The Power to Be Way: Fostering Healthy Relationships with Oneself, Nature and Community through Outdoor Experiential Education

by

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ABSTRACT

Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society (PTB) was founded in 1999 and is located in Victoria. Interviews were conducted with staff members of the PTB Wilderness School to identify its core components and unique characteristics. Staff members identified several themes that define the PTB Wilderness School: active youth participation; committed staff members; a focus on healthy relationships and pro-social behaviour; community-based programming; voluntary participation; the creation of a safe place to express oneself; the length and mobility of the program; and, reconnecting or building a relationship with the natural environment.

Recommendations emerged from the research relating to the following topics: ongoing development of recruitment process; group cohesion; youth leadership; cultural programming; consistency with program objectives; accreditation of the Wilderness School; securing a permanent base camp; professional development; evaluation; parent involvement; and, donor involvement. The Power to Be Wilderness School continues on its evolutionary journey, absorbing and building upon its successes and morphing into a more effective model.
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INTRODUCTION

The sacredness of land is first and foremost an emotional experience. It is that feeling of unity with a place that is complete, whatever the feelings it may engender in an individual～ Vine Deloria Jr., 1991 (2002, p. 1)

I am a spiritual person and I replenish my soul by waking to the song of birds, exploring the woods, playing in the rivers and being lulled to sleep by the sound of waves crashing on the shore. Away from the natural world, my spirit becomes stagnant. Living, teaching and learning in the outdoor environment gives me the opportunity to receive lessons from the surrounding natural world.

Outdoor experiential education (OEE) encourages the development of interpersonal skills and interactive group processes. Leaders facilitate these experiences and also expose students to the natural world, a world that is sometimes foreign and yet fascinating. Students can gain a new understanding about the interconnectedness of life and their place within the ecosystem. Fostering connections with one’s environment can lead to a balance in one’s life mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally as identified by the medicine wheel (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane Jr., 1984, p. 29).

The outdoor environment provides opportunities to develop a new awareness and to observe and learn from the lessons and opportunities that unfold. I go to the land to nourish and heal my spirit, to contemplate and to make decisions. I believe that the outdoor classroom is the opportune space for teaching and learning life lessons. The literature review examines the following topics: outdoor experiential education; outdoor
experiential education in Canada; transformative learning; Indigenous and holistic education; reconnecting with nature; and ecopsychology.

Situating Myself within the Research

As I situate myself within this research project, I enter it with the lens of a witness…a witness to the potential for transformative learning experiences through outdoor experiential education. I enter as someone who truly believes in the power of experiential education and in the transformative learning experiences that it can offer to people. I passionately believe and advocate for these types of learning experiences, especially for youth as they move through stages of exploration, growth and transition.

My hope is to document and bring to light, the unique characteristics of outdoor experiential education. Furthermore, I intend to bring greater credence to the work to which many dedicated educators across Canada commit their time and energy.

My own experience in OEE started as a child when I travelled through the wilderness in canoes, on skis and by the force of the wind in sails. This early passion was further explored through my undergrad studies in outdoor recreation and sciences at Lakehead University. As a practitioner of OEE, I guided sea kayaking expeditions on the Bay of Fundy, taught outdoor leadership courses throughout New Brunswick, guided whitewater rafting in Ontario and British Columbia, facilitated adaptive recreation for people with disabilities (Ontario March of Dimes camp and the Whistler Adaptive Ski program), guided outdoor experiential expeditions at a private school and worked as the program coordinator at Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society from 2004 until 2007.
Simultaneously, my brother, Tim Cormode, explored similar paths working in the fields of social work, adaptive recreation and rehabilitation, and pursued training in outdoor leadership. Tim founded Power to Be in 1999 with Andrew Woodford, initially to serve people recovering from head injuries. Over the years, the organization has evolved into two distinct programs, the Wilderness School and the Adaptive Recreation Program.

It has been a great honour for me to witness and participate in the evolution of these programs. I am continually awed by the power of these unique learning situations and hope that one day, all youth will have the opportunity to experience these kinds of adventures.

Research Location

Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society (PTB) was founded in 1999 and received charitable status in 2002. PTB initially began by providing outdoor experiences for people living with disabilities. Over the years, other programs have been developed based upon community needs and community partnerships. There are currently three main programs offered: the Wilderness School for vulnerable youth; the adaptive recreation program for people living with disabilities (in both Victoria and Vancouver); and the wilderness expedition for youth living with cancer (collaborative program with the BC Children’s Hospital). PTB defines their values and culture using the following terms: collaboration and teamwork; leadership; communication; social responsibility;
environmental responsibility; experiential education; inclusiveness; trust; and innovation (Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society, 2008).

The organization is governed by a Board of Directors and has several advisory boards that provide support for fundraising and programming. Currently, private donors and corporate donations fund the majority of the organization’s expenses (administration, programming, staffing, etc.). The organization receives minimal funding from the provincial government.

**Purpose of Research**

The main research question is: what are the core components and unique characteristics of the Wilderness School program at the Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society, related specifically to curriculum, teaching pedagogy, and the learning environment?

**Rationale and Significance of Research Project**

Ross (1988) elaborates on the need for relevant research in education:

The function of the curriculum critic…is to describe the essential qualities of phenomenon studied, to interpret the meanings of and relationships among those qualities, and to provide reasoned judgments about the significance and value of the phenomenon. (p. 162)
Through this research process, staff played an integral role in identifying key factors and unique characteristics of the PTB Wilderness School.

This research project provides a “snapshot” in time of the development and evolution of the PTB Wilderness School. There are multiple stakeholders at PTB: youth, parents, families, staff, volunteers, board members and donors. This project provides an accurate account of the current program and offers recommendations based upon the responses of those who continue to monitor the pulse of the program on a daily basis, namely, the staff of the Wilderness School.
“Adopt the pace of nature. Her secret is patience. ~ Ralph Waldo Emmerson.”

(Canadian Outward Bound Wilderness School, 1982)

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Outdoor Experiential Education

Outdoor experiential education is rarely included as part of the curriculum in the mainstream Eurocentric education system. Fox (1995) eloquently explains:

…and so we focus on what seems to be the area of deficiency, namely experience. We put together ‘experiential education’, as though education could have ever been anything else. The irony is that we do indeed seem to have invented a non-experiential sort of education, not by design so much as due to the fact that our whole culture has drifted strongly in a schizoid direction. We have retreated over a period of several centuries from feelings and relationships into individualization and abstract thinking. We are living to an extraordinary degree in our heads rather than our emotions. When experiences get too chaotic, we try to control it by force or manipulation, or we retreat from dealing with it into thinking about it. (p. 99)

This shift of education from our hearts to our heads has taken place in relatively modern times.

The history of OEE has its roots in numerous fields of study. Kraft (1995) discusses some of the philosophical foundations for experiential education and examines the practices and beliefs of various philosophers and educators such as: Plato and Aristotle; Descartes and Locke; John Stuart Mill; Peirce and James;
John Dewey; Mao Tse-Tsung; Paulo Friere; Robert Pirsig; and, Kurt Hahn. Kraft (1995) quotes Aristotle, “…with a view to action, experience seems in no respect inferior to art, and men of experience succeed even better than those who have theory without experience (Aristotle, 689-690),” (p. 9). Kraft (1995) claims that experiential educators took their cue from Aristotle and criticized the lack of experience for young people “…who spend thirteen to twenty or more years in a formal school setting mastering theories which are often unrelated to the ‘real’ world for which that education is supposedly preparing them,” (p. 10). This perception of theory versus experience exemplifies my own attitude towards both education and research.

Kraft (1995) also examines Friere’s educational philosophy and how:

…it brings again to the forefront of educational thinking the necessity of the cognitive, the rational, the reflective as we find it in traditional, vicarious education as practiced in the schools, while at the same time pointing to the need for active learning outside the classroom, which change the personal and social realities of the learner. (p. 14)

Friere supports a holistic type of education that leads beyond the classroom to social action and justice.

Joe Nolds (1995) refers to the remarkable educator Kurt Hahn, who formed Outward Bound and eventually Round Square, an organization comprised of over fifty schools globally. Hahn developed programs that challenged students mentally and physically and that nurtured resilience, compassion, responsibility and pride. Nolds notes that Hahn developed his unique approach as an educator at a time when, “…above all,
there was a decline in compassion,” (p. 53). He speaks about Hahn’s formative years during World War I and II and of their impact on his life:

Hahn was a Jew and was left, perhaps, with the guilt so many surviving Jews experience. So ‘decline’ was not merely malaise, or mid-life crisis, but was a deeply rooted existential response to his life experience. He viewed the world broodingly, deeply conscious of man’s capacity for evil, a Jew’s sense of sin and guilt – but also of redemption. Indeed Hahn distrusted the intellectual community, seeing how easily they were cowed by Hitler. He was witness to their failure to resist. To him the purpose of education is moral and social. Indeed, with Hahn education is a form of redemption. (p. 53)

Hahn took action to develop programs for youth that would foster their independence, responsibility and invoke social consciousness.

