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DEVELOPING LIFE SKILLS THROUGH ADVENTURE EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Historically, adventure education research has focused on program outcomes. What do participants gain from these experiences? The volume of outcome studies with significant findings leaves the reader with the distinct impression that something is happening during many adventure education programs. However, how and why this growth or development occurs is not well understood. For more than a decade, adventure education researchers have been calling for more research on the process of adventure education (Ewert, 1989; Henderson & Fox, 1994; Klint, 1990; Warner, 1990). While some research has attempted to focus on the process (e.g., Bisson, 1998; Priest & Gass, 1997), the majority of the research has remained focused on descriptive studies and outcome research.

In an attempt to understand the process of learning during a longer duration adventure education program, students in Broadreach were interviewed after participating in a three week long sail and dive-training program. In addition to sail and dive training, the Broadreach program focuses on leadership and personal development through experiential methodology.

METHODS

Qualitative methodology is becoming increasingly popular in the education field. One of the strengths of qualitative research is its ability to richly describe holistic processes that are difficult to attack with current quantitative methods; another strength is its capacity for exploratory research and theory development (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These strengths made qualitative research the method of choice for the study of the participant's perspective of the adventure education process.

Consistent with qualitative methodology, this study was based upon a conceptual framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This frame-

work is a hypothetical model of the adventure education process relevant to Broadreach programs and was created through a review of existing adventure education models (e.g., Luckner & Nadler, 1997; Walsh & Golins, 1975) and collaboration with the senior Broadreach staff. The conceptual framework is broken into three parts: the inputs, the process, and the outcomes. The inputs are what participants bring into the program, their individual differences. The outcomes include what the students take with them from the program. The process, which is the focus of this study, is how the participants, with their individual differences, evolve during the course of the adventure program.

During the summer of 1998, 18 student participants in Broadreach adventure programs were selected and interviewed. The students were chosen to ensure a variety of ages and a diversity of experiences and personalities were included in the sample population. In an effort to understand how and why learning occurred, structured questions were generated along two themes: (1) the type of learning that occurs on longer duration adventure education program, (2) how this learning happened. Questions were crafted in a method consistent with Spradley (1979). Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded by thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS

Several clear themes emerged including a) most of the participants learn best by doing, b) a great deal of learning comes from modeling, watching both staff and the other participants, c) the physical space of the boat added the necessity of conflict resolution, which became a valuable learning experience, d) the students felt a sense of accomplishment from completing tasks necessary for their existence, e) having to live

with all strangers for three weeks on a boat was both the most difficult and most educational aspect of the program. The general conclusion was that these students learned how to deal with, tolerate, and respect others out of necessity. These skills are generally termed life skills.

DISCUSSION

Maybe adventure research has been looking at the wrong outcomes? Emphasis has been on making the connection between climbing the mountain and success in life (through metaphor), or in building self-esteem (or another global construct) through climbing the mountain. Since self-esteem is a global measure, transfer is generally "assumed." Instead, perhaps, the most important learning comes from the social interaction and the efficacy developed in dealing with the necessary living tasks inherent in adventure settings. These "tasks" and the isolation become authentic through the adventure experience and create an effective microcosm for practicing valuable life skills. Thus, the hard-skills may be crucial, but not central, to the learning in adventure education.

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