Therapeutic Wilderness Programming

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Introduction

The wilderness environment has long served as a source of spiritual inspiration (Frederickson & Anderson, 1999; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992). Previous research has studied the spirituality of the wilderness experience and found participants to gain heightened levels of spiritual awareness: with self, God, interconnectedness within the natural world, and openness to possibility (Daniel, 2007). Furthermore, researchers have contended that the wilderness environment promotes a natural place for healing and change (Todesco, 2003).

This paper summarizes my research thesis, completed as partial requirement for a Masters of Arts (MA) in Child and Youth Care (CYC), University of Victoria. By way of a case study research design, my thesis sought to answer the question: What are the effects on youth participants of a holistic wilderness camping program that provides youth with an urban component in addition to wilderness out tripping? The Leaders-in Training (LIT) program at Project C.A.N.O.E. (Creative and Natural Outdoor Experience – www.canoe.org) served as the basis for this research. C.A.N.O.E is a registered charity and accredited member with the Ontario Camping Association that provides wilderness canoe trips for youth. This research was described as holistic because facilitators actively engaged participants with activities aimed to increase awareness and understanding of self through a connection with others, and within the wilderness and urban environments that the program operated in. The purpose of the study was to evaluate whether youth participants would benefit from being involved with the program on a year-round basis. Rooted in experiential learning, the group consisted of a 22-day canoe trip followed by a four-month urban follow-up period. Interpretational analysis of semi-structured interviews with the participants found emergent themes in two specific areas: Feedback on Program Structure, and Effect of Program on Youth Participants. The results of this study are encouraging for proponents of year-round wilderness programming.

Overview of research literature

There is a growing body of research dedicated to examining the effects of therapeutic wilderness programming with youth (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Schroder, 1996; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992). In North America, the role of wilderness as a therapeutic agent for positive change in human lives was first documented in the early 1900s (Caplan, 1974). Increasingly, this role of the wilderness is emerging across several helping disciplines with reference to several reasons for incorporating the wilderness into programming: improvements in medical treatment of disease; creation of empathy in offender rehabilitation; improved personal and group development; and increased capacity to cope with various emotional, psychological and behavioural problems (Ungar, 2003; Ungar, M., Dumond, C., & McDonald, W., 2005; Russell, 2005, 2002; Lambie, I., Robson, M., & Simmonds, L., 1997; Milner D, & Nisbit, J., 1997). Specifically, Ungar (2003) has argued that "outdoor experience-based programming (OEP) contributes best to healthy outcomes in at-risk populations when programming provides participants an appreciation for the complexity and challenges they face living in the familiar environments they call home" (p. 18) The emphasis of my research has focused primarily on the role of the wilderness and experiential learning as part of a holistic, year-round group process that included activities, support and exercises based in the urban home environment that aimed to build pro-social behaviours, which was outlined as an objective of the LIT program's mandate.

Working with youth in the wilderness is generally viewed as positive (Grey, 1979; Marsh, 1999). However, few studies have researched the impact of such programs for these participants following program completion. Researchers and practitioners are left to question the overall effectiveness of such programs when little consideration is given to the strikingly different characteristics of environment: where programs take place versus where participants live. Viewing the person as separate from the environments where this program took place risked adopting a traditionally Western view of person-in-environment that views the person largely as the main subject and the environment as merely context. The challenge became to incorporate a more spiritually-entwined understanding of the environment. Kim Zapf (2005) has advocated for a view

of person *with* or *as* environment using the notion of wellness: "living in full partnership with a living conscious environment that sustains us and towards which we have powerful and respectful obligations for mutual survival" (p. 6). My research aimed to help address the question of overall effectiveness by incorporating a follow-up urban program after the wilderness experience, which could link the characteristics of the environment in both urban and wilderness locations so that they could be more easily viewed as one canvas for positive change. This extended the research of key studies, which had incorporated a follow-up period absent of programming following a wilderness experience (Neill & Dias, 2003; Garst, Scheider & Baker, 2003).