The field of outdoor education has grown tremendously over the years, with various trends emerging within it, ranging from adventure therapy to ecopsychology. Adventure therapy is defined by Priest and Gass (1997) as:

….the branch of outdoor education concerned primarily with interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships…these tasks often involve group problem solving and personal challenge…by responding to seemingly insurmountable tasks, participants often learn to overcome self-imposed perceptions of their capabilities to succeed. They are able to turn limitations into abilities; as a result, they learn a great deal about themselves and how they relate to others. (pp. 17-18)
Many OEE programs incorporate an element of the solo experience in which “...students are intentionally separated from the expedition group for 24-72 hours for the purpose of reflecting on their lives, the lessons they have learned while traveling in the wilderness and the quality of their relationships,” (Bobilya, Kalisch, & McAvoy, 2005, p. 318). Through their research, they found that the solo experience ranks high among program components and has a major impact on program development, life significance, personal learning and growth (Bobilya, et al., 2005). Bobilya et. al. also found the role of the instructor to be critical in preparing students for an effective experience and in debriefing the experience afterwards.

Furthermore, content analysis revealed the following recommendations for instructors:

(a) present a clear rationale to the participants for the solo and any suggested activities, (b) provide activities to assist the participant in effectively utilizing the solo time, (c) assure participants that their experience is unique and to set aside any preconceived expectations, (d) provide optional opportunities for students to talk with instructors during the solo time, and (e) facilitate a group discussion after the solo that encourages the uniqueness of each individual’s experience.

(Bobiliya, et al., 2005, p. 320)

The solo experience provides participants with an opportunity to absorb the lessons that they have learned during the program and further validates their experience.

Watkins discussed her own experience in OEE and touched on lessons about reflection and exploring different perspectives.
Learning to become a whole person requires an openness to all those experiences, and a willingness to reflect honestly and critically on your own responses to those experiences…We begin to see that life is an adventure, not an absolute: that being, becoming, striving to become an open, learning whole person is hard work – sometimes frightening, sometimes confusing, but always an adventure…You faced the challenge and discovered that you could control your own life rather than be controlled by forces outside yourself. (Watkins, 1995, p. 192)

Watkins’ statement reflects the experiences that I have witnessed in some OEE participants who complete programs with a newfound confidence and new understanding of themselves. These experiences can be built upon, especially if participants have continued support once programs are completed.

Watkins touches on a key aspect of OEE programming, the allowance of time for reflection on one’s experience: “To truly learn from one’s experiences, one must reflect on them and be willing to change what does not feel right. It was that reflection that I had not really understood in my floundering attempts to become ‘self-actualized’ or whole,” (Watkins, 1995, p. 194). She suggests the notion of transformative learning when she states: “The message is that no force outside ourselves is the answer. There is no easy way. Whether we start with too rigid or too permissive an environment, we must seek to examine and experience the opposite if we are to become whole persons,” (Watkins, 1995, p. 194). Her words indicate the transformative process that many youth experience as they test and re-shape pre-existing views and values that they have learned through their lived experiences.
OEE gives students an opportunity to discover their skills and talents and to develop them more fully. This mode of learning is often more intrinsic than extrinsic and consequently more valuable to the learner. Kraft (1995) reiterates this point when discussing OEE and states that it is “…also to gain insight into oneself, to approach learning as something intrinsic to the learner and not imposed by external sources,” (p.14). Lessons that we learn intrinsically are personal and not easily evaluated; however, that does not diminish their importance or their unique role in developing self-knowledge.

Ives and Obenchain (2006) measured “higher order thinking skills (HOTS) and lower order thinking skills (LOTS)” (p. 64) and compared pre and post-tests between different classes, including one class in which the curriculum focused on experiential education principles. The authors examined the current state of education in the United States and claim, “…narrowing of the curriculum includes choosing to focus on the recall of basic information over in-depth understanding, as well as focusing primarily on information that teachers believe will be tested,” (p. 63). By contrast, experiential education challenges students to extend their thinking and to gain new learning and a wider understanding of the topic.

Narrowing the curriculum also leads to limited instructional strategies. Teachers choose time-efficient delivery models of instruction (e.g. lecture) over instructional models that promote critical thinking, problem-solving, and inquiry (e.g., experiential education-based models). Studies report that teachers abandon innovative, active, and higher order experiences in favor of rote memorization and drill, believing this is the wise course of action for testing, although not
necessarily for student learning. (Hillocks, 2002; Marchant, 2004; McNeil, 1990; Pennington, 2004)

Cited in (Ives & Obenchain, 2006, p. 63).

The authors identified three essential elements of experiential education (EE) by examining the historical foundations of EE and its current practices. They identified these elements as: opportunities for student-directed learning; connection of the curriculum to real-world situations; and critical reflection (Ives & Obenchain, 2006, p. 65).

Outdoor Experiential Education in Canada

Organizations that teach OEE in Canada frequently share their resources and knowledge. They share a conviction about the importance of OEE and also a vision of how to enhance its role in the lives of the people they serve. For example, the first Canadian adventure therapy symposium was hosted in Victoria on March 8th, 2009 and brought together practitioners from across Canada, as well as from the United States. Those attending came from a variety of fields including, “health, mental health, substance abuse, education, justice and related human service fields,” (Harper, 2009).

After this symposium, one of the facilitators, Lee White, created the Canadian Adventure Therapy Network which is a collective of interested practitioners, students, academics and administrators (Canadian Adventure Therapy Network, 2009). This network continues to expand and is valuable resource for learning and for exchanging information about current OEE programs.
Programs that incorporate OEE are offered at diverse institutes and organizations throughout Canada: schools (private and public); camps; non-profit organizations; private businesses; and, judicial programs. The following section is a review of some organizations offering OEE programs: Boundless Adventures; Outward Bound; Trails Youth Initiatives, and Earthquest Outdoor School. These organizations serve unique audiences and have distinct curricula and learning environments. They vary in structure, location and funding sources.

Boundless Adventures was established in 1984 and received Independent School certification in 2004.

Boundless is dedicated to improving the lives of marginalized youth, adults and children at risk through a unique combination of counselling, social rehabilitation, alternative education and outdoor adventure…our program strives to prevent crime, promote alternatives to drug abuse and strengthen the bonds of families and communities ravaged by poverty, violence and mental illness. (Boundless Adventures, 2009)

Staff members from Boundless Adventures have provided advice and staff training for PTB over the past years and have generously shared their expertise to support the development of the PTB Wilderness School and Adaptive Recreation programs.

Outward Bound (OB) was founded by Kurt Hahn and the first courses were launched in Wales in 1941, challenging and inspiring sailors, students, apprentices and cadets (Outward Bound Canada, 2009). The first OB school was opened in British Columbia in 1969, and there are now schools in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, and the Yukon. In the words of Kurt Hahn, the philosophy remains strong:
I regard it as the foremost task of education to ensure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion. (Outward Bound Canada, 2009)

Earthquest Outdoor School is sponsored by the Vernon School District and was established in 1981 by Barrie Reid (Earthquest Outdoor School, 2009). This five-month program targets students entering grade 11 and provides them with the opportunity to develop self-discipline, confidence and their own abilities. Core activities include mountaineering, whitewater kayaking, rocking climbing and cycling. Students can also elect to participate in surf kayaking, sea kayaking and backpacking. Students are able to receive credit for English 11, Earth Science 11, Fine Arts 11, and Physical Education and Leadership 11 & 12. Applicants to this program need to apply on their own initiative, share their academic report and show a genuine interest and commitment to the program. Students receive credits for participating in this course, validating the potential for accreditation of such courses with the BC Ministry of Education.

As the Power to Be Wilderness School developed, staff consulted with Trails Youth Initiatives (TYI). In many ways, TYI paved the road and inspired PTB to develop their Wilderness School, providing ongoing support and advice. They shared their stories of success with PTB staff, which allowed the Wilderness School to develop in a manner that avoided some of the potential “growing pains.” TYI is a non-profit organization that collaborates with the Toronto Board of Education. Through ongoing collaboration with the school board, they have effectively targeted youth who are most likely to benefit from the program.
The criteria for selection are simple - perhaps best explained by one teacher’s testimony. When asked to identify the kids in her class who she thought would benefit from Trails, the teacher could name the kids at the top for their excellence and she could name the kids at the bottom for their turbulence. She could not remember the names of the kids in the middle. Trails wants those kids who are lost in the middle, the ones not previously identified as either the problems or the superstars. Those invisible kids are the ones that need Trails for they are the ones in danger of falling through the cracks. (Trails Youth Initiatives, 2009)

The program is very accessible to youth living in poverty, costing just $100 per year (TYI will support students in fundraising this amount if they cannot pay).

The motto for the four-year TYI program is: 4 Seasons, 4 Years, 4 Life. The program serves youth aged twelve to sixteen, with an optional fifth year in the Leader-in-Training Programme. TYI was granted private school status in 2001 by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Their curriculum focuses on six program areas: communication and group skills; healthy living; inside-out; outdoor skills; building wings; and service. Long-term tracking of this program demonstrates remarkable success, with 95% of youth completing the entire program, of which 76% go on to pursue post-secondary education (as opposed to 24% of their peers). Youth from the program describe their experience in the following quotes.

