Disconnections Between Outdoor Programs and Education Principles

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of health and safety legislation and the introduction of vocational training on outdoor education programs in New Zealand schools. In depth interviews were conducted with a number of program leaders to determine the most significant influence on outdoor education in their schools over the last decade. The interviews revealed how these changes have influenced program design and delivery, and indicate that these two key changes have served to disconnect outdoor education from the principles that have traditionally underpinned it.

Introduction

When I began this research the original purpose was to explore how and why outdoor education in schools in New Zealand had changed over the last decade and explore what had influenced the changes. I conducted interviews with 8 individuals who were either heads of outdoor departments in schools or were in positions in the industry that offered an overview of what was happening in schools. Amid many influences specific to school and situation, two key developments emerged as having the most dramatic effects over the last decade. One was the introduction of health and safety legislation, the other the offering of vocational training in schools. This paper restricts its examination to two key changes in outdoor education and explores the disconnections they foster with regard to underlying principles.

What emerges from the interviews is a picture of outdoor education with influences on it that appear to be at odds with what would encourage vibrant, holistic, outdoor education experiences. The holistic nature of learning is one of the key strengths of outdoor education. The outdoors provide a means, second to none its proponents would argue, to offer rich experiences where students, their teacher/leader, peers and nature come together, if not in a glorious union, then certainly in a way with enormous learning potential. The resulting interaction may be harmonious, or it may not, or it may be downright dysfunctional, but whatever takes place the experience will be memorable, often poignantly so, and provide rich material for reflection and learning.

If I think back to the outdoor education experiences of my youth, which admittedly were few, these were substantial periods of time with classmates in natural spaces, to interact with both my peers and nature. They were low-tech experiences, but high on personal responsibility; low on adrenaline but high on adventure. These experiences coloured my view of what constitutes good outdoor education. Providing holistic learning experiences is still the hallmark of best practice in outdoor education. But is this reflected in contemporary outdoor education or are there factors that serve to disconnect programs from this “holistic best practice”.

NB: this research is New Zealand based and as such will be reflective of practices in NZ and has conclusions that may or may not be relevant elsewhere.

There are several assumptions above that ought to be explored first:
Outdoor education is a broad term and the New Zealand Ministry of Education defines it as: "Education *in* the outdoors, *for* the outdoors, and *about* the outdoors:

**Education in the outdoors* is 'the use of the natural environment in the educative process using direct experiences as the teaching medium for any curriculum domain' (Hammerman et al, cited in Boyes, 2000).

**Education for the outdoors* involves developing 'the skills, attitudes and appreciations necessary for intelligent and safe use of the outdoors' (Smith et al, cited in Boyes, 2000).

**Education about the outdoors* focuses 'on the interrelationship of the human being and the natural resources upon which societies depend, with the goal of stewardship in mind' (American Council on Outdoor Education, cited in Boyes, 2000)." (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Holistic outdoor education experiences then would presumably consist of an integration of these three component parts. That is, education "in" *and* "about" *and* "for" the environment. The best outdoor education could be expected to reflect all these elements in a program that was designed to address each.

Holistic learning has long been a hallmark of NZ outdoor education. Pip Lynch's (2003) investigation into the origins of outdoor education in New Zealand offers many examples that infer the experiences were used as a means of developing the whole child, "enhancing social development and recreational interests" (p. 77). Outdoor education was seen by its proponents "as a means of enhancing the full development of pupils" (p. 75) and on this basis it was introduced into primary schools. In the secondary schools outdoor activities such as guiding, scouting, camping, tramping and bushcraft "were to be 'vigorously encouraged' for their physical, moral and social values" (p. 65).

A quote cited by Lynch captures the integrated nature of these experiences: *"Children learn to live together, to keep themselves clean and healthy; it teaches them to love Nature and the open country. It gives the teacher the opportunity of becoming better acquainted with the child.* (*Anon*, 1939, p58)." ('G.S.', 1941,p7; cited by Lynch,2003).

Outdoor education is a broad field and encompasses much of the learning that relates "to" and "in" the outdoors. Priest (1990) records that outdoor education has been described in many ways and as many things. He provides the following definition:
"Outdoor education is an experiential learning method with the use of all senses. It takes place primarily, but not exclusively, through exposure to the natural environment. In outdoor education the emphasis is placed on relationships concerning people and natural resources"(Priest, 1990). Outdoor education has historically comprised of two branches: environmental education and adventure education and Priest and Gass (1997) again

reinforce that “the product of most adventure programs are people who understand themselves more fully and relate to others more effectively”, suggesting that environmental relationships may be a secondary aim. So two fundamental aims emerge from literature- enhancing personal development and raising environmental awareness.

