

# **Do journey style outdoor education programs lead to change? – What the participants think.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the influences of a journey style outdoor education program on the program participants that appear to contribute to changes in personal understanding, behaviour and/or outlook on the world. The study investigated these influences from the participant's point of view using a qualitative research approach collecting data in the program setting. The program investigated did appear to produce a life style that the participants reported as different to their normal home environment. The participants felt they were free of the competing distractions of home life, including, television, phones, Internet, school and lots of people around. This simple life style and lack of distractions combined with the influences of the natural environment appeared to have a calming effect on the participants, encouraging them to think and reflect on various aspects of their lives and behaviour. The participants reported the program experiences contributed to positive changes to their personal understanding, behaviour and/ or outlook on the world.

## **Introduction**

Many investigations have explored the benefits of outdoor education, with numerous researchers finding positive benefits for participants (Bunyan, 1997; Ewert, 1983; Gibson, 1979; Goldman & Priest, 1991; Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards, 1997; Yaffey, 1992). These findings are consistent with my own experiences of conducting outdoor education programs, observing positive behaviour and attitude changes in students, such as, an increase in self-confidence, an increased empathy towards others, and an increase in perseverance. A question that comes to mind is not that outdoor education experiences can lead to positive outcomes for the participants, but what are the specific aspects of outdoor education that lead to these positive benefits? It is this broad question that has been the motivation behind this investigation.

Outdoor education has traditionally striven to provide experiences, which encourage personal growth of the participant (Bunyan, 1997; Friese, Hendee & Kinzinger, 1998; Kimonen & Nevalainen, 1993 / 4; McAvoy, Schatz, Stutz, Schleien & Lais, 1989; Meyer & Wegner 1998). Frierich and Priest (1992) found that outdoor education experiences are intended to be holistic in nature developing all aspects of the participant in terms of physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth. Itin (1999) identified the focus of outdoor education experiences, as encouraging the individual to reflect on his or her current social, personal and environmental attitudes and behaviours. Itin (1999) concluded reflection might be the catalyst for change as the individual discovers limitations in his or her current attitudes and behaviours. Thus outdoor education provides holistic experiences with opportunities for reflection, which may lead to changes in the participant's personal growth.

Research into outdoor education has used a range of quantitative methods to investigate the changes to individuals as a result of outdoor education experiences. These methods have

included standard testing instruments such as the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS), as seen, for example, in the work of Gillett, Thomas, Skok, and Mclaughlin, (1991) and Hazelworth and Wilson (1990). Although the benefits of outdoor education have been identified using quantitative methods, these methods have not been able to clearly identify the reasons why these changes occur. As Ewert (1983) stated “Outward Bound does something ‘good’ to, or for, the participant, but like electricity, we know it does something, but we’re not sure how it does it” (Ewert, 1983, p. 27). Some 14 years later the same sentiments were echoed by Hattie, Marsh, Neill and Richards (1997) noting that more formative or process aspects of adventure programs need to be studied. They went on to say, “it is critical that such formative studies are part of research programs that investigate theoretical concerns and processes that lead to positive change” (Hattie, et al., 1997, p. 74). Neill and Richards (1998) support Hattie et al. (1997) findings, concluding that outdoor education is a legitimate educational training method but, “more research is needed to examine the psychological and social processes which lead to the outcomes of outdoor education programs” (Neill & Richards, 1998, p. 7). The experiences of outdoor education programs encourage reflection by the participant to explore personal perceptions, currently held beliefs, relationships and behaviours. Everall (2000) and Rowley (1987) both suggest that a qualitative research approach is appropriate and well suited to explore the nature and meaning of such experiences.

Due to the complex nature of outdoor education experiences a naturalistic approach was used in this research. The study identified self reported influences from participants on a journey style outdoor education program and examined how these influences affected the participants’ personal understanding, behaviour and / or worldview.

The study explored the following research questions:

1. What do participants report as influences on their outdoor education experience?
2. How, if at all, has the outdoor education experience altered the participant’s personal understanding, behaviour and / or worldview?

## **Method**

The objective of this study was to identify those influencing aspects of outdoor education experiences that were sufficiently influential or significant on the participants of an outdoor education program such that the experiences contributed to changes in the participants’ behaviour and / or worldview. Qualitative research methods were selected for the study as qualitative methods are specifically designed and suited to studies that explore the meaning and nature of experience (Everall, 2000). McKenzie (2000) in her review of literature on adventure education outcomes suggested that, “Qualitative data collection would facilitate the comparison of the relative impact of various program characteristics on program outcomes” (p. 25). Naturalistic inquiry is a term used by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to describe a philosophical approach that uses qualitative methods to primarily collect data in the natural setting of the phenomenon being studied. The researcher is the main data-collecting instrument as humans are adaptable enough to understand and adjust where needed in collecting data in complex settings. The outdoor education experience occurs in a complex physical and social setting, with interactions occurring not only between participants but also between participants and the leader and participants and the natural environment. Due to the complex nature of the outdoor education experience, it is important for the experience to be studied in the setting in which it occurs.

The setting of this investigation was a semi-remote natural environment, following a group of 16 year 10 female secondary school students aged between 15 and 16 years of age through a journey style outdoor education program, lasting 22 days. Journey style outdoor education programs involve students travelling as an independent and self-contained group through an area away from urban and rural areas. On this particular journey the students walked in a remote wilderness area for the first 12 days, en route to the start of a river. At the river they used rafts and canoes to journey the length of the river to the sea and the completion of their journey. There were three food drops along the route where the group was able to re-supply and change over equipment as required.

To investigate the research questions, the experiences of the 16 female secondary school students were studied during their 22 day journey. For the first 12 days of the journey, which comprised the bushwalking segment, I accompanied the group, being able to observe the activities of the students and interview them at regular intervals over the course of the bushwalking segment. When the group reached the river they had a rest day to restock food and prepare rafts for the river segment of the journey. I was not able to travel with the group during the eight days of river travel but was able to meet them as they paddled to the mouth of the river, having that night and the next day to review the completed journey and their experiences of the river segment. This range of contact with the students and leader over various parts of the journey and at the journey's completion, gave me the opportunity to collect data in a variety of situations. The data collected included background information on the participants' school and private outdoor experiences followed by the participants' and leaders' experiences while participating on the program.