…they taught the values of inclusion, acceptance and diversity…

~ Trails Grad 2002 ~
I have obtained many leadership skills and qualities. I use them in my everyday life, with school and around my community. I am seen as a role model in many areas in my life and that makes me feel really good about myself. ~ Trails graduate 2007 ~  (Trails Youth Initiatives, 2009)

Indigenous Education and Holistic Education

There are similarities between OEE and Indigenous ways of knowing, learning and teaching. OEE allows people to learn through hands-on experience and thus it prompts many types of learning, such as cognitive, spiritual and physical. Ningwakwe Priscilla George speaks of an Indigenous approach to teaching that she terms the Medicine Wheel approach. She states that it “…recognizes that holistic, life-long and life-wide approach to literacy is needed,” (Antone, McRae, Provost-Turchetti, & Sinclaire, 2002, p. 14). George discusses the importance of the Medicine Wheel approach as it addresses all four parts of each person: spirit, heart, mind and body. She notes that, “Institutional educational systems have tended to focus on Mind – through cognitive outcomes, and possibly Body – through physical education, and subjects that teach a physical skill,”(Antone, et al., 2002, p. 14). George supports the need for educational practices that also offer opportunities for the development and awareness of spirit and heart. This idea of holistic learning reverberates through Indigenous communities as they continue to redefine education in their own terms using Indigenous epistemology and ontology (Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association, 2009).
Fixico (2003) examines the current state of Eurocentric education and compares cyclical Indigenous ways of thinking with Eurocentric linear thinking. He quotes Russell Means who states:

American education has always seemed much like Christianity to me. It doesn’t deal with reality. Aside from math, which is usually taught with logic, children are mostly taught to memorize the latest theory – a hypothesis based on what the powers have decided is ‘true’ at the moment. Of course, all those theories keep changing. Even the way most subjects are taught is illogical. Why should children be isolated by age group? I think that’s insane. Why are students forced to sit in rows, looking at the backs of people’s heads? America’s educational system robs people of their individuality while training them to accept whatever the authorities dictate. Instead of learning to reason for themselves, children learn to obey – precisely the quality most valued by a society dependent on mass production.

(p. 95)

My personal experiences of learning and teaching within the Eurocentric education system have kindled in me a plethora of thoughts and feelings, ranging from exultation to demoralizing frustration. It seems that the system effectively serves certain types of learners and the focus is primarily cognitive and academic. However, the system fails to give credence to alternative methods of learning that would serve other types of learners. I support an educational system that is more holistic, that would encourage all learners to develop self-knowledge and “life skills”. Learning crucial lessons about oneself helps a person throughout their life. I advocate for a system that is more student-centered and
experiential; thus, allowing students to learn, honour and celebrate their own unique, intrinsic strengths and potential.

Battiste (2000, p. 198) discusses cognitive imperialism and how this impacts the worldview of people educated within the Eurocentric education system.

Cognitive imperialism is a form of cognitive manipulation used to disclaim other knowledge bases and values. Validated through one’s knowledge base and empowered through public education, it has been the means by which whole groups of people have been denied existence and have had their wealth confiscated. Cognitive imperialism denies people their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture and one frame of reference. (Riecken, et al., 2006)

Battiste calls attention to the need for educators to facilitate and encourage students to explore their own cultures and personal worldviews, rather than have them rely on learning from specific curricula and textbooks.

Brown explains the historical sequence of events that led to cognitive imperialism in relation to the medicine wheel teachings.

Aboriginal values represent a relational, affective approach to reality. It is important to understand that when the European male...separated their mind from their heart and, in medicine wheel terms, began the oppression of the heart by the mind that they also separated themselves from their environment. One might argue that this emotional detachment from their lands allowed them to leave their homeland and export their philosophy of oppression throughout the globe. When Europeans became detached from their affective awareness, it enabled them to
avoid the emotional feedback from their exploitation of the world’s peoples and environments. (Brown, 2004, p. 28)

Awareness of connection to one’s environment is an important lesson in OEE programs. The teachings of the medicine wheel, learning with the heart, mind, body and soul, are pertinent teachings. I believe that traditional teachings benefit all students and teachers, and it is imperative that traditional teachings be accurately portrayed when teaching the history of Canada.

Fixico (2003) reflected on a teaching from Luther Standing Bear: “Among his people, one person and his or her views were never tested against another person. He described, ‘there being no such thing as grades, a child was never made conscious of any shortcomings,” (p. 85). In contrast, the current system promotes competition and individualism. Fixico spoke about his own experience learning mathematics and problem solving; he solved the problems in a different manner from the teacher. Fixico describes being frustrated by the fact that he could not understand the teacher’s method and that his own method was not acknowledged.

Brown examined the need to include emotional learning in the education system, in particular within Indigenous pedagogy and curriculum. He examines the current situation and discusses research done by Goleman on emotional literacy:

Goleman (1995) also argues that emotional illiteracy has been created by the absence of affective education in the classroom. Goleman discusses the cost of emotional illiteracy. He finds that emotional literacy dropped in all ethnic, racial and income levels of school-aged children between 1970 ad 1980. Based on
teachers’ assessments and evaluations, there is a steady decline in emotional ability including: (1) presence of social problems; (2) presence of depression and anxiety; (3) problems with attention or thinking processes; (4) increase in aggressive and delinquent behavior (p. 233). Goleman argues that the students are both angrier and more isolated than the previous generation and that these indicators relate directly to poor self-esteem and self-identification based on emotional incompetence. (Brown, 2004, pp. 10-11)

Many participants come into OEE programs with similar emotional illiteracy issues and these problems are sometimes displayed through withdrawal, embarrassment, anger, frustration, peer isolation or bullying.

OEE programs provide participants with opportunities to learn about themselves and learn that they have many valuable skills, assets, knowledge or characteristics that are unique to them. As facilitators, we strive to discover these qualities and abilities and bring them out in each participant. This idea is supported by Brown (2004) when he states:

The greatest sadness in life, for me, is to perceive potentialities in those around me and know that they will be unexpressed. The Elders say that every human being, in each of the four directions, has a song that expresses their uniqueness within creation, their power at the center of the universe and the rhythm of the meaning of their life. Each person’s song represents their nature and teaches them of their true self and the lessons of their ultimate potential, the gift they have brought to life by being. (p. 6)
This teaching affirms my own beliefs, that through the process of providing students with opportunities for self-exploration, they discover their own innate strengths…this is the transformative process that can occur in OEE.

Brown (2004) quotes Walter Lightning who,

…defines the process of learning through the ‘grasping of meaning’ as involving the elements of cognition, insight, relationship between teacher and student, sensation, and spirituality. It is not just a cognitive (mental) act, but an emotional – thus physical – act. Learning is felt. It is a sensation. It is something that involves emotions. And as the Elder here points out, learning is ideally a spiritual thing, because the compassionate mind is one that is spiritually centered. (Brown, 2004, p.21)

Participants in OEE have the opportunity to experience these elements of learning, thus providing great potential for personal growth.

David Suzuki examined “the value of native ecologies” in his book “Wisdom of the Elders,” written with Peter Knudtson. Suzuki states that:

The Haida opened up a new world for me. Their sensitivity to human interconnection with all life on their homeland, I believe, can give us an alternative to Western culture’s narcissistic self-preoccupation coupled to an ecologically destructive worldview. (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992, p. xxv)

By providing opportunities for environmental education through OEE, students learn about their role within the ecosystem and of the impacts that humankind has on the natural environment.
They [tales that illuminate traditional Indigenous knowledge] remind us, however metaphorically, of the shared origins of all forms of life, the ecological integrity of natural systems, and the ancient bonds of kinship between human beings and other species. They underscore the fundamental relationship between life and land. (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992, p. 3)

Learning and respecting the interconnectedness of life forms can give people the humble opportunity to reassess their role within the ecosystem in which they live.

Wade Davis (Davis, 2009) examines the cultural relationship that people have with their surrounding environment and coined the term “ethnosphere.”

Together the myriad of cultures makes up an intellectual and spiritual web of life that envelops the planet and is every bit as important to the well being of the planet as is the biological web of life that we know as the biosphere. You might think of this social web of life as an “ethnosphere,” a term perhaps best defined as the sum total of all our thoughts and intuitions, myths and beliefs, ideas and inspiration brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness. The ethnosphere is humanity’s greatest legacy. It is the product of our dreams, the embodiment of our hopes, the symbol of all we are and all that we, as a widely inquisitive and astonishingly adaptive species, have created. (p. 2)

Wade argues that the biosphere is being destroyed at a faster and more alarming rate than the biosphere. Participating in OEE provides an opportunity for participants to glimpse these spiritual realms and potentially gain some perspective about ancient connections with the environment.
Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is a term that was coined in the 1980s and focused primarily on adult education. Learning in childhood was viewed as “formative” and was a “…process that includes assimilation of beliefs concerning oneself and the world, including socialization and learning adult roles,” (Mezirow, 2000, p. xii). Mezirow describes the transformative process of adult learning as “…involving alienation from those roles, reframing new perspectives, and reengaging life with a greater degree of self-determination,” (p. xii). I believe that this description of the transformative process also occurs during adolescence as youth reframe their beliefs and challenge ideas and authority figures.

Mezirow explains the foundation for Transformation Theory as “…formulating more dependable beliefs about our experience, assessing their contexts, seeking informed agreement on their meaning and justification, and making decisions on the resulting insights,” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 6). This process can stir a range of emotions in a person as they begin to question concepts and beliefs that are ingrained within their worldview. As Mezirow explains:

Transformative learning, especially when it involves subjective reframing, is often an intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions under-girding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change. (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 6-7)

Educators need to be attentive to the impact that transformative learning might have on their students. As suggested by Bobilya et. al. (Bobilya, et al., 2005), educators need to
ensure that they provide appropriate briefing and debriefing of activities so that participants can understand the emotions that might accompany transformative learning. This emotional component is integral to the emotional learning as described by Brown (Brown, 2004).

Transformative learning is related to mindful learning that is defined by Langer as the continuous creation of new categories, openness to new information, and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective (Langer, 1997, p. 4). Langer calls for the need to include more mindful learning within the education system because it helps students develop critical thinking and because the learning is more relevant and more comprehensive.

