge, a teacher and a parent. The tramp is about 5 hours and on a high use, well formed and clearly marked track. The track is very steep in places and has two easier contingency routes.

Four groups of 11: 10 Year 10 students assigned to one Year 13 leader. A parent tramper or teacher with 2 groups of 11. See diagram. So two larger groups of 23 tramping 5-10 minutes apart. Teacher – in-charge within whistling distance of both groups. Both groups stopping and touching base with each other at junctions and pre-determined rest spots. The group of 40 was split into these smaller sub-groups to be a more manageable size to walk along a tramping track.

It wouldn't be best practice to have each of these groups walking totally independently. Ideally we would want supervision levels to be sufficient so that we could, but reality in schools means we make the best of what we can get. The bottom line has to be do we have enough competent leadership to handle a crisis in this given situation?



Y5 and Y6 Social Studies Camp – Rotorua

Teacher in charge. Moved between the groups particularly when groups stopped at junctions. No assigned students. Knows the area particularly well and has considerable tramping experience, risk and crisis management skills (Bush 1 equivalence). (1:46)

Teacher Two and Parent. Teacher had some tramping experience and site specific knowledge having tramped the track previously. Parent with considerable tramping experience and leadership

experience working with young people in youth groups. (1:11)

Year 13 students. Trained in leadership, established rapport with students in previous two or three days leading in other outdoor activities. Received site-specific training earlier in the year. At least one of the two had workplace first aid. (1:10)

Overall the 'ratio' according to definitions above was 7:40.



Other examples.

We are seeing specific supervision structures being designed for outdoor programmes promoted to schools. Check out ACC Riversafe: *Supervision of ACC Riversafe and other EOTC activities in, on, and around water* and Water Safe Auckland: *Rainbow System*. Both spell out specific roles and required competence for each in their supervision plans.

Operational Procedures

What is more important than getting bogged down on numbers is for supervisors to understand the operational procedures that have been carefully considered and put in place. Management strategies particular to the supervisor’s role need to be understood and able to be put into action. ‘Chain of command’ or who has responsibility for what needs to be understood by all supervisors. Hence an effective

briefing of the supervision team must be done at some point prior to the event, preferably with the opportunity for the team to ask questions and contribute to the plan.

For me the term ‘ratios’ has become redundant. Anytime someone asks me a question about ratios I invariably find myself responding with ‘supervision structure’ in my answer. And yes the answer is invariably a lot longer than it used to be – but it’s a better one!

References

Ministry of Education - Safety and EOTC Guidelines for good practice.
Cathye Haddock (2003) - Outdoor Safety Risk management for outdoor leaders.
Water Safety New Zealand - ACC Riversafe, Provider’s guidelines.
Watersafe Auckland Incorporated - The Rainbow System.

Comments on this ViewPoint are welcome and should be directed to Gemma at: hedoutdoors@xtra.co.nz



Photo: Arthur/Robyn Sutherland



Photo: Arthur/Robyn Sutherland

Photo: Arthur/Robyn Sutherland