On completion of the outdoor education program, the collected data was formally analysed with the aid of the computer software NUD\*IST Vivo [NVivo] (1999). Field notes were entered directly into the NVivo program while interviews were transcribed from the tape recordings using a word processor and then entered into the NVivo program. Once the data had been entered into the computer, it was analysed using what Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as inductive data analysis. This type of analysis starts with first coding the data into identifiable units and then categorising the units by similarities. Relationships between the units are identified to develop theories that may help explain the phenomenon that was observed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to these theories as grounded theories because the theories have been derived from the data via the data analysis. The notes and transcripts from this study were first coded into nodes of similar data using the NVivo program. Nodes of data were then categorised into larger units of data, which were analysed to develop themes. The themes were analysed and refined several times to develop theories that were used to explore the interaction of the reported program influences on the participants personal understanding, behaviour and / or worldview.

## **Results**

Five themes emerged from analysis of the data: the natural environment, style of the program, strategies employed to overcome difficulties encountered, social interaction of the group and participant outcomes.

### **The Natural Environment**

Being out in the natural environment appeared to produce different feelings and attitudes within the participants compared with how they felt in their usual urban environment. Some

of these feelings they found difficult to describe, as Alex's comment illustrates when asked how she felt about being in the outdoors, she explained, "It has a whole different feeling...it's just different". The environment appeared to have a calming effect that some of the girls, including Jenny, identified "as getting away from it all":

I just love the outdoors, it gets me away from everything and school. Especially now because we just had exams at school it's a busy time and stressful time, not for me but for everyone else, I don't get stressed but I have to look after them. Being out here with no phone or Internet, no TV, no mobile phone, that is my worst thing (being on the phone at home all the time). Being out here with nothing no contact with all my other friends, it is great, I love the feeling, to sit and chill and just looking at the mountains.

There was something more to the environment than just getting away from it all, as several of the girls noted that going to a quiet place at home or being away with their families on holiday did not evoke the same feelings or sense of calm. Alex commented that, "It is all nature, there is no technological stuff". When comparing this experience to holidaying in a caravan park, she observed that it was very different – "Here you get really relaxed - it is the isolation and people and stuff".

The beauty of the natural environment was commented on, with views from mountaintops producing exclamations of "wow" and "I could look at this forever". Wildlife also produced positive reactions –the sight of brumbies stopping the group, people speaking in hushed tones. Other animals such as beetles and a large worm created great interest and discussion, with some of the colourful beetles found over lunch breaks being given names.

Aspects such as rain, wind and flies were endured and considered part of being out in the bush. There was an expectation that if you come on these trips there is going to be a level of discomfort. Louise's comment about flies reflects this expectation: "If you got rid of all the flies, it wouldn't be the outdoors and it wouldn't be camp". At times conditions did get too much, as indicated in Louise's comment after a day of walking in the rain: "The rain was shit" – her comment bringing general agreement amongst the girls. Comments of "That was a bitch" after crossing over the Suggan Buggan mountain range to the river demonstrated that not only the weather and insects had to be endured, but also the physical hardship of walking.

At times the environment produced a sense of uncertainty and unknown, which was highlighted as the group prepared to enter the Pilot Wilderness. Knowing that they would be on their own for the next eight days of walking to the next food drop brought on comments of, "this is a bit scary". The thought of entering such an isolated area appeared to produce a level of anxiety about the unknown and what the group was going to encounter and how they were going to deal with what lay ahead.

### **Style of the Program**

Style of the program is closely linked to leadership, as the leader has a strong influence on the nature of the program. To analyse the program theme, it is worth examining some of the external influences on the leadership and program style before reviewing program style from the participants' point of view.

The program is a voluntary experience where students travel for 22 days from the Australian Alps to the coast. In the meetings leading up to the program, participants were given information on equipment and the route that would be followed. The participant's information handbook contained an itinerary that indicated each campsite and the distance that would be travelled each day. The itinerary outlined the 22 days, which contained two days travel to and from the venue, three food drops and two rest days.

A detailed itinerary was in contrast to the leader's preferred approach for a journey style program of this length. Vince's approach was to be constrained only by the food drops; the route taken and the group could decide campsites to be used as they travelled along. Vince explained his role as ideally being more a participant rather than a leader, contributing to the group along with everyone else.

The participants also identified the length of the journey and its voluntary nature as affecting the way they approached the program. Everyone elected to go on the trip and wanted to be there and wanted the trip to be a success. Success was identified by the group as meaning everyone completing the 22 day journey and no one having to be evacuated out. Georgia summed up the group's feelings when she said, "It is only 22 days and it is the one time we have to pull together. I'm not going to have this type of experience again. So don't take it for granted". They had all attended a 12 day journey style outdoor education program the year before as a compulsory part of the school's co-curricular activities.

The voluntary nature of this program appeared to influence the way the girls approached the journey. Libby became aware of this in the pre-trip meetings: "Everyone acted differently, even in the meetings, you could tell everyone wanted to get on". Once on the program the voluntary nature appeared to continue influencing the way people interacted. Libby noted that "Comparing it to this one, you were allowed to complain on the 12 day and you're not on this one". There were increased feelings of responsibility, an expectation to do your fair share and push through difficulties.

Further to the voluntary or compulsory nature of programs, many of the girls stated that if they had not been compelled to go on the 12 day program they probably would not have volunteered to go on this journey, not because they did not like the idea of an outdoor program, but they did not see themselves as 'outdoorsy' people and thus would elect to do other things. As Victoria stated, "I think that both are really good because if you don't have to, often like, you are a bit tentative to try something new. I know if it wasn't compulsory, the 12 dayer, I probably would have done it, but I am not sure".

Having everyone complete the 22 day journey was developed as the underlying goal of the program and was often referred to in daily conversation. This goal appearing to influence the way the girls interacted with one another. They seemed to be aware that social harmony was important if everyone was going to complete the journey. As Jo said, "You have to have a positive outlook otherwise it is going to be bad anyway, even if it could be good." Gill added to this, "Especially with this trip, it is so much more a mental thing, I haven't found it physically very hard".