Edmund O’Sullivan discusses the current state of the education system and the need for educational reform.

I call the movement into this postmodern perspective the ecozoic period. The educational framework appropriate for movement into this period must be visionary and transformative and clearly must go beyond the conventional educational outlooks that we have cultivated for several centuries. (O'Sullivan, 1999, p. 181)

He also discusses the interconnectedness of life and relates transformative learning to OEE in stating:

This unbreakable bond of relatedness is increasingly apparent to scientists, although it ultimately escapes scientific formulation or understanding. By virtue of this relatedness, everything is intimately present to everything else in the universe. Nothing is completely itself without everything else. This unity prevails
over the boundaries of space and time. The universe is both communion and community. We ourselves are that communion in a special mode of reflective awareness. (O'Sullivan, 1999, p.215)

Participants in OEE programs are exposed to opportunities that promote a better understanding of this interconnectedness of life. This is achieved by providing participants with preparation, guidance and time for reflection while immersed in the natural environment during OEE programs.

The Traditional Pathways to Health project was a six-year participatory action project led by Dr. Ted Riecken as the principal investigator, at the University of Victoria. This project was an example of transformative learning in action. Youth involved in this project had the opportunity to explore topics about health and wellness that were relevant and meaningful to each of them. The students researched their own topics and made videos, and in the process gained new insight and understanding about their topic and also about themselves. By providing youth with the opportunity to learn outside of traditional settings, youth have the ability to learn in a more holistic, relevant manner. This project led to transformative learning for many youth and allowed them to take action within their community. Some students investigated traditional Aboriginal methods of transformative learning such as cultural ceremonies, drumming, singing, healing circles and traditional medicine (Riecken, et al., 2006).

Giroux (1998, p. 31) explains the need for learning to relate directly to student’s personal experiences:

Educationally and politically, young people need to be given the opportunity to narrate themselves, to speak from the actual places where their experiences and
daily lives are shaped and mediated…Educators and others need to recognize the importance of providing opportunities for kids to voice their concerns, but equally important is the need to provide the conditions – institutional, economic, spiritual and cultural – that will allow themselves to reconceptualize themselves as citizens and develop a sense of what it means to fight for important social and political issues that affect their lives, bodies, and society. (Riecken, et al., 2006, p. 274)

Using this approach, learning is more relevant, meaningful and provides opportunities to explore different perspectives, gaining insight and potentially leading to transformative learning.

Reconnecting with Nature

Many educators are calling for the need to reconnect youth with nature (Andrews, 1996; Feld & Basso, 1996; Henley, 1996; Louv, 1996; Loynes, 2006; Pendleton, 1995; Priest & Gass, 1997; Russell, 2005; Surridge, McKie, Housden, & Whitt, 2004). Louv (1996), an author and child advocate, speaks about the richness of these outdoor experiences: “Unlike television, nature does not steal time from adults or children; it augments that time, makes the time fuller, richer. And for those children for whom family life is destructive, nature can offer healing” (p. 136). There is an inherent nurturing and healing quality to nature. Sometimes OEE programs provide youth with safe opportunities to grow and explore, especially when their home environment or community is unhealthy, dysfunctional or violent.

Drengson (1995) elaborates on the importance of self-discovery through immersing oneself in nature:
To grasp and understand significant interrelationships and their laws is to turn
information into knowledge…We proceed as if nature is uniform and as if we can,
with effort, discover her laws. This discovery is part self-discovery and part
discovery of settled patterns that make self-awareness itself possible…To know
ourselves we must know that which is not ourselves. We must distinguish
ourselves from our background, both from nature, and from other groups.
Eventually we must distinguish ourselves from the group to which we belong.

(p. 88)

By providing people with time for reflection in nature, we gain a new understanding of
our relationship with nature and of how we are connected to the natural world. Drengson
(1995) continues, “Experiential learning is a holistic process, where conceptual, linguistic
and perceptual elements are blended with direct impressions of the environment” (p. 88).
During OEE programs, participants are given opportunities to experience these moments,
contemplate them, form a new perspective and learn.

Louv (1996) implores the need to reconnect youth with nature and to have more
schools support this type of learning:

Still, an increasing number of parents – and a few good schools – are realizing the
importance and the magic of providing hands-on, intimate contact between
children and nature...Many of us are already acutely aware of our own
disconnection to nature, amplified in our children, and the need to reweave that
connection…Around the country, schools and museums are stepping up their
efforts to connect children with nature. (p.14)
The research site, the PTB Wilderness School, is one such organization that embraces these ideologies and offers programs that provide opportunities to connect or reconnect with nature. Working with the local school board, PTB launched a four-year wilderness school to serve youth from grades eight to eleven, an age group identified as being vulnerable.

Drengson (1995) clearly depicts how someone might conceive and then reflect on their wilderness experience:

In going on a wilderness journey this young person learns to apply the learned concepts directly to the mountains. They mediate his/her experiences of the mountains, give it structure, extend his/her concepts and mind to the sensory field, and eventually enable grasp of the relationships, patterns and features that characterize the mountains for a human consciousness. (p.88)

These new thoughts and understandings can provide opportunities for growth and change.

Kenneth Andrews (1996) examined the meaning and process in experiential education by evaluating sea kayaking expeditions as a rite of passage for youth. Andrews compared the expedition experience to Victor Turner’s examination of the theme of liminality in relation to rites of passage in which he describes three phases: separation, margin (or limen) and re-aggregation. Turner and Andrews examined how changes took place during these experiences and how the participants emerged with new duties and responsibilities. Andrews applied the theory of liminality to the sea kayaking expedition and examined this experience over the long term, both during and after the trip. He noted in his journal:
There has been a marked shift away from talking about our regular lives. Through the intense experiences we have shared together so far - from the portage to the day-to-day hard work of loading the kayaks, paddling, setting camp, and cooking meals together – we have been resolving conflicts and developing a sense of camaraderie, a sense of ourselves not only as individuals but also as a group of people dependent upon one another. Not surprisingly, most of the students have also become more comfortable with living in this place and more aware of subtle changes in the weather and sea conditions. They have been developing a sense of connection not only with other group members but also with this environment.

(Andrews, 1996)

It is this connection with the environment, the lessons that one learns and the application of newly acquired knowledge that I wish to research, analyze and attempt to decipher.

Loynes (2006) documented some of the changes that they saw in youth who participated in the Stoneleigh Project in Scotland. He suggested that,

It is not behaviour change that is the result, though this can happen. It is more likely a change of meaning and intention that occurs along with a different sense of power and confidence in being this way…we think it is simply the result of a confident person grounded in their beliefs and purposeful in life engaging with the world.

I have often witnessed changes similar to this and have received similar feedback from participants in OEE programs. A point of interest is that although this is the case for some participants, it is not the case for all participants. Perhaps through analyzing our teaching
practices, we could augment the number of students completing our programs and leaving with new knowledge and with an entrenched confidence.

Ecopsychology

Angayuq (Oscar) Kawagley, a Yupiak Elder, encompassed the spiritual element of environmental education and applied his theory of “global consciousness” to everyday lessons (Kawagley, 2004). One of his simple and profound teachings was: “Don’t hug a tree, be a tree.” Kawagley spoke about ecosophy (or Ecopsychology), which he defined simply as “seeking wisdom from nature.” He said that, “It is a participatory universe. The more you look at the universe, the more it looks alive.” The concept of ecosophy is predominant in Indigenous philosophy. The concept holds that people learn lessons from experiences of living close to the land and find additional meaning in their lives, sometimes many years after an experience.

Scull (2000) explains that Ecopsychology emerged from numerous traditions: Buddhism, mystical religions, the romantic movement in Europe, and the transcendentalist movement in the United States. Modern philosophers and ecologists such as Freud, Jung, Skinner, Muir and Leopold, further developed the field by exploring its foundation in nature. “Beginning in the 1960s, Michael Cohen, Robert Greenway, Art Warmoth, and perhaps others began using wilderness settings for psychotherapy or education” (Scull, 2000).

Henley (1996) started Rediscovery camps to reconnect Indigenous youth to themselves, to nature and to their culture. He states that, “Children are intimately exposed
to the natural world around them and have the opportunity to develop a respectful and loving relationship. This leads to the same relationship within oneself…the ability to love and respect oneself,” (p. 23). Many OEE and adventure therapy programs attempt to expose youth to the same lessons of nature so that they might gain new self-knowledge.

Several health care staff started a program for clients with severe long-term mental health disorders at the Darwin Ward of Nottinghamshire Health Care NHS Trust in England. The purpose of the program was to combine “what Muir deemed ‘the restorative power of the mountains’ with the ideals of adventure therapy and ecosophy. We have produced a package which helps service users to learn skills that are transferable to life outside long-term institutional care,” (Surridge, McKie, Housden, & Whitt, 2004, p.20). The program was named Reflection “in honour of the first trip and the idea of being able to reflect upon oneself in a constructive manner through the challenge of adventure,” (Surridge, et al., 2004, p. 22). Staff members found that patients developed new skills through exposure to therapeutic risks that were calculated and allowed development of independence. The program was highly successful in nurturing independence and the participants were always eager to get involved.