Brief overview of the program

Our summer program consisted of a 22-day canoe trip based on the traditional wilderness outtripping model at Project C.A.N.O.E. Six male participants (age range 15-18) and two leaders (one male and one female) paddled and portaged everything required to live (food and supplies) amidst typical seasonal conditions in the Temagami region of Northeastern Ontario. The trip utilized one access point at the mid-point of the trip to restock provisions and to provide an emergency evacuation point. The program operated on a balance of hard and soft skill development. Hard skills consisted of routine physical tasks associated with wilderness travel (canoeing, portaging, cooking, etc.). Soft skills refer to the development of basic listening, conflict resolution, self-awareness, group cohesion, and diversity training. Following the wilderness component participants took part in three focus events designed to recreate aspects of the wilderness experience in an urban locale and sustain contact between the organization and its participants: a team charity relay, a day trip spent mountain biking north of the Toronto, and the participation in a first aid certification course. In addition to these focal points, participants had bi-weekly contact, in the city, with one of the facilitators from the summer wilderness experience.

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Overview of Research Findings

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Ideas for program structure

The following is a brief discussion surrounding what was found to be beneficial about this program. For example, participants reported enjoying the influence and

ownership associated with the decision-making process of the group throughout the program experience. One participant stated, 'here you have a say in everything you do'. Similarly, another participant reported, 'if I didn't want to take the first aid trip, I didn't have to. They weren't going to force me'. Participants indicated that having ownership in the program's structure contributed to a positive affiliation with this type of wilderness program as compared to earlier experiences in a residential camp setting. Similarly, in the urban follow-up to the wilderness experience, participants were responsible for planning the activities that they themselves would later participate in. And it was the decision of the participants to take part in the certifications available. These results imply, for these participants, that control, influence and ownership positively impacted their sense of self and developing independence as young adults.

Additionally, participants stated that opportunities for personal space and reflection also positively contributed to the structure of the LIT program. One participant described their solo experience, whereby participants were dropped off close to the main campsite but seemingly alone with minimal provisions for a designated period of time: 'it's always good to sit down, away from everybody else and just think for yourself and not let other people's thought processing affect yourself'. A second participant recounted that 'back in the city, you don't really have time to stop and think about things'. A third participant said, 'at camp you actually have that time to sit down and think: how is this affecting my life? How could I change it and do I want to change it? Will it benefit me?' This finding implies that the space created for participants through this program seemed to impact the readiness and ability of the participants to engage in meaningful questioning of their own change processes.

Overwhelmingly, participants reported having fun during the program. They indicated an enjoyable experience that was not restricted to one aspect of the program. Participants, instead, pointed to the spontaneity of various games and team-building exercises during the canoe trip as well as more traditional components to wilderness programming such as route planning and food preparation, as sources of their enjoyment. Additionally, participants commonly referred to the role modeling, and positive attitude displayed by staff members during the facilitation of these activities. This link helps to describe the criticalness of appropriate staffing for these participants. Existing wilderness

research in this area has equated low staff-camper ratios with overall program effectiveness (Wetzel, McNaboe, & McNaboe, 1995). Indeed, goals of this program suggested ratios as being important, including "providing each camper with individual support and attention" (Heinz-Ziliotto, 2004, p. 29).

Finally, participants articulated a strong sense of the wilderness environment by describing what they had seen or by contrasting their experience with what they know from life in the city. Both ideas were expressed by one participant: 'we were sitting there and the water was so calm; I've never seen it so calm in my life – you're just like, wow…it wasn't the city. It was a place other than the city where you didn't have to think about the city. It brought you to another place'. This comment lends itself to observing how this participant saw himself or how he viewed his place in the world. Throughout the interviews, participants reported rich descriptions of both wilderness and urban locations to help describe their experience. This finding may also represent a link to sense of place theory, which suggests a strongly unique and personal response to the environment that contributes to a cultural identity (Hay, 1992; Raffan, 1992; Tuan, 1974). Additionally, this result describes a link to the importance of setting in therapeutic wilderness programming. Studies looking at the importance of setting have been linked to youth resilience (Ungar, 2003). Deep ecology underpins much of this work: a philosophy (ecosophy) that argues against a hierarchal view of humankind over the environment. Special care should be made to create urban experiences that serve to complement the novel, unique and powerful wilderness experiences attained away from the city.