The two former students Lou and Cath attended the program in place of the usual teacher from the school, who would act as a support person rather than an additional program leader. The girls found that this changed the dynamic of the program, as there was not the usual focus

on school rules or expectations. The general feeling was that most teachers did not cope very well on programs of this type and they brought their classroom approach along with them. As Louise identified, "Some of the teachers expect it to be perfect, they like, 'come on, we have to be efficient now and keep to the schedule'". The general feeling was that without teachers, as Jo stated, "you are given more responsibility". Clare noted that it also produced a level of equality, "with everyone treated equally".

The group leader, Vince, and the two past students, Lou and Cath, shared responsibilities with the group, from group tasks such as digging the toilet, to making decisions on the route and where to camp. The participants still viewed Vince as the group leader but felt they had more responsibility with the expectation that Vince would step in if the need arose. They felt that Vince was part of the group, as Victoria noted: "I have really enjoyed the way Vince has stepped back and just been a group member as well, it has put us in the position where we have to make choices and be in the position of running our own camp".

The participants were able to identify from their past experiences what characterised a good outdoor education leader: someone who treats you as an equal and is non-judgemental; someone who takes you seriously, telling the truth about any given situation, such as how far the group still has to walk; someone who steps in when you need help; someone who shares in group responsibilities; someone who is calm in times of difficulty or when a participant makes a mistake; and someone who allows you to solve your own problems.

Participants spoke about the absence of parents. Louise commented: "when you go on camp you have to do your work, your parents are not there to do it all for you". "At home I am really slack but out here I cook and everything, because you have to" was Tess's response to how she behaved without her parents to do things for her.

The style of this outdoor education program produced a simple life style, as the group journeyed from one place to another without the comforts of home. The group travelled as a small self-contained unit, which required a routine of packing up, moving on, setting up camp and cooking. This routine combined with the lack of distractions, such as television, phones, computers, lots of people and school appeared to be in contrast to the busy home lives of the participants, producing a less stressful lifestyle. Meg found that the less stressful life style also gave time for reflection, "[I am] less stressed, it has fully done heaps for me. It makes you look at life a bit in a 22 day camp, you can't look at it like you look at everyday, you look at the big picture like it represents life, I don't know".

This aspect of reflection and putting life in perspective appeared to relate not only to the current situation but situations, issues and relationships at home. Louise talked about how while walking, "You just tune out, I know it sounds weird but you have a conversation in your head. You sort everything out, like back in Melbourne stuff, so when we go back we are going to be so laid back, because you have it all sorted out. I really like that".

Having difficulties to overcome appeared to be an important gauge to value the enjoyable moments. Being tired at the end of the day and being able to enjoy a pleasant campsite and the company of the other members of the group seemed to be very important. Without the hardship the "easy" bits would not be valued. Meg, Sally and Alex were sitting in the sun at the end of the day commenting on the peacefulness and beauty of the campsite. When asked if getting to the campsite by bus would create the same feelings they all said "no way". As Meg said, "You have a sense of accomplishment".

## Strategies Employed by the Participants to Overcome Difficulties Encountered

Often the difficulties or challenges of a program are the peak challenges, such as getting to the top of a mountain or navigating through a large rapid that have been incorporated into the program design. On this program the difficulties seemed to emerge as the journey unfolded. The length of the program was one of the first difficulties the participants identified and it appeared they had a common strategy of taking one day at a time. Louise did not look at the whole 22 days but would look forward to aspects a short way in to the future, "I couldn't think a week into the future, each day I would think we have a rest day in three days and that's as far as I am going to think. Yeah you enjoy it more". Nikki seemed to find the prospect being out in the bush for 22 days a bigger challenge than some of the other girls, noting with eight days to the next food drop,

Eight days is a lot to look at and if you take each day as it comes, it's another day gone and it will be over in no time. When you take it in chunks like that you... I don't know how it makes me feel. Yeah, it's like in your life, if you try to look at it all in one go you can get pretty depressed about where you are. I like to think I have got this far and have achieved this already.

Previous experience of the 12 day program the year before gave the participants an insight into their abilities. As Libby pointed out, "At some stages on the 12 day I thought I was going to walk backwards but you got through it, so once you have done it once you know you can do it again". Many of the girls spoke of their previous experiences on the 12 day program and how it helped them with keeping going when they got tired.

Other strategies were also used when the walking got difficult. When walking off track down a spur through thick bush and in heavy rain, many of the girls started singing and laughing every time they fell over. Louise explained that, "Singing makes the time go faster and if you make it fun it takes your mind off it". When walking along a road with sore feet, Gill and Tess made up a song that they sang to the group that night. As Gill said, "Yeah making it up was fun we really cut sick with the whole thing, it makes the whole situation easier".

Singing and taking your mind off difficulties did not work all the time, perseverance was an important strategy as Sally highlighted with her sore feet:

As much as I would have liked to sit down and cry I knew I couldn't so I just had to keep going till we got to camp and then I could take my shoes off. I know I will get through and we are not tramping out here for ever".

Keeping problems in perspective was a common approach to difficulties, as Gill pointed out when the group had to make an unplanned camp due to difficult scrub and some niggling injuries in the group:

You just get through it and think if this is the worst that happens then it is sweet. It was like that day at Purgatory, it was pretty bad when you sort of look at it, we were kinda lost, we aren't up the mountain and we aren't at our camp site and we are going to have to back track and we have an injury, but at the same time it was

sweet, there wasn't any major problems, we have food, we have water, in the morning you just got up and cooked.

### **Social Interaction of the Group**

The 16 participants on the program came from diverse friendship groups at school, with many of the girls saying that there were people on the trip they did not know and did not normally talk to at school. Generally, each girl had only one or two friends on the program who they spent time with at school. Most girls saw this as a positive aspect of the trip as you could talk to new people and find out about them. As both Jenny and Meg commented, "It is much more interesting with different people. Like, you can talk to all these people that you don't know and get to know them". Louise was able to explain how conversations are different:

When we are at school we are talking about school stuff. When we are on camp, first we get to know each other, because you actually know nothing about some people, so you really start from the start. So you learn stuff about family and who they live with even. Conversations at school, because you know them, are usually about what did you do on the weekend. We are also talking about our friends that aren't here, wondering what they are doing at the moment.

There was an unspoken code that personal aspects talked about on the program would not be discussed with other people back at school, producing a sense of trust within the group. Jo explained it as neutral ground, "Everyone is out of their own environment and away from their friends".

Social interaction was one of the highlights of the trip for most of the girls; when asked about what were the memorable moments of the program, they consistently identified times when they were sitting around chatting or playing impromptu games.