Norah Trace (2003) examines the relationship between Ecopsychology and Ecotherapy within outdoor adventure therapy programs, “In Adventure Therapy we count on the environment to stimulate a self-organizing process that we then bring to life with narrative therapy,” (p.93). This practice is specific to Ecotherapy and occurs in the realm of psychology. OEE programs might have similar effects, but this is not a specific outcome of the program.
Much of the literature in Ecopsychology is written from a perspective of psychology or deep ecology. It is difficult to find examples of how to actually apply these lessons in education to address the needs of all youth. Scull explains that the field of Ecopsychology is large and diverse; however, much of the writing has focused on practices in North America. He states that,

Besides representing a somewhat narrow view of the new field, the collection in *Ecopsychology* lacks geographical and cultural diversity: All the writers are North American and more than 60% live in California. Without minimizing the valuable contribution made by Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner, I would like to suggest that we seek a more diverse ecopsychology by looking at some of the writers and perspectives they did not include. (Scull, 2000)

Educational and Indigenous perspectives would be an interesting contribution to the ongoing dialogue about Ecospsychology.

Pendleton (1995) writes about the Norwegian Seminar for Nature Life (NSNL) program in which she participated and mentored for two years. She notes that this program differs from other experiential education programs as it focuses “on the fellowship and interactions between human being and nature. One learns about oneself in relationship with Nature. “Nature life” requires that intellect and intuition cooperate, that one’s whole self is engaged in a learning process…it is a fusion of experiences that nurtures us spiritually as much as physically.” (p. 105) Pendleton then elaborates on this approach and explains:

NSNL has developed the ‘nature life approach’ on the premise that ‘how’ we teach/learn, which in turn is integral to ‘why’ we teach/learn. Deep ecological
values – the ‘why’ – motivate us to teach awareness of and familiarity with other life forms – the ‘what’ which can only be gained through a personal and ‘experiential’ encounter – the ‘how’. (p. 106)

This holistic approach to education leads to a better understanding of ourselves and, as Fox elucidates, “We become like what we worship” (1995, p. 101).

Chief Luther Standing Bear of the Lakota Nation explained this same philosophy back in 1868:

The old Lakota was wise. He knew that man’s heart away from nature becomes hard, he knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans too. So he kept his youth close to its softening influence.

(Canadian Outward Bound Wilderness School, 1982, p. 16)

The next step is to determine how to foster and facilitate these types of experiences for today’s youth.

Keith Russell (2005) examined the long-term impacts of outdoor behavioral healthcare and determined that youth who participated in the program perceived that aftercare was “a crucial component in facilitating the transition from an intensive wilderness experience to family, peer and school environments,” (p.209). It is vital that we, as educators, recognize the importance of facilitating the transition of knowledge back to the home environment so that the lessons learned during the experience, are not forgotten. By teaching youth the lessons of ecosophy, they can learn tools to continue to help heal themselves and to remain healthy throughout their lives.

I passionately believe that it is vital to examine how to facilitate more effectively “lessons of the spirit” for youth in OEE. In the words of Wade Davis (2001):
A child raised to believe that a mountain is the abode of a protective spirit will be profoundly different human being from the youth brought up to believe that a mountain is an inert mass of rock ready to be mined. A Kwakwaka’wakw boy raised to revere the coastal forests of the Pacific Northwest as the abode of Huxwhukw and the Crooked Beak, cannibal spirits living at the north end of the world, will be a different person from the Canadian child taught to believe that such forests exist to be logged. (p.52)

The natural world and all of its elements can provide us with lessons and metaphors to promote healing, to enable self-discovery, and to connect to sacred places and spaces.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design: Case Study

The research objective is to identify and explore the core components and unique characteristics of the Wilderness School program at Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society, related specifically to curriculum, teaching pedagogy, and the learning environment.

Lincoln and Guba (1995) formulated a case study structure that identified, “the problem, the context, the issues, and the ‘lessons learned,’” (Creswell, 1998, p. 36). Creswell further explains that the case study methodology works well when examining a, “bounded system…bounded by time and place…a program, an event, an activity, or individuals,” (p. 61). In this project, the parameters were limited to examine the PTB Wilderness School program curriculum, teaching pedagogy and learning environment. The research was conducted solely with the staff members who teach in the Wilderness School, to investigate their views based upon their experience teaching in this specific environment at this distinct time. As the Wilderness School evolves, there will likely be changes to the curriculum, teaching styles and learning environment; therefore, this project helps to identify these factors at this particular time in its evolution.

Goodson and Walker (1988) discuss research in education and the fact that the research is often inaccessible to those people being researched. They state, “…this happens because the context in which the research is planned is largely the research community itself and not the world of educational practitioners” (pp. 111-112). By
focusing my research on the practitioners’ perspectives and involving them directly in this reflective process, they are directly involved in the research process.

The Wilderness School at Power To Be was launched in 2006 and currently has three cohorts of youth participants. As the program evolves, it is important to identify and evaluate the core components of the program to ensure that objectives are being met. This research is important as it provides a venue for staff to provide feedback regarding the program, and for the staff team to hone and develop the overall program based upon their perceived understanding of its strengths and needs.

Staff members have experience in the development and delivery of their curriculum and the ongoing evaluation and modification of curriculum and teaching pedagogy. They also have practical first-hand experience about how lessons are delivered in the field, and about the successes and challenges of various methods of delivery.

Research Process

A poster was displayed at the PTB office to recruit research project participants (Appendix A). When staff members contacted me, I used the script in Appendix B to review my research objectives and clarify their questions and expectations. I arranged to conduct interviews in private locations, which were convenient for the interviewees. Prior to commencing the interview, I reviewed the Participant Consent Form with the interviewee (Appendix C) and provided them information about: their expected involvement, time requirement, risks and benefits of participation, compensation,
voluntary participation, ongoing consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and dissemination of results.

I also explained that participants had the opportunity to vet their transcripts and make any additions, deletions or edits. Once I completed transcribing the interviews, I deleted the audio files and then sent the transcripts to each participant for their review prior to data analysis.

The research questions (Appendix D) were designed to start unstructured and move towards more structured questions “…to prevent the interviewer’s frame of reference being imposed on the interviewee’s viewpoints,” (Flick, 2006, p. 150). For example, I chose to start by asking staff members to define the terms “teaching, learning and curriculum,” to gain an understanding of their perception of the teaching and learning process as it applies to their pedagogy and environment.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis as it provides for on-going analysis throughout the research process. All of the transcripts were analyzed and emerging concepts were manually noted in the margins of the transcripts. The key concepts were clustered, forming a thematic framework that identified similarities throughout the research. I participated in several of the Wilderness School programs and observed the leaders instructing the youth. This information verified the fact that the staff members actively used the teaching styles and curriculum they had described and modified their lessons as the learning environment dictated.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Teaching at the Wilderness School

Interviews were conducted in May 2009 with seven staff members from the PTB Wilderness School. At this time, they had just started working with their third cohort and had three years of participants enrolled in the school (Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3). Staff members perform various tasks within the Wilderness School program including: administration; working in the field with youth participants; curriculum development and planning future program delivery; meeting outside of programs with youth, families and community partners; coordinating logistics; community development; ongoing reporting and evaluation; and, recruiting and screening of new participants.

When asked to define teaching, learning and their own teaching philosophy, the staff members identified themselves as guides, facilitators or mentors, and differentiated their role from that of a “traditional teacher.”

My vision for teaching, in relation to the Wilderness School, it is more of a sense of providing information, providing the knowledge and guiding people through the process of learning. Many of the youth that we work with are in our program because they don’t learn in the traditional school setting. Traditional teaching doesn’t work for them. I would much rather be considered a guide versus the teacher. (PTB staff member)

I define a teacher as a guide. Teaching is like you’re going on a trip. The length of time that you have with your kids...that is the length of your trip...it is laying out a smorgasbord, “This is what we have got here, does anything on this plate look appetizing?” And if you want to bite into something, then run with it. Grab that apple...bite into that. Teaching isn’t about laying out the facts, laying out all the knowledge on something. For me, it is about laying out the opportunities...a new idea, and if the kid is interested, they are going to explore that...with PTB you are offering up opportunities for leadership and opportunities for all sorts of outdoor activities, opportunities for volunteering and getting into sports. Some of
the kids have even gone to conferences. Finding out if they’re interested in public speaking...there are a million things. (PTB staff member)

Staff members viewed their role as being more holistic than the traditional Eurocentric teaching models that exist in mainstream educational institutions.

Two of the staff members are experienced teachers who had worked within the traditional classroom setting. Their experiences within that system contradicted their own teaching philosophy, and they felt restricted by the teaching environment. The following example demonstrates this contradiction:

...I don’t really like the limitations that I faced teaching within the school system. The kids that I wanted to work with were the kids that were getting pushed out of the classroom, the kids that nobody wanted to see. For example, the students had agendas that they had to get signed every night by a parent and then bring back in. If students had their agenda signed, that meant that they were responsible, and they got a star by their name, and when they get 15 stars, they get a prize or something. The kids that were getting their agenda signed were the same kids, every single day. The kids that weren’t getting their agenda signed were the same kids too. The kids that weren’t getting their agenda signed also happened to be the kids that were late, and I started talking to these kids. They were pushed out of classrooms, and they weren’t encouraged to be there. I started talking to these kids and found out that pretty much all of these kids were dealing with some horrible stuff at home, parents coming home drunk at 2:00 am, having a big fight with whoever else is in the house, they had a bunch of younger brothers and sisters that they had to get dressed, somehow get some food into them, get them out the door, get them to their school, and they showed up 5 minutes late to class, and they didn’t have their agenda signed...but they are not responsible! The kids that have their agenda signed, their parents wake them up out of bed, everything is all set on the table, they’ve got a nice breakfast, backpack is packed, and the parent says, “Don’t forget your agenda, I signed it.” If those are the responsible kids, there is something so wrong. I want to work with these other kids, and I want to reward them for the things that they are doing. (PTB staff member)

Staff members defined “teaching” around the themes of: relationships; student-focused program delivery and development. The focus was on process as opposed to end results. Fostering relationships with the youth participants guided the staff throughout the program.
...teaching is definitely a process that takes time, and it is a direct relationship between the teacher, the material, and the learner. There needs to be an understanding and commitment to go through that process for effective teaching. I think teaching starts with building that relationship, and then it’s that exchange of information in a way that’s palpable for the learner. It is key to have that relationship and understanding of where they are coming from, to get the most retention of the information you’re teaching. (PTB staff member)

Another staff member spoke about their own experience as a student and the impact of the mentors in their life.