Vocational Training

Pip Lynch (2002) found outdoor education in NZ reached its ”zenith in 1989 and has since declined in just as spectacular fashion”. She offered the educational restructuring of the 1980s as one of the reasons for the decline. The market-led economics and user pays philosophy introduced in the 1980s resulted in education relating more directly to industry.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority:
In1990 the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), a Crown Entity, was established to provide an overarching role in quality assured qualifications and to coordinate national qualifications in New Zealand. It works in partnership with all education providers and national groups representing education and training in industry and business. However the Authority does not deal with the school curriculum (NZQA, 2004).

The interviews showed consensual agreement amongst post-primary educators on the impact on outdoor programs of the introduction of vocational training. The emphasis in outdoor learning became skill training, rather than other aspects of outdoor educations such as relationships between people and with the environment.

NZQA qualifications are made up of individual “Unit Standards”, small packages of learning outcomes and performance criteria. Examining the unit outcomes and assessments, one is left with an impression of a very narrow projection of outdoor education. There is an almost linear focus on skill acquisition, over other potential objectives, and any integration of learning about relationships between people and with nature are not apparent.

With the introduction of unit standards in schools came government funding targeted at vocational training. Note, training was the emphasis of unit standards, and implies learning packaged and delivered in a very different form from holistic education.
The NZ Ministry of Education cites experiential learning as “an excellent way of engaging students in the EOTC safety process” (Ministry of Education, 1999). But is this really compatible with training? Or is a more didactic style of delivery the norm in much of outdoor training.

There is certainly opinion that supports this. Wurdinger (1994) indicated that many adventure-based programs offer nothing more than a range of physical activities and erroneously claim that this is experiential learning, a view also supported by Hovelynk (2000a,2000b). (Cited in Leberman and Martin, 2002/2003). Is, as Hovelynck (2001)

suggests, adventure education increasingly adopting the didactic teaching methods that it set out to be an alternative for?

The nature of unit standards does nothing to encourage either experiential learning or holistic approaches to outdoor education and I would contend serves to disconnect outdoor education from the outcomes and teaching approaches that lie at its heart.

Experiential learning and outdoor education have at their core the aim of individual growth through reflection and there is much support for the basis of this reflection being problem solving activities and challenging experiences (Gass,1993); Luckner & Nadler, 1997; Nadler, 1995; Nadler & Luckner, 1992). So these outdoor experiences are tools for effecting change, but vocational training means the outdoor pursuit skills can be treated as an end in themselves.

Vocational training and personal development are not exclusive of each other, but there is nothing to encourage the development or active facilitation of the latter, so it is easy to see how this could become peripheral to simply learning the technical skills of "pursuiting".

The perception amongst individuals interviewed was, that their outdoor program is now "more structured, analytical and theoretical". Much of the flexibility in delivery and content and the program spontaneity has given way to structure and the acquisition of qualification units. Suggesting that social and personal development now happens secondary to learning outdoor pursuit skills, rather than being a targeted program aim.
"In the past I was able to use pursuits as a tool to achieve personal and group development aims and target individual needs, whereas currently the central program focus is on collecting unit standards".
"Much more logbook work and consequently much less interaction with others"
"I used to be better able to target class needs, but now our program is driven by the unit standards"
"Our outdoor education program looks better on paper now and is better resourced, but personal and social development run a distant second to qualifications"

The funding schools could access under the Government funded STAR scheme is an obvious incentive to schools and training institutions to offer unit standards. One teacher claimed $2000 was contributed by the school toward its outdoor education program while $38 000 was accessed through STAR funding. Other schools too were reliant on the funding that accompanied vocational training. "If STAR funding stopped our program would fold". But while the introduction of unit standards and vocational funding has done much to make outdoor education a viable teaching subject offered in schools, it appears to undermine that outdoor education.

Many comments centred on the prescribed nature of vocational training. "There is not always an appropriate activity at the level I want, I have to do the same thing, in a similar way to everyone else… Many of the activities we did are not catered for by NZQA and they have been dropped". "Unit standards have narrowed our program. It doesn't have

the broad base of experiences anymore, that I think are very important for our students". So again, while valuable experiences such as solos are not incompatible with a programme including unit standards, it draws no funding, and as such is less likely to happen.

As commented by one of the program administrators, "Unless the subject resulted in some sort of qualification or unit standards could be collected toward a career in the outdoors the subject was discontinued". There is a danger in schools being driven by the units and funding and losing sight of the big picture of what outdoor education strives to achieve.