Keeping social harmony and a positive group was an important goal for the participants. The girls felt if the group did not make an effort to get on well and look after one another, someone would end up getting sick or injured and have to be evacuated from the program. Sally identified this as one of the reasons everyone was getting on so well, "We all want to be here and we all want to get to the end together". She then went on to elaborate, "We are all experiencing something that so many other people aren't, we may as well stick together and enjoy it".

Having these shared experiences also made it easier for the girls to interact, as Louise identified: "We have more in common, which makes it easier to talk to most people". This sense of a shared experience came through at many times over the course of the journey and seemed to focus the group when things became difficult.

With all of these good intentions there still was what the girls dubbed the "big fight" on day 16, four days into the rafting section of the journey. It was not a fight between individuals but a group meeting that developed into a fight. As Jenny put it, "The first fight, day 16 and the abuse was flying left right and centre." Danni added, "People were raising their voices and standing up". It appeared it all started over small issues, as Clare pointed out, "It was over nothing, the pettiest things".

The girls had a range of theories as to why the big fight occurred. Jo put it down to not enough time to relax when rafting compared to walking, “When we were walking, we had heaps and heaps of rest time and lots of time to talk to people but on the rafting you could only talk to those on your raft”. Louise thought it was the lack of personal space living under the tarp, “with your tent you have got your me time, even if it is five minutes, you can sit in there on your own”. Gill expressed the thoughts of quite a few of the girls, “there was no tension until day 16 and even then it was because everyone was so tired, it was late, and no one had seen their family for so long”. It was generally agreed that the fight helped clear the air.

Not all the participants had the same level of social interaction. Two of the girls found they had less in common with the rest of the group. Anna found that this trip was socially not as enjoyable as the 12 day program, “on the 12 day I had a great time, we got so close to everyone. I didn’t know many people on that camp but I got to know people more and we just combined so well and on this camp it is not the same”. Georgia thought it was the dynamics of the group:

Dynamics of the people, these people in our group make no effort to enjoy your company and it has been really hard because of our image, or whatever you want to call it. They feel that they can’t talk to us and when we talk to them they don’t seem interested, it is a very different group of people, very different friendship groups, we have made so many efforts to make it better. Being under the tarp forced everyone to start speaking that was a good and a bad thing, because there was a lot of tension forcing us to sleep together every night. There were comments like don’t put your things under the tarp before we get it up, ridiculous things like that. I have put the tarp up five days in a row, everyone got really tired and really annoyed they made problems for themselves so they could have an excuse [to have a fight].

The river section did provide more opportunities for Georgia and Anna to interact with the other girls more. Anna found that sleeping under the tarp:

It was better, it sort of made a few people closer, you could hear people talking, so you joined in. I hadn’t got close to anyone over the camp, I didn’t even know Georgia very well, you probably thought I got on really well with her.

Georgia found that being in the raft with three other people was better for conversation, “We talk a lot [in the rafts], it was pretty easy going, nothing too exciting”.

## **Participant Outcomes**

All the participants were able to identify ways in which their thinking, outlook and or behaviour had changed over the course of the program. Many of the identified changes were common across the majority of the participants; it appeared to be the degree of change that varied from one person to another.

A change in maturity was a common statement made by the girls. This change appeared to be characterised by an increase in feelings of independence, an increased tolerance of others, an increase in the awareness of others’ feelings and an increase in respect for individual differences. When asked if there was anything the girls would take away from the 22 days,

Sally's response was, "Maturity and tolerance". Danni elaborated on Sally's comment: "To respect people for their individuality and that people sometimes need their space. I learnt more about how to interact with people and pick up on their emotions". Meg identified an increase in independence and maturity, "you have to be independent. You have to pick yourself up and be strong, you can't say to your mum and dad I don't want to do this, it is a mind thing".

Being aware of "what is important" was a common thread amongst the girls, many of them commenting that at home they complained or worried about trivial matters. Danni felt she became very aware of what was important:

I am definitely going to complain less, Jenny knows I complain about the most stupid basic things, but out here you realise that the more basic things are important, like food and water issues, warmth, dry clothes. At home I complain about stupid things.

Comforts and the ease of living at home was a contrast the participants identified. One of the aspects Victoria liked about being on outdoor programs was how it made you appreciate things at home:

I love everything about my home and out here you see what is important to you and what you miss, like running water, like flushing a toilet, just little things that you take for granted like turning on a tap, and seeing your family every day, just little things you take for granted you appreciate so much.

Three girls identified personal changes, where they felt they had discovered something about themselves. Kate found she learnt a lot about herself on the program:

You learn a lot of things about yourself on camp, I think I didn't realise that I couldn't be around people that are so different to you, sometimes you just can't handle it, but then once you say something and get it out you feel so much better than keeping it in.

Anna felt that she had changed herself rather than being out on the program having an effect, "I have changed myself this time out, that is the only part of the camp I say I am happy about. I did it, because it gave me time away to figure out who I am". Georgia was able to see herself differently by talking with some of the other girls:

I have learnt lots of things about myself and the way I should be respecting myself from talking to Tess, Gill and Anna. Looking back on my past and thinking how can I change the way I am, I have grown up a little bit and started my path to maturity.

Participants identified many common outcomes. All the participants felt that they had become more mature and independent over the course of the program. This maturity was reflected in the ways they interacted with each other; with most participants identifying that they had become more tolerant, less judgemental and more respectful of others. Approaches to problems had changed, with the participants being able to keep problems in perspective, complaining less about small issues. An awareness of how easy some aspects of home life are with showers and unlimited food was identified by all participants, with some participants

noting a change in their own perspective of what things are really important in life. A small number of the participants were able to identify specific personal changes that occurred over the course of the program.

## Summary

Of the five themes that emerged from the data, four themes can be categorised as influences on the participants' outdoor education experience: the natural environment, leadership and style of the program, strategies employed by the participants to overcome difficulties encountered and social interaction of the group. These four themes relate to the first research question,

What do participant's report as influences on their outdoor education experience?

Using the theme headings the specific elements that make up each theme identified by the participants have been summarised in table one.