_The number one thing would be to know your students. If I think back in my life to the teachers, or mentors, or guides or whoever it was that had an impact on me learning things in my life and what stuck, were people who really knew me and understood how I learned and encouraged that._ (PTB staff member)

Staff members explained that the entire program is focused around student needs and that these are continually evaluated through ongoing dialogue through debriefing or one-to-one discussions.

_Teaching to me, is the process of assisting in someone’s learning. That looks so different depending on what we are teaching and how we can clearly meet the goals of that individual. Teaching is the facilitation of the acquisition of knowledge._ (PTB staff member)

The focus on individual needs is confirmed by this testimonial from one of the parents of a youth in the Wilderness School.

_“The staff members respect each child’s individualism, but they teach them to work as a team and they work with them to accomplish things they did not think they could. They encourage, they do not pressure, along with encouraging the kids to encourage each other, which in turn teaches them teamwork.” ~ Parent of Youth who participates in the Wilderness School (Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society, 2009)._

There is a strong emphasis on the learning “process” specifically, rather than on the end result. Learning that occurs throughout the process relates to the development of inter-personal skills and these successes are acknowledged as being as important, or even more important, than learning the new skill.
Another principle would be, and this is something that I struggle with, not being attached to the end result, but recognizing that it is actually the process that is probably more important than the end result...not to get stuck on that final end result I think is really important (PTB staff member).

Staff members defined components of “learning” as being a life-long process and reinforced the importance of reflection when learning new concepts or activities.

Learning is definitely life-long. I think it comes a lot from needing creativity and curiosity in our lives. Learning to know how much you don’t know...being comfortable with that, and hopefully that provokes you wanting to learn and experience more. (PTB staff member)

Due to the nature of the changing outdoor environment, the staff remains flexible in their teaching styles so that they can take advantage of the teachable moments as they arise. For example, staff model effective methods of managing conflict so that the youth come out of the experience with a stronger relationship and understanding of themselves. They learn how to develop healthy relationships with one another.

Staff members spoke about the need to have respectful, reciprocal relationships with the youth in order for teaching to be effective.

I think I have a few [teaching styles] that I use, depending on the setting, and the materials, as well as the participants...so that I try to be adaptive to the situations and bring in those environmental factors, if you will, to optimize the learning environment. One of my favourite styles particularly with youth and children is more of an exploratory style, where you present the material in a unique way where the learner is coming up with their own answers, themselves. It’s all there for them to sift through and explore. I really enjoy that because I find that that sense of novelty and discovery is really key for humans. It’s something that you cannot necessarily create but you can facilitate. (PTB staff member)

Staff members use frontloading and debriefing techniques to facilitate learning. Frontloading is the process where staff members present important information prior to an activity. This includes the establishment of parameters for the activity (especially in relation to physical, emotional and mental safety), by suggesting metaphors to which the
youth can relate the activity, or by reminding the youth that the activity is a challenge by choice. Debriefing is a process where the group discusses the activity and shares their perceptions, feelings and opinions.

*We use front-loading a lot with the expectations, not only for us, but for the health and safety aspects as well as the learning aspect, so the kids can do the preparation they need to do or switch gears if need be. That sets the stage for success for them. We use that quite a bit in our programs, both on a larger scale as well as on a smaller scale, and transition, if you will, from one activity to another. Debriefing is absolutely critical on multiple levels…that piece of reflection in our society. They don’t think of reflection, it is not a natural process and we bring it into their lives, break things down in this setting…it has great value. (PTB staff member)*

Curriculum

The PTB Wilderness School program is relatively new, and the first cohort that launched the program, are now in their third year. This first cohort provides valuable ongoing evaluation as they lead the way through each year of the curriculum and the evolution of the program. The curriculum serves as a “living, breathing document” and is a foundation upon which the program has been designed.

*To use a metaphor here, curriculum is the canoe mould, the structure in which you build your program. It provides a framework and also some structural integrity of what your program is. It’s built not only of lessons and teachables and activities, but also the intent and values of what you are trying to bring across…and it’s standardized. The canoe mould is built, set, and you have a lot of creative freedom within that for the program, but at the same time your pillars, your foundations are set. I think that’s what curriculum does; it provides that structure. (PTB staff member)*

There are four pillars or themes around which the curriculum has been designed. Each year has a main theme, but there are components within each theme every year. The
The Power to Be Way: Facilitating Healthy Relationships with Oneself, Nature and Community through Outdoor Experiential Education

The program was originally designed to recruit youth as they graduate from grade eight and make the transition to grade nine.

...grade 9 is a huge transition year for kids. In the first year, they are going from middle school to high school, and this is where they start beginning most high-risk activities, and where they are exposed to risk factors. We create a foundation for kids around goal setting, confidence-building, and emotional regulation. *(PTB staff member)*

The learning objectives for each year are outlined below:

- Year 1 - interpersonal awareness and group awareness (communication, team building, peace-making process, emotional regulation, use of circles for debriefing and ongoing evaluation);
- Year 2 - personal development & well-being (create foundation for goal setting, confidence-building, ongoing emotional regulation);
- Year 3 – environmental and outdoor education (cultural respect and environmental stewardship); and,
- Year 4 – community focus – giving back to the community, community service, volunteering, mentoring younger participants, family integration/involvement.

The concept of the “Power to Be Way” emerged as a theme that exists independently of the curriculum, local environment or staff member. As one staff member explains, it is a concept that was developed to create consistent routines for the youth.

...the first year is about becoming a group in our community, making foundations. That is mainly taught through the PTB way. *(PTB staff member)*

*It is very much a mobile classroom if you will. The PTB Way creates a structure in any given location that is consistent with the kids which is important.* *(PTB staff member)*

The PTB Way also includes the manner in which staff and participants interact with one another, fostering a space (and curriculum) that focuses on pro-social behaviour. This topic is constantly mentored and discussed within the group.
I think we are teaching them not just skills that they can only use out in the wilderness; it is every day skills, social skills...pro-social behaviour. They realize they will face people that are going to challenge them, whether in the woods, at school or in the community. So it is developing those skills that will help them or assist them in being able to manage conflict. (PTB staff member)

The curriculum also incorporates the development and ongoing evaluation of internal and external assets. The Search Institute is a non-profit organization, based out of Minneapolis, Minnesota. For fifty years, they have conducted research and provided tools and resources to promote healthy children, youth and communities (Search Institute, 2009). They identified forty developmental assets for four different age groups: early childhood; grades K-3; middle childhood; and adolescents. The list includes forty developmental assets, half of which are personal assets, and half of which are community assets. The youth grade themselves using one of the evaluation tools to assess their own perception of their personal and community assets.

We are building our curriculum in and around that [developmental asset framework], using it as a measurement tool. Every year at the beginning and at the end, and then we cross-compare them...it’s a reflection of themselves and their community. It is a gauge for us to see how kids are thinking and how they are growing or progressing in some areas. It allows us to tweak our program to help create greater strengths. (PTB staff member)

I think the outdoors, the wilderness, and outdoor activities, give us opportunities to see things and talk about things that aren’t really tangible in other settings. I believe in value development and I feel that a lot of the parents are taxed to really make the time that’s needed to develop morals and values in kids. I believe that having a value set is a very important piece of development. You can change as you grow, but if you’re not thinking about that stuff, you are not making decisions based on your own values, that’s where kids can get into trouble. The outdoors, in particular, creates environments and situations where kids are forced to take time to reflect on that and what their values are. We establish the values of the community together, and then once they’re established, there is the expectation to follow them. So it’s a chance to build a community based on those values and some of those activities. Rock climbing for example, deals with trust. You can find a definition of trust loosely defined in a dictionary, but some of those values you need to feel, and experience them, then you can figure it out for yourself. So I
like taking those things that are intangible and making them tangible, and the best way to do that is to be outdoors. (PTB staff member)

Many programs that incorporate OEE as a teaching method (eg. Outward Bound Canada) recognize the value of this research and resource tools and have integrated them into their programs (Outward Bound, 2009).

Creating awareness around developmental asset building aids youth in identifying and establishing their own goals.

*A big thing for us is goal setting. The kids do goal-setting worksheets each September. So each September they get their goal from the previous year and they reflect on it, whether they accomplished it, or what got in their way and those types of things…it is all documented in their journals. (PTB staff member)*

Staff members emphasized the importance of the reflective process and have structured time for reflection through ongoing debriefing, sharing circles, journaling and solo experiences. Staff members recognize the importance of encouraging youth to share their feelings and emotions in a supportive environment.