National Certificate of Educational Achievement:
In 2002 NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) level 1 replaced School Certificate. Level 2 was introduced in 2003 and level 3 in 2004, replacing University Bursaries. NCEA is New Zealand's national qualification for senior secondary students. NCEA is part of the National Qualifications Framework and provides a pathway to tertiary education and workplace training. It offers several outdoor pursuit modules within the Health and Physical Education curriculum (Outdoor education is one of seven key learning areas in the Health and Physical Education curriculum) (Ministry of Education, 2004).

In the transition to schools using NCEA modules it appears that outdoor education suffered. Several teachers commented on the "impracticality" of adopting the NCEA modules for outdoor pursuits as they were first written. Sports were better catered for "written in a more user friendly way" at the inception of the NCEA and so in several cases were adopted in place of pursuit modules. "When NCEA was first introduced it did not cater well for outdoor education so we dropped the outdoor components from our physed. program and replaced them with sports modules such as squash"

Although at levels 1 and 2 it has minimal provision for outdoor pursuit activities, at level 3 under physical education it caters for the skills of sea kayaking, white water kayaking, rock climbing, board sailing and scuba diving (Ministry of Education, 2004). Students are assessed demonstrating performance in a physical activity against nationally developed performance standards. Again, qualification acquisition is the emphasis of NCEA delivery and outdoor education has become the narrow delivery of outdoor pursuit skills. The holistic learning experience, so often associated with outdoor education, is not visibly promoted.

Health and safety compliance

One of the key changes most keenly felt by schools has been the introduction of the Health and Safety Act, 1992 (HSE Act). Under this and the Health and Safety Regulations 1995, boards have obligations as employers to the health and safety of employees, students and other visitors to the school (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Boards of Trustees and teachers have always been required to provide a duty of care for pupils. They could be prosecuted for negligence or criminal nuisance under the Crimes Act 1961, and under the Education Act 1989 they are required to maintain certain health and safety standards (Ministry of Education, 2002).

So when in 1992 the Health and Safety in Employment Act (HSE act) was introduced, according to several of the schools little changed on the ground with regard to outdoor education. Some schools developed systems and processes to comply with the legislation and others carried on much as they had before the Act.

In 1999 there was a double drowning on a school trip in the Pirongia Valley. The subsequent investigation and speculation made several schools "sit up and take notice" and was in many ways a catalyst for change. "Seeing Boards of Trustees being scrutinised made us acutely aware of our own vulnerability and we brought our administration up to speed" As well as this the Education Review Office (ERO) set about auditing schools for health and safety compliance. Schools had either by then put in place the appropriate processes and these schools continued with their outdoor programs, or they did not "pass" the audit.

Anecdotal evidence is strong that a number of schools were not able to adapt to the changes and outdoor education programs ended at some schools. There was a significant workload putting in place the appropriate compliance systems, policies and administration and for a significant number of schools this proved an insurmountable barrier. "Booking for many of the facilities we used, that had often been difficult in the past through demand with other schools were no longer a problem. The other programs had been canned".

Robyn Zinc (2003) also suggests the continuing focus on safety and risk management may be contributing to schools withdrawing from outdoor education due to compliance costs and concerns with liability.

Some of those that did meet the compliance did so with an over zealous focus on the policies to ensure safety rather than the good judgement and experience of teachers. " Ratios were set for all activities we ran. I canned my surf life-saving module when the ratio determined as safe for beach based activities (1adult: 4 students), simply became prohibitive"

Others have highlighted the emphasis on outdoor pursuits. Robyn Zinc (2003) suggests pursuits in outdoor education are privileged over other forms of outdoor education but does not mention vocational training and qualifications among the reasons. She does however identify the discourse on risk, driven to a large extent by HSE act legislation, as keeping risky activities in focus.

If outdoor pursuits skills are being taught to the exclusion of other aspects of outdoor education then schools need to be cautious. research indicates that activities, which participants identified pushed them out of their comfort zones, may not necessarily be the

activities that result in peak learning experiences (Leberman & Martin, 2002/2003). While it was mainly physical activities that pushed the boundaries of comfort, "a range of social, creative, and reflection activities that produced the most learning".

The cost of compliance, and difficulty maintaining teaching staff with the requisite qualifications and experience for delivering outdoor pursuit training has led to an increase in contracting out such "outdoor education" to private training establishments (PTEs). Several of those interviewed admitted that such a strategy reduced the focus on "personal development and social awareness" and contributed to narrow training specific outcomes. PTE providers don't have the depth of knowledge about individuals, their history, and perhaps don't have the same motivation to develop this aspect of students.