**Table 1**  
**Influences on the Participants' Outdoor Education Experience**

Theme	Specific elements identified
Natural environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A calming effect</li> <li>• A sense of beauty and awe</li> <li>• A sense of the unknown</li> <li>• Something to be endured</li> <li>• A place of change with comfort and discomfort</li> </ul>
Style of program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voluntary participation</li> <li>• Long trip length of 22 days</li> <li>• No teachers present</li> <li>• A group leader who shares in the group's goals and responsibilities, rather than directing what needs to be done</li> <li>• The participants having a valid role and responsibility in the decision making process</li> <li>• No parents present</li> <li>• Having to do things for yourself</li> <li>• Journeying from one place to another providing a simple life-style</li> <li>• No comforts of home such as showers, toilets or water from a tap</li> <li>• Fewer distractions without the influence of TV, phones, Internet, lots of people and school</li> <li>• Time to sit and not have to do anything</li> <li>• Difficulties to overcome</li> </ul>
Social interaction of the group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diverse group of participants from different friendship groups at school</li> <li>• Small group size</li> <li>• Different conversations compared to school</li> </ul>

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- Time to relax and talk particularly during the walking section of the journey
  - Sense of trust within the group
  - Impromptu games
  - Shared experience and shared goal to complete the journey
  - Being aware of how and what you say to other members of the group
  - Group meetings
  - Sleeping together under a tarpaulin on the river section of the journey
  - Being in a raft all day with a small number of people for the river section of the journey
  - Long days during the river section of the journey
  - Sense of exclusion by some members of the group
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(table continues)

**Table 1 (continued)**

Theme	Specific elements identified
Strategies employed by the participants to overcome difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking one day at a time and not allowing the length of the trip to overwhelm you</li> <li>• Thinking back to previous experiences and thinking if I have done this once I can do it again</li> <li>• Seeing the funny side of the difficulty and making a joke out of it</li> <li>• Singing</li> <li>• Putting up with the difficulty knowing it will come to an end</li> <li>• Keeping the problem in perspective</li> <li>• Preparing and planning for the next day's journey</li> <li>• Helping one another</li> </ul>

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The fifth theme, participant outcomes, relates to the second research question:

How, if at all, has the outdoor education experience altered the participant's personal understanding, behaviour and / or worldview?

Table two summarises changes that occurred over the course of the program in participants' understanding, behaviour and / or worldview, as identified by the participants.

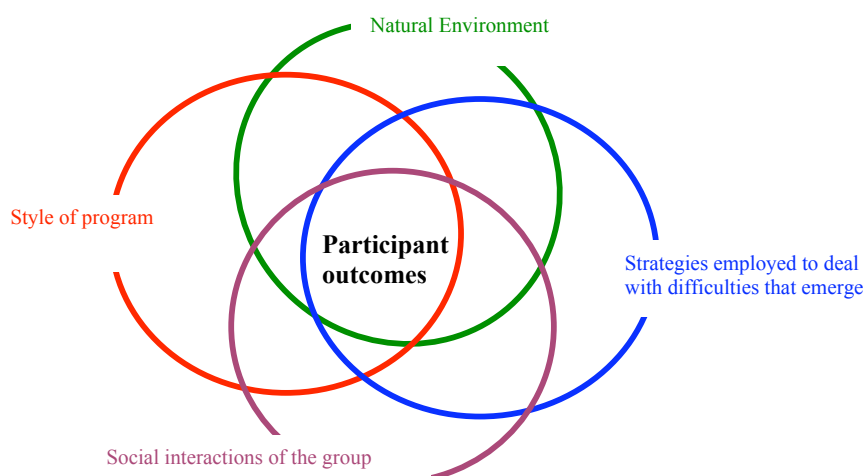
**Table 2**  
**Changes Participants Identified as Having Occurred Over the Course of the Program**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Specific Elements Identified</b>
Participant reported outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maturity and independence</li> <li>• Change in social approach, becoming more tolerant, less judgemental and respecting individual differences</li> <li>• Complain less and keeping problems in perspective</li> <li>• Appreciative of home comforts and the things you take for granted</li> <li>• Learning about yourself</li> </ul>

## **Discussion**

The five themes that have emerged from the analysis of the data can be considered as five identifiable components of the outdoor education program being studied. Each component is a collection of specific elements that relate to the program. By identifying the themes as components of the outdoor education program, the components can be used to explore the possible relationships that may exist between them and how these relationships may help shape the nature and character of the outdoor education program being investigated.

The four components of natural environment, style of program, strategies employed to deal with difficulties that emerge and social interaction have been grouped together as influencing components as it is these components that appear to influence the participant's outdoor education experience. From the data analysis it appears that the influencing components work dynamically to produce a set of conditions that appear conducive for change to occur in the outdoor education program participants. The changes identified by the participants that have resulted from the four influencing components, are identified as, participant outcomes. Figure one illustrates the dynamic nature of the influencing components in generating a set of conditions, within which change may occur in the outdoor education participants.



**Figure 1. Interaction of the five components of the outdoor education program.**

Each circle in the diagram represents an influencing component. The circles overlap in the centre of the diagram. This central area of the diagram represents the combined effect of the influencing components, producing conditions that may encourage change in the outlook of the outdoor education program participants, identified as participant outcomes. Overlapping of the circles indicates that the influencing components do not operate in isolation. Rather, it is assumed that each influencing component affects all the other influencing components. Thus, the four influencing components appear to work in concert generating conditions where possible change in the outdoor participants may occur.

With the assumption that the influencing components contribute to the outcomes identified by the participants, I feel it is possible to explore links between the elements that make up the influencing components and the reported participant outcomes. These links will be explored by examining the elements the participants identified as contributing to a particular outcome, combined with the observed behaviour of the participants during the 22 day journey.

### **Maturity and Independence**

All of the girls identified feelings of becoming more independent and mature as an outcome of the program. Travelling through a remote natural area appeared to influence these changes in maturity and independence, with the environment providing a contrast to the familiar home environment. The natural environment provided a sense of the unknown. This was highlighted when the group entered the Pilot Wilderness, with the girls commenting on feeling anxious as they packed the eight days of food they would need before the next food drop. The group had to be self-reliant and subsequently more independent in this situation as compared with the home environment, dealing with whatever challenges that arose. The natural environment not only evoked feelings of uncertainty and the unknown but also provided a place for reflection. Participants often commented that being out in the natural environment was less stressful than being at home due to the lack of distractions from TV, Internet, phones and lots of people around. This lack of stress combined with the feelings that Alex described as, "... a whole different feeling...it's just different", seemed to have a calming effect, allowing the participants to be more reflective on how they behaved and dealt with problems and issues.