*Letting them vent. Emotionally letting them vent if they need it…as well as journaling and writing…talking about their emotions and allowing that to be done in an open, safe environment. (PTB staff member)*

*I think one of the key things to learning and retention of those lessons comes from reflection. For things to really sink in, people need to take that extra step to reflect on what has happened or reflect on the material to embody it as knowledge. (PTB staff member)*

*I think again going back to reflection, in an urban environment where things are busy and always changing…people just don’t stop and think outside the box. I think nature gives them that place to slow things down and figure things out for themselves. (PTB staff member)*

Youth are prompted with specific questions and are asked to choose several to answer in their journals. Their journals serve as a way of providing self-reflection and will also be their “memory book” for all of their PTB experiences. Through this self-
reflective process, students learn how to identify their own needs and to think about new goals.

*Doing that solo time is really crucial. It is challenging for them, but once they get over the fact that they don’t have to hang out with their buddy or make noises, that they can actually sit down and really think about what it is that is going on. Journals are an important aspect…answering those intentional questions that are going to get them thinking…it is more meaningful.* (PTB staff member)

Opportunities arise for teachable moments and the staff members use these occasions to discuss issues such as personal responsibility and the effects of peer pressure. The curriculum allows for flexibility to address the needs of the group at any given time. Staff members take these discussions and build them into the theme for the next monthly program. For example, the theme of the Boys Warrior Weekend was developed to explore connection, openness, trust and self-exploration. The Girls Warrior Weekend focused on self-care and hygiene. Each girl had their own potted herbs and used them for cooking and making homemade soap, face cream and lip balm.

*“Our Girls Warrior Weekend.” It was all about self-care. Everything that we did, even though some of the things that we were doing were things that we do every weekend, it was finding ways of linking that to self-care.* (PTB staff member)

*The bottom line is that you have that ability to modify the trip and make it challenging for some, and keep it at a level where people are still in their comfort zone.* (PTB staff member)

Staff members attempt to meet the multiple needs of the individual youth and provide a program that is balanced and that addresses emotional, spiritual, cultural, mental and physical needs.

*I think that the core root of how we address their emotional needs is by paying attention to group process, paying attention to the elements and groups that need to be there for trust, for group safety, and the different ways in which the group needs to function together in a healthy way. That all provides a context for...*
meeting folk’s emotional needs. And by modeling that through our instructors, whether that be stating when our emotional needs aren’t being met and modeling that, and communication models and providing space for students to share...creating normalcy around that, in a language of acceptance around the place of emotion in someone’s well-being and health. (PTB staff member)

I think that there is, within our staff team, quite a deep spiritual practice present, and that gives the potential for students to make connections and explore. Being in the natural world...you are struck by awe with regards to something beautiful, or you see an animal or you see something that just hits you on that spirit level...there is no avoiding that in the wilderness context. (PTB staff member)

PTB staff work with the local First Nations communities and invite Elders and traditional knowledge keepers to teach about local flora, fauna and their traditional uses. Through these experiences, the youth are encouraged to develop a stronger connection with the natural environment. All of the staff members expressed a desire to further develop the cultural component of the program and make more connections with the local First Nations communities.

With regards to the physical component, staff members teach about nutrition on a daily basis. They have established healthy routines, such as eating meals together, and use this time to nurture the sense of community.

A huge component is physical challenge. There is grunting, groaning and complaining, but I think the more that kids see what they are capable of, and having the experience of a positive experience with physical exercise, then the more likely they are to do things outside of PTB, in their own lives. We encourage that as much as possible. (PTB staff member)

Youth have the option of working towards credits for the Duke of Edinburgh Award, which is a three-pillar program, with certifications of Bronze, Silver or Gold. In each pillar, there are four components of community service, physical recreation, expedition skills and skill development.
The Outdoor Classroom: Teaching Environment

The outdoor learning environment allows for lessons that are both intentional and non-structured. All staff members felt very fortunate to call the outdoors their classroom, and their enthusiasm was apparent.

*The outdoors is a fantastic teacher...there are lessons around every corner and it continues to change, seasonally. It’s a place where everyone feels comfortable and relaxed in the right setting, doing the right activities. It is a non-judgmental place where people can learn things about life. Most importantly it just allows for space.* (PTB staff member)

*Our classroom is beautiful. You don’t get a better classroom...you find a point where you are going to camp for a night, and it is just so peaceful...and I can see that with the youth.* (PTB staff member)

The outdoor classroom provides an environment that is constantly changing and affected by influences that cannot be controlled by the leaders. The ongoing transformation of the classroom provides endless teachable moments.

*It is constantly changing. That creates an awesome experience to always be able to teach. You could be by a river, in the woods, or up in the tree. We don’t ever do a trip that is the same, that is what is so neat about this program. You are always learning.* (PTB staff member)

*And some of the greatest teachings come through what emerges in the course of the program, those teachable moments. Knowing that there are things that are going to be unpredictable that are going to happen, especially in this context, because we are not in a four-walled classroom. That is always built into the back of my mind in terms of how I deliver the curriculum. It is constant, ongoing, and founded on the relationships that I am able to create with the student.* (PTB staff member)

*Choosing locations that will promote and, facilitate success is huge. I describe it as a dynamic, changing environment that really requires skilled facilitators to know, to make wise determinants as to where they should, how they should, interact and engage with the environment. There is so much to be learned from every spot that we go into in the natural world, in the van, and transitions from boats to beaches, to just being in the community with the youth. It is an incredibly diverse and rich, and potentially overwhelming teaching environment that in my*
mind needs to be recognized as that in order to be used effectively. (PTB staff member)

The location of the program continually changes, a mobility factor that is both positive and negative. One positive effect is that the youth are always excited to explore new locations and try new activities (eg. surfing in Tofino), and some staff members attest to the rich environment that fresh locations offer. By contrast, the mobility of the program is a challenge for the logistics and for funding, as transportation is costly. Some staff members mentioned their hope of having a base site in the future, where youth could have a sense of ownership and pride. Staff members could also make more focused and efficient adjustments to the program, planning with ongoing sustainability and relative certainty about facility requirements. The Wilderness School does use Camp Bernard in Sooke, as a temporary base for some of their programs. Camp Bernard is owned and operated by Scouts Canada and rents the facility to PTB for a reduced rate in exchange for support with staff training, fundraising and public relations.

It is very place-based learning and you need to create some sort of awareness around that relationship. And that is so different. In the traditional classroom setting, all those sorts of things are controlled, like seating, temperature, places to write and places to show movies. It is a much more challenging environment in that sense, but what it has to offer is huge... there are elements of our curriculum, such as environmental stewardship, ways that the outdoor classroom facilitates group cohesion, the ability for us to learn about consequence, and the ability to learn about self care and responsibility in terms of keeping ourselves warm and, comfortable. The constant lessons that are emerging from the natural world in terms of the symbiotic relationships, nested systems, beauty, spirit, those sorts of things are always there for us. Then that human-nature connection and our relationship to the natural world and how we have abused it. That is there as well...when we see land that has been destroyed, and looking at our impact on that land. (PTB staff member)

We do provide the conditions, such as if the students are ready in their own lives to start developing the connection to the natural world, then they will, but we are at least providing that interaction so some sort of relationship is going to unfold, whether it is one that reinforces that subject/object relationship where they just
see it as a place to use for their own needs, or whether it is the youth that become totally enchanted and inspired. We take them to places that are being influenced by humans, and we also try to take them to places that are more wild. We provide environmental education, we provide a context for them to journey in the natural setting, which has a huge potential for transformation, rights of passage, and that sort of work. And we provide solo time, which gives the potential for the deep ecological work of human nature connection. (PTB staff member)

Each participant enters the program with his or her own experiences and their own “comfort zone,” or sense of security and safety. Staff members encourage the youth to push themselves and move beyond their comfort zone, to try new experiences, whether it is sleeping outside under the stars or speaking to someone about their feelings. It is important to note that participants are briefed about “challenge by choice,” that is, they can choose not to participate in a specific activity but are still asked to be involved with the group in some manner. For example, if someone does not want to participate, they can observe and report back to the group, or they can provide support and encouragement to the group.

*When you put people outside of their comfort zone and expect them to do activities, you are going to come up against resistance and what they say and do is not a direct result of what you are saying and doing, but just from being in that situation. And being able to adapt your program and recognizing that those challenges are out there...the focus, in my eyes, is creating that pro-social environment, that behaviour that can be projected out into the community and to the families.* (PTB staff member)

*For example, we have gone from using tents, mats and bags, to now these guys are going to be sleeping under a tarp...setting up their own tarp, lighting their own fires. Creating comfort out there, in a place that can be pretty scary for some people, being alone and in the dark. The same with their solos, they start by doing a 20-minute solo, which is an absolute disaster for some of them to sit there for 20 minutes. Now, this year, these guys are doing a 24-hour solo...I found that the girls last year, exceeded all our expectations. We took them to Vargas Island, to their specific areas. They had a rope and they had a tarp and some food, and when we came back, 8 hours later, some of them had the greatest set-up. They were building things. It was awesome. It is so neat to see... and they just wanted that too, just wanted to be out there by themselves!* (PTB staff member)
This is an affecting testimony as to how kids perform when they are not presented with limitations.

Some of the youth are disengaged, and spending time outdoors allows them an opportunity to explore and transform.