Effects on the participants

The following discussion explores the effects that imply meaningful gains for participants partaking in this program: self-awareness, coping with adversity, self-reliance, and skill transference. Self-awareness was conceptualized by the participants in their ability to describe themselves as a member of the group and how they have been impacted by the program. One participant stated, 'before I came here it was just my way – everything goes – but now I tell people that I'm more of a communicative person and it has a lot to do with camp cause you're stuck with a bunch of kids, right? That's all you gotta do is you gotta work it out'.

Another effect noted by the participants was their ability to cope with adversity, most commonly depicted by environmental factors such as inclement weather or bugs, and the unfavorable actions of group members during the trip. Participants articulated the individual process of coping with adversity. One participant explained that 'you can't dwell on it. You have to look past it and look for positives. There are those days but camp wouldn't be camp without those days'. Correspondingly, another participant stated how he chose to reframe the previous day's events: 'I'd write it down somewhere so that I knew that it did happen. The next day I just woke up and said it was like a fresh sheet of paper'.

Other coping strategies pointed towards the theme of self-reliance. Some participants recounted an awareness of completing the program as an inner goal related to both physical and mental strength. One participant explained that 'there were a bunch of times I wanted to stop because it was hard but when you're done you felt relieved that you accomplished something big'. Another participant recounted feeling pride after completing a challenging hike during the trip: 'It's a unique accomplishment. I was here. I went camping and I went to the two highest points in Ontario. I didn't even know Ontario had a highest point!' Finally, participants reported the ability to transfer specific skill sets from wilderness to urban environments. Participants pointed specifically to cooking, communication with others, and the incorporation of routine into their daily lives as examples of skills used more often back in the city. The effects described by participants imply that meaningful gains were made through their participation in this program.

Finally, these findings may support previous research by Ewert and McAvoy (2000) and Ungar (2003), which called for the further study of wilderness programs that focus on transferring skills from wilderness to urban contexts: "programming for at-risk children and youth that seeks to bolster their ability to cope with adversity would be more effective, based on the reasoning of deep ecologists, if nature is more than just a backdrop". More research is required with a larger sample to determine rates of transferences and other potentially helpful skills in the wilderness that may be of value to participants back home, as well as the role of environment in the scope of wilderness programming for youth. However, this research does imply that participants benefit from

the program's ability to connect with participants in both a wilderness and urban environment. This was evidenced in the participants' responses to the program and to their ability to gain certification, which has enabled them to apply to continue in the organization as an intern (staff member in training).

Conclusion

This paper summarized the impact on youth participants of a year-round wilderness camping program. It addressed the research question: What are the effects on youth participants of a holistic therapeutic wilderness camping program that provides youth with an urban component in addition to wilderness out tripping? This study was also interested in evaluating whether youth participants would benefit from being involved with the program on a year-round basis. Our findings suggest that year round programming is beneficial for youth participants as expressed by the program's participants. Accordingly, the program at Project C.A.N.O.E has continued to further implement and improve its grassroots approach to maintaining contact with its clientele throughout the traditional 'off-season'. The year round program has broadened to focus not only the LIT participants but younger youth also, through events held regularly in the city designed to engage participants on a year-round basis. Camper retention may provide another indication of overall program effectiveness.

Upon further reflection following the completion of this research, it remains abundantly clear that the wilderness experience can provide a spiritual context for individuals to explore questions about self and their place in the world. Indeed, for many people, being in nature is described as a spiritual experience, or somewhere they go to nurture their spirit and/or sustain themselves and their work. One needs only to remember the voices of participants recalling solo experiences, whereby each was left in perceived isolation on an island for an entire day with minimal food. The stories afterwards combined questions, and answers, of purpose, self-reliance and resolve.

The challenge remains then to be mindful of our understanding of the wilderness as an environmental context completely independent and isolated from the lives we live away from the outdoor experience. Often people have what they describe as "powerful" experiences. Incorporating spirituality may help process these experiences more fully and replicating the unique, novel, and spiritual wilderness experience in urban

environments may work to lessen the isolation an individual could experience if the program has assigned wilderness the role of backdrop instead of active partner in a holistic process. People, who facilitate experiences for others such as the program described herein, should be encouraged to be conscious of spirituality and to recognize how spiritual themes and experiences can occur. Facilitators need to demonstrate tangible connections that the air we breathe in school and in a canoe is the same, and that that the weed in the sidewalk is connected to old growth forests in Temagami.

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