The style of the program was different from the previous outdoor education programs that the girls had experienced in the past. The voluntary nature of the program appeared to change the way the participants approached the program. They came with the view that you had to do your part for the group and took responsibility for the success of the program. As Louise pointed out when comparing how participants on this program took on responsibility, "we take on the jobs because, we are here because we want to be here, and you really had to motivate some people on the 12 dayer". Thus with this approach, they possibly operated more independently than in previous programs and situations.

The leader took a more participative role, encouraging the participants to be part of the decision making process. Regular group meetings enhanced opportunities for the group decision-making. The participants rather than the leader decided key issues such as the route taken and where to camp. The participants had to deal with each day's difficulties without the support of their normal social networks of teachers, friends and family potentially adding to the feelings of independence and maturity.

The girls had to do everything for themselves including setting up camp, cooking, collecting water and digging toilets. It was not only the jobs necessary for survival that had to be completed, they also had to provide their own entertainment. Without the distractions of TV, telephones, Internet and having lots of people around, the group made up games, songs and dances. In some ways, then, they became more independent of the structures they usually depended upon.

Living in close contact with 16 group members, the girls had to change the ways they interacted with one another. It was important to be aware of how others felt and also contribute one's own opinions and thoughts at group meetings and when decisions had to be made. Keeping a balance between one's own needs and the needs of others could lead to a more mature and less self-oriented outlook. Jenny highlighted this aspect of having to be mindful about other people in the group:

You have to tread lightly cause there are so many [different people] here and you can't say anything too bad and it's really good, it kind of cleanses you. At home I can be pissed off at people because I can just go home and leave them alone and avoid them for months and months and months, but like out here, there is no way in hell that you can avoid anyone.

Increased feelings of independence and maturity appeared to be influenced by a range of elements across the four influencing components. The natural environment provided a setting that is in contrast to the home environment, the unknown aspect of the environment requiring a more independent and self-reliant approach from the participants to deal with problems. This setting matches Luckner and Nadler's (1997) suggestion that experiences that are unfamiliar and take participants out of their comfort zone provide opportunities for growth. This need for an independent approach was magnified by the style of the program, a small self-contained group travelling through a remote area, without the normal support mechanisms. Such a group size and composition is supportive of Wichman's (1991) contention that activity groups should be made up primarily of peers and a size that encourages social interaction and problem solving. Participants were encouraged by the leader to be part of the decision making process, weighing up the options available and the potential consequences of action taken. This style of leadership matches what Kewia (1997 / 8) termed transformational leadership, where the leader's approach is to disseminate power amongst the group, where all individuals are encouraged to reach their full potential in making a full contribution to the achievement of the task. She suggested that this style of leadership would work well for women because of their natural operational position to help, encourage and build social harmony. Living in close contact with a group of 16 girls from a diverse range of friendship groups, participants were required to take into account the needs and feelings of each other. These influences appeared to combine together encouraging the participants to take on a responsibility for the program, requiring them to be more independent and mature in their approach. Finally, the natural environment combined with the lack of distractions found in the participant's normal home environment appears to provide opportunities for reflection due to a calming effect. Miles (1987) also identified that the lack of competing stimuli in the wilderness setting compared to an urban lifestyle contributing to a different perspective in program participants. Kaplan and Talbot (1983) identified the natural environment as contributing to this reflective atmosphere. In my opinion, these opportunities for reflection could provide important moments for self-examination, leading to an evaluation of one's behaviour and acknowledgement of a more independent and mature approach.

## **Social Approach Toward Increased Tolerance, Less Judgemental and More Respect**

In addition to feelings of independence and maturity, many of the participants were able to identify specific aspects of their social behaviour that they felt they had become aware of over the course of the program. Many of the girls felt they had become much more tolerant of other people and less judgemental, they had become aware that first impressions about someone can be inaccurate, and had developed an increased respect for individuality.

Even though the girls all attended the same school and were in the same year level, they did not know each other very well. At school most of the girls only associated with one or two of the other girls on the program. They found that even with a small group of only 16 participants, not knowing everyone was an advantage. The style of the program, journeying from one campsite to another in a small group through a remote area, provided many opportunities for the participants to talk and socialise, thus finding out about one another. The lack of distractions compared to the home environment allowed different conversations to emerge, changing from the normal chatter about what was happening on the weekend to discussions about family, other friends, the program and past outdoor education program experiences. The participants increased attention to their social surroundings supports Miles (1987) contention that a simple lifestyle enables participants to relax and pay more attention to their physical and social surroundings. It seems reasonable to propose that this increase in range of conversations would help the girls gain a greater insight into one another, possibly contributing to greater tolerance, being less judgemental and respecting individuality.

The voluntary nature of the program appeared to establish the shared goal of wishing everyone to complete the 22 day journey together. This goal appeared to alter the way the girls approached each other, as from the beginning they were aware of not upsetting each other or becoming upset and of keeping the group positive. As Libby stated when asked about the general approach of participants, "People are more tolerant so it is easier to say stuff that you normally would not say and you are more tolerant of them, tolerant of weather and other people and their ways".

A sense of trust in the group allowed people to act more naturally and not be worried that it would affect their reputation back at school. This sense of trust helped maintain the social harmony within the group. Even after the big fight on day 16 of the journey there did not appear to be any ill will or any lasting negative effects. The exception to this was Anna and Georgia, who felt they were not given a good hearing during the big fight. The majority of the participants did feel the argument helped cleared the air and allowed them to refocus on the journey, again becoming aware of each other's needs and personal responsibilities to the group. As Schole, Prouty and Radcliffe (1988) found the level of trust between the participants may have also assisted the development of positive relationships.

The majority of participants found the social aspect of the trip was an important one. Having a small group of individuals from a range of friendship groups travelling as a self sufficient unit through a remote natural setting appeared to changed the social dynamic. Being away from the normal distractions of home life provided different opportunities for social interaction. The shared goal of completing the journey together appeared to increase awareness of each other's needs and feelings. As a sense of trust grew within the group people started to act more naturally.

It appears that feelings of becoming more tolerant, less judgemental and more accepting of individual differences were strongly influenced by the social interaction component, with participants identifying the social aspects of the program as important, not only from an enjoyment point of view, but also in getting to know each other. This occurred in a community environment that developed a sense of trust and belongingness in most participants. Knapp (1990) identified this as an important characteristic if greater emotional and physical risk taking is going to occur within the activity group. Watts, Webster, Morley, and Cohen (1992) in their study of expedition stress found that the close social interaction of the group increased feelings of sociability, responsibility and emotional stability in the individual participants. The leadership and style of the program provided a contrasting setting to the school and home environment; participants identified that they acted differently on the program compared to at home, being more relaxed and at ease in the program setting. Although not specifically identified by the participants, the calming effect of the environment seems likely to have played a role, encouraging reflective moments where participants may consider their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

It should be noted that a sense of trust, increased tolerance, being less judgemental and more accepting of individual differences was not a universal change, as Anna and Georgia felt they had tried hard to work with the group but still felt that they had not been accepted by the group and they were not accepting of some of the other participants. They felt that this was mainly due to the other members of the group not trying hard enough and that the other members of the group were scared of them, due to their school reputations. It is interesting to also note that one girl, Jo, specifically felt she knew Anna much better because of the program and saw her differently from how she perceived her at school, highlighting Jo's ability to be less judgemental.

### **Complain Less and Keep Problems in Perspective**

The majority of participants were able to identify that at home they complained about minor issues and often worried about trivial things, such as what to wear on Saturday night. The experiences of the program appeared to change their outlook, complaining less and keeping problems in perspective with other concerns.

The natural environment provided a sense of the unknown and mystery as the group travelled from one area to another, not knowing what problems or surprises lay ahead. These included not only days of rain, steep hills, and difficult off track navigation, but also rewarding views, peaceful campsites and contact with wild animals. The natural environment provided both hardship and reward - reaching a beautiful campsite after a hard day's walking seemed to make the effort worthwhile, the memory of sore feet and tired shoulders becoming a minor concern. These experiences seemed to encourage strategies that kept problems in perspective.

There were several other strategies employed to keep problems in perspective rather than complain about the situation, such as seeing the funny side of a difficulty, rather than focusing on the difficult aspect. Singing was used to take one's mind off a difficulty or monotonous activity, changing the situation from something that was hard to something more enjoyable. The length of the trip appeared to produce a common response in the participants. Many of the girls indicated that they broke the program down into smaller chunks than 22 days, taking a few days at a time and not allowing the concept of 22 days to overwhelm them. Finally, many of the girls felt it was not fair to complain about difficulties to other members

of the group as everyone was dealing with the same issues. Everyone worked together to deal with the situation rather than allowing the situation to overwhelm any individual or the group.

The contrast of the participants' lives on the program compared to their lives at home appeared to have a refocusing effect on their priorities. Supporting Miles (1987) suggestion that travelling in wilderness areas can alter participants' perspective about the 'real world' and what other possibilities exist. The girls were able to compare the issues that were important to them at home with those on the program. The program issues became more important to them, such as food, water and warmth, as these issues were linked to personal comfort and the potential success of the journey. Many of the home issues that they would complain about were not linked to personal comfort and success, but image and social acceptance. The girls seemed to re-evaluate what they felt was important and what was trivial, or at least not worth getting too "stressed out about".

### **Appreciation of Home Comforts**

All the participants mentioned the lack of home comforts and how they often take for granted the ease of living with hot showers and water from a tap. The simple life style of travelling from one place to another in a remote natural environment with all that you require for the journey in a backpack was in complete contrast to the participants' normal home life. Being able to live for an extended period of time without the comforts of, an endless supply of clean dry clothes, toilets and, food from the fridge appeared to change the participants' perceptions of life at home. Staying warm and dry was a high priority compared to the normal home issues of how you looked and what clothes one should wear.

This contrast appeared to increase awareness of how easy an urban life style is, with all the comforts of home. Interestingly many of the girls volunteered to be part of the program because they had enjoyed this simple lifestyle and lack of comforts on the previous years 12 day journey. As Alex replied when ask why do you come on these trips, "Because you felt good after it".

### **Learning About Yourself**

Three girls were able to identify a personal insight that had occurred. Katie thought that she was able to be more open with other people, discussing her concerns with them and getting personal issues out in the open. Anna was more general in her personal change, feeling that she had a better understanding of herself. Georgia had used discussions with other members of the group to reflect on her life, feeling that she should respect herself more and envisaging how she could change herself compared with her past behaviour.

Even though only three of the girls identified a personal insight, it is likely that all the girls were able to take the time to reflect on their lives and past behaviours, identifying possible areas of change. Such reflection appears to have been encouraged by the calming effect of the natural environment combined with the lack of distractions found in the normal home environment. Added to this, the program produced a different social interaction between the girls, compared to their normal social interaction and peer group at home and school, encouraging different conversations and a more tolerant and open approach towards one another with a high level of individual acceptance.

Table three summarises the connections discussed that have been drawn from the data between the specific elements and the participant outcomes. The specific elements that appear to influence each participant outcome are listed under each component heading.

**Table 3**  
**The elements of the various components that appear to have influenced the participants' outcomes**

Participant outcomes	Components of the outdoor education program that appear to influence the participant outcomes			
	Natural environment	Leadership and style of the program	Strategies employed by the participants to overcome difficulties	Social interaction of the group
<b>Maturity and independence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A calming effect</li> <li>• A sense of mystery and the unknown</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No parents present</li> <li>• The participants having a valid role and responsibility in the decision making process</li> <li>• No teachers present</li> <li>• Fewer distractions without the influence of TV, phones, Internet, lots of people and school</li> <li>• Voluntary participation</li> <li>• Having to do things for your self</li> <li>• Group leader who shares in group responsibilities and decision making process rather than directing what needs to be done</li> <li>• Difficulties to overcome</li> <li>• Long trip length of 22 days</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing and planning for the next day's journey</li> <li>• Thinking back to past experiences and thinking, if I have done this once I can do it again</li> <li>• Helping one another</li> <li>• Keeping problems in perspective</li> <li>• Taking one day at a time and not allowing the length of the trip to overwhelm you</li> <li>• Seeing funny side of the difficulty and making a joke out of it</li> <li>• Putting up with the difficulty knowing it will come to an end</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being aware of how and what you say to other group members</li> <li>• Small group</li> <li>• Group meetings</li> <li>• Impromptu games</li> <li>• Singing</li> </ul>

(table continues)

**Table 3 (continued)**

Participant outcomes	Components of the outdoor education program that appear to influence the participant outcomes			
	Natural environment	Leadership and style of the program	Strategies employed by the participants to overcome difficulties	Social interaction of the group
<b>Social approach</b> - <b>Tolerance</b> - <b>Non - judgemental</b> - <b>Respect individuality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A calming effect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voluntary participation</li> <li>• No comforts of home such as showers, toilets or water from a tap</li> <li>• Time to sit and not have to do anything</li> <li>• Fewer distractions without the influence of TV, phones, Internet, lots of people and school</li> <li>• Journeying from one place to another providing a simple lifestyle</li> <li>• Long trip length of 22 days</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining a positive outlook</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diverse group of participants from different friendship groups at school</li> <li>• Being aware of how and what you say to other group members</li> <li>• Shared experience and shared goal to complete the journey</li> <li>• Sense of trust within the group</li> <li>• Different conversations compared to school</li> <li>• Impromptu games</li> <li>• Small group</li> <li>• Group meetings</li> <li>• Time to relax and talk, particularly during the walking phase of the journey</li> </ul>
<b>Complain less and keep problems in perspective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Something that has to be endured</li> <li>• A sense of mystery and the unknown</li> <li>• A calming effect</li> <li>• A sense of beauty and awe</li> <li>• Place of change, comfort and discomfort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No comforts of home such as showers, toilets or water from a tap</li> <li>• Difficulties to overcome</li> <li>• Voluntary participation</li> <li>• Long trip length of 22 days</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking one day at a time and not allowing the length of the trip to overwhelm you</li> <li>• Seeing funny side of the difficulty and making a joke out of it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being aware of how and what you say to other group members</li> <li>• Singing</li> </ul>

(table continues)

**Table 3 (continued)**

*Insert table*

Participant outcomes	Components of the outdoor education program that appear to influence the participant outcomes			
	Natural environment	Leadership and style of the program	Strategies employed by the participants to overcome difficulties	Social interaction of the group
<b>Appreciation of home comforts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Place of change, comfort and discomfort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No comforts of home such as showers, toilets, or water from a tap</li> <li>Journeying from one place to another, providing a simple lifestyle</li> </ul>		
<b>Learning more about yourself</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A calming effect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Long trip length of 22 days</li> <li>Time to sit and not have to do anything</li> <li>Fewer distractions without the influence of TV, phones, Internet, lots of people and school</li> <li>Journeying from one place to another, providing a simple lifestyle</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small group</li> <li>Time to relax and talk, particularly during the walking phase of the journey</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

The journey style nature of the outdoor education program studied, combined with the influences of the natural environment, producing an atmosphere that appeared to have a calming and reflective effect on the participants. The leadership style encouraged participants to take on responsibilities for decision making and planning for most aspects of the program. This increased responsibility appeared to produce feelings of independence and maturity in the participants. The participants committed approach to the program, which started with volunteering to attend and the subsequent development of shared goals, appeared to increase a commitment to maintaining social harmony within the group. Different social strategies were employed by the participants to maintain social harmony, which appeared to alter the majority of participants' general social outlook.

There are two other aspects from the study worth considering: 1) the lack of specific peak challenges found in many outdoor education programs; and, 2) the role of informal peer discussions. Presenting activity groups with a specific peak challenge that will induce levels of positive stress that encourage the activity group members to operate outside their comfort zone and search for strategies to overcome the challenge is a strong theme in the literature (Gass, 1993; Handley, 1998; Luckner & Nadler 1997; Priest, 1991). The outdoor education program investigated did not appear to present a series of specific peak challenges such as reaching a high summit or abseiling off a large cliff. Rather, the challenge was completing a journey of 22 days through a semi-remote natural environment. As a result, the participants did not identify moments of high anxiety and potential stress as the result of an approaching challenge. Personal moments appeared to be the significant challenges, times when they needed to focus on keeping going or being aware of the needs and feelings of others. In my view, it appears that the challenges of an outdoor education program can be found at any moment during the program depending on the individual and could include such things as dealing with being away from home, resolving a conflict with another group member, persevering through times of discomfort or cooking dinner. It is not necessarily the challenges that are scheduled into an outdoor education program, such as rafting a specific rapid or reaching a high summit that become the significant challenge for the participants. Less focus on scheduled challenges or using them to develop group goals and a common purpose rather than a personal challenge to overcome, may be more effective in producing the positive changes in social approach, maturity and independence as reported by the participants on the program studied

Most of the program's experiences appeared to be processed in an informal way either via personal reflection or during peer discussions. The participants acknowledge that they talked experiences and issues through amongst themselves, with Georgia, for example even attributing her personal insights as being facilitated through discussion with some of the other girls. All the participants were able to identify changes in personal understanding and or their worldview, which they attributed to the outdoor education program. The results indicate that the program experiences had been processed, and it appeared that connections were made between the program experiences and the participants' past experiences. In the literature it is this connection that is the hallmark of processing the experiences and thus, learning (Gass, 1990; Greenaway, 1992; Handley, 1998; Heath, 1985; Priest & Naismith, 1993; Stremba, 1998). An interesting process at work here is the role of informal peer discussions as a potential method to connect current and past experiences. This aspect of processing has not been identified in the literature, although may be a part of the processes which occur when the experience is left to speak for itself as described in the mountains speak for themselves (MST)

processing model (Priest & Chase, 1989). In my opinion, processing may also be affected by the amount of free time the participants have to talk amongst themselves or to be able to sit and contemplate their experiences. To program in free time, where participants have the opportunity to talk or time to reflect may increase the processing of outdoor education experiences by the participants.

This study has focused on the experiences of a group of female year 10 students participating in a voluntary journey style program of 22 days in duration. Because of the specific nature of the study one cannot confidently draw conclusions that would be applicable to all outdoor education programs or even to other journey style outdoor education programs. Programs of male and female participants or male only participants may produce different social interactions, potentially producing different influences and outcomes for the participants. Different styles of outdoor education programs would possibly produce different relationships between the program components and influences, perhaps resulting in a different set of conditions affecting the program outcomes. The application of these findings to other settings is left to the care of future researchers and practitioners.

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