…and we bring them to the outdoors and these kids will just walk the beach for hours, heads down, engaged, looking at stuff, completely engaged in what is going on, and totally regress to like 7 year olds who are excited. Just the beauty that it allows, it is non-judgmental. Those relationships, I think everyone has the capacity to have them. Like any relationship you have got to maintain them and keep them connected. It’s the key to life. (PTB staff member)

We are not just an outdoor education program, we are so much more than that and we want to really recognize what the kids are learning when they are with us. You can’t teach kids what it feels like to push through and challenge themselves. You can’t read that, or speak to it. It is only something that can happen through actually experiencing it with a pack on your back, and going up a mountain. You don’t know that stuff until you are put into that position, then that is how you learn it. Kids who haven’t seen a campfire before, or bio-luminescence at night in the ocean. Planet Earth is great and there is nothing like actually experiencing it. (PTB staff member)

These lessons need to take place in the outdoor environment so that youth can develop and cultivate a relationship with nature.

…because we are dealing with a generation of kids that doesn’t have any connection to the environment for the most part. They are so locked into their high tech world and all of that. It can be tough to take them from that and put them in this place where there is so much to do and see. One of our biggest challenges is really trying to generate an innate love for the outdoors, that encourages real respect and stewardship. There is no doubt that all the kids who are in the program love to be outside and enjoy it, and like the activities that we do…the kids love being out there. Carmanah [Walbran Provincial Park] was probably one of the greatest trips that we have done in terms of that, because you can be walking through there and be completely silent, and watch the kids looking at these massive trees. Then they realize that they are just so small in terms of what the natural world is. I have great pictures of the girls doing their solos amongst all these giants. (PTB staff member)

I think they learn the components of experiential education. We provide them with an opportunity to experience it and guide them through the process. They understand that that is the learning that happens when they are with us. It is
challenge by choice when they are with us. When you give kids the option, they are more likely to push themselves further. We always say that you have to participate in some way, but kids generally surprise people. If you set the bar high, they will go there. (PTB staff member)

Unique Characteristics of the Power to Be Wilderness School

Staff members identified several themes that define the PTB Wilderness School: youth participants; committed staff members; a focus on healthy relationships; community connections; voluntary participation; the creation of a safe place to express oneself; the length and mobility of the program; and, reconnecting or building a relationship with the natural environment.

First and foremost, the staff acknowledged the youth who choose to participate in the Wilderness School. They inspire the staff with their motivation, energy, commitment, experiences, goals, curiosity and humour.

At this point where the Wilderness School is going into its third year, students are bringing everything to the table. We definitely lean on them a lot to validate our programming, to critique it and provide that feedback. The three groups that we have now, they have their own unique spins on the curriculum as well. The other piece to it as well, is that they bring the motivation. They really are the inspiration of the program, keep things going and they keep things fresh. They continue to push us as a program, push the community to be really on terms of what they are capable of. Sometimes we, society, can focus on the challenge of the youth today or the negativity, but these kids are full of surprises...they just need the opportunity to show and share their gifts. (PTB staff member)

They are our program. They bring a huge amount of learning for us as staff...they bring the teaching of humility, humbleness. They are the constant reminder that we are not experts, that relationship is the key factor. They bring a reminder of some of the injustices of the world that we live in. They also bring strength and resilience and hope. They bring that kind of adolescent energy and angst. (PTB staff member)
Staff members spoke about their commitment to the Wilderness School and their dedication to having a positive impact on the youth with whom they work. The staff members strive to model reliability, healthy relationships and offer opportunities for youth to explore and pursue their own personal development.

*I think we support the development of young people through providing role models, through providing consistency in terms of demonstrating that we are reliable and that we will be there. We are also a bridge for them to the larger community and services that are out there, whether it be a youth health clinic or different services in town, other recreation programs. We provide a positive identity for youth to grab hold of and run with. So often they are targeted, or labeled as someone who is not succeeding, or as someone who is delinquent and then that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that they are entrenched in...we offer the potential for them to break away from that identity, to immerse themselves into a supportive environment that is constantly giving them opportunities to claim a preferred identity...identities of strength, resilience and competence.*

*(PTB staff member)*

Through relationship-building, staff members are able to build trust and learn about the needs and goals of the youth. Staff can then refer them to other agencies if necessary. The PTB community exists on many levels: within each cohort, within the PTB community and through connections with the external community. PTB is but one strand of a larger web of support within the wider community (eg. school, counselling, etc.).

*...we are really very much a community-based program, in the sense that the community, kids and instructors, is an entity unto itself. A lot of work goes into creating a healthy community for kids to be in for their time in the program. Our curriculum is educational, skills-based, and strength-based. In addition to that, there is acknowledgment that the health of the community needs to be an intentional piece to cultivating those relationships, and making sure that the community is intact for the youth that we support. (PTB staff member)*

PTB works with a number of local organizations to connect the youth with a larger support network. They also encourage opportunities for leadership development, volunteering and mentoring in the larger community.
We are putting them out in the community and creating a greater social network for them and exposing them to things, versus trying to do it all in house. I think that collaborative programming piece that PTB does is a huge strength. (PTB staff member)

...in all youth work that I have done, the greatest lesson that I have learned is that all behaviour has meaning. Having an understanding of what is going on in the kids’ lives. If you don’t have context you won’t be able to address their issues. And then relationships. Kids really trust us, and they know that we care about them. That makes it a lot easier in terms of having some in-depth conversations. Providing space for the kids to share with each other. So much learning can happen in those circumstances, from each other, and they can support each other. We don’t pretend that we have all the answers at all, and they are such a strong peer group, going through a lot of the same stuff at the same time, so providing that space for those conversations. At night around the campfire, those are when the best conversations that happen. (PTB staff member)

Youth are encouraged to play an active role in their community. Some of the youth willingly take on leadership roles when they are given the opportunity. For example, PTB hosted a camp in March 2009, and all three cohorts attended. Some of the older youth took pride in their experience and spontaneously started mentoring the younger participants and surprised the staff by taking the initiative on their own. The youth are given “the canvas to apply their own paint,” and have gained enough experience and confidence to lead the way with self-motivation. Some of the other students have pursued leadership roles by volunteering with the Power to Be Adaptive Recreation program, attending and speaking at conferences, or even assisting on other trips.

There are at two parent meetings hosted every year and parents are encouraged to share their experiences with one another.

We had one [in May] and we had the largest turnout yet, much to do with our new cohort of youth and just that commitment that was expected right from the very beginning. I was really encouraging our Year 3 parents to answer some of the questions that were coming from Year 1 parents. One of the parents said, “Any time you call Power to Be, it doesn’t matter if [staff member] is there or not,
somebody is there, and somebody will always talk to you. That whole organization is there as support and will listen.” It was a huge testimonial to what we do. (PTB staff member)

This spring, staff members started visiting youth outside of the program to provide additional support and create stronger personal relationships. Staff members realize that they support youth by extending the web of support beyond the PTB community. They also recognize that they are limited as to the services they can provide and work in collaboration with other service providers.

We just finished our safety review for 2008 and most of our incidents were behavioural issues, very few were physical. It is something that we continue to try and manage with kids...create a lot of opportunity for them to try new things and to process things. We also do a lot of one-to-one in the community. There are kids that are struggling in different aspects of their life and we create opportunity for one-to-one situations and to be supportive within our means and give recommendations as well as we’re getting better with our connections to be a referral source for our kids too, recognizing that our ability and mandate is limited. Some of the stuff that our youth are going through is beyond our skill set, so we’ve done some support and gotten referrals for some kids who need it. (PTB staff member)

In order to have any lasting impact, it does need to be over a longer period of time. I have this vision of creating circles of support around these kids. So engaging in conversation with their parents or other care givers, but also their schools, and if they are involved in counselling outside of the program, engaging with them, so that all of these people, are on the same page and are using the same language with the kids so there is consistency. Not to say that I am aware of confidential things that happen in counselling sessions, that is not what I need, but if I know one of the kids is really working on communication or really working on communicating their emotional needs, something as simple as that, then that is something that we can use in the field. I think that is a huge strength. (PTB staff member)

One of the other characteristics that make the PTB Wilderness School unique is that the youth enter the program voluntarily. They are sometimes referred to the program through a teacher or counsellor; however, they enter the program on a voluntary basis and understand the long-term commitment. This differs from some other OEE programs.
where youth might be enrolled by parents (perhaps against their will), or as part of a health or judiciary intervention.

The extended program ensures that strong relationships are developed so that youth can comfortably access support if they are faced with personal challenges. Staff members see their role as preventative as opposed to intervening.

...the long term programming that we offer is unique. We are a support program and that makes us unique. The population that we work with, they are kids that have come in for some reason that they have identified, or their parents or teachers have identified, but they are not youth involved in the justice system as of yet, and they are not folks that are coming in for some kind of treatment. That is a unique target area. It puts us in the realm of prevention. So we can design our programs to the emerging needs of our clients and see that change. What is unique is that combination of using experiential...and using wilderness programming that provides the metaphors and provides a gentler way to access their issues. (PTB staff member)

One of the things that stands out, is the length of the program. Being four years, it really is a sustainable program, over a long period of time. We know that adolescents are going to experience a lot of challenges, a lot of success...and to be a support in their lives during that time, and the commitment right at the beginning I think is pretty unique. It’s not a program that they are sent to, in a reactive situation. It’s a support that is put in place prior to events. We know that working with this kid in Grade 8, there are going to be various points of crisis through to Grade 11 and Grade 12. We will have a relationship with that youth at the front end so I really enjoy that piece. It is going to allow our staff to do some