There is strong anecdotal evidence for a trend toward programs that are shorter, closer to school and entail individualistic activities. This contrasts with theory and research that supports the value of longer, committing, group experiences, in wilderness. Much of the research in adventure education is outcome focused rather than process focussed and so, much of our practice is grounded in assumptions (McKenzie, 2000), but though our understanding my be incomplete, theory does support certain characteristics of programs design. The use of an unfamiliar physical environment has been supported by several theorists (Kimball & Bacon, 1993; Nadler, 1993; Walsh & Golins, 1976). Walsh and Golins (1976) suggest that new perspectives can be gained on peoples current situation from the contrast provided by an unfamiliar setting. Nadler (1993) identified the value in a "constructive level of anxiety" caused by an unfamiliar environment. Kimball and Bacon (1993) also credit an unfamiliar environment with providing participants with "the freedom to experiment with new psychological strategies or a fresh sense of identity" (cited in McKenzie, 2000).

Clearly a wilderness setting would provide an unfamiliar physical environment for most participants. It will also likely provide a different level of comfort/discomfort. The wilderness is a setting that suitably is different on all sense levels. It will look different to participants, it will smell different, there will be different sounds, perhaps new sounds, It will generally be rich in textures that will be new and different and there may even be the opportunity to eat or taste new things directly from the environment. All of the senses can potentially be stimulated to identify the wilderness as an unfamiliar environment.

In a 10-year study of the psychological benefits of wilderness experiences conducted by Stephen Kaplan and Janet Talbot (1983), it was found that there were identifiable benefits of wilderness experiences that relate directly to the environment itself: An increased awareness of a connectedness to the environment, an increased sense of self-confidence, inner peace and decreased need for external control, and spiritual contemplation.

Wilderness imposes strict rules on those visiting with sometimes-harsh consequences for those that flout them. The consequences are real- boots left out will freeze, poorly pitched tents will leak, a body not well fed and watered will flag. These natural consequences are thought to encourage self-awareness and self responsibility (Walsh & Golins, 1976). Another advantage is that the "rules" and consequences that wilderness imposes are

unlikely to be deemed unfair or inappropriate by participants (Kimball & Bacon, 1976). In fact the clarity of the tasks required of participants in wilderness environments are likely to encourage mastery (Walsh & Golins, 1976) and ultimately to improved self-concept (Nadler, 1993).

There is clear support for wilderness as a valuable tool for promoting key aims of outdoor education. If schools are conducting outdoor education experiences closer to schools and for shorter lengths of time, as a result of difficulties meeting compliance requirements, this value tool may be lost.

Conclusion

Though outdoor education has retained (and in many ways strengthened) its place in schools despite the changes of the last decade, its sense of purpose today is less clear.

While most if not all programs have personal development and environmental awareness as objectives, these are often secondary to vocational training objectives. Any development that does take place in these areas appears to happen despite these developments not because of them and in many ways they have acted to counter these traditional outdoor education aims. Training in outdoor pursuits competence is a valid goal toward a career in outdoor recreation, but there must be due emphasis applied to the development of the whole student, not simply the acquisition of technical skills, and in many schools this appears to be compromised.

Health and safety compliance, while without doubt necessary, has served to reduce the overall amount of outdoor education being offered. The privileging of outdoor pursuits over other forms of outdoor education may in part be due the risk discourse (driven by health and safety concerns) keeping risk activities sharply in focus. Health and safety compliance appears also to have resulted in less outdoor education in wilderness environments and shorter experiences away from school.

While structures and funding for skill training in outdoor pursuits is easy to find, the same cannot be said of personal development, leaning about relationships, and environmental understanding and connection. It is easy to see how this “other stuff” can be overlooked, under valued, or compromised in the light of both health and safety compliance and the vocational focus. If the outdoor units being offered are considered as the blocks of learning, then the personal development- the inter-personal skills, the self knowledge, the environmental appreciation and awareness- these things are the “mortar” that binds those blocks of learning together and is the essence of holistic education. The challenge remains to ensure the structure of outdoor education actively encourages the development of this mortar, rather than hoping it happens as a matter of course.

The teachers interviewed were those that headed successful programs and had weathered the changes. Whether their views represent a reflection of mainstream outdoor education in NZ or not is speculation. Anecdotally many programs have faltered and folded as these

changes have impacted on them and these were not investigated. There is little data available as to the range of activities schools offer in their programmes and if or how these programmes may have changed with time. There is rich material here for further research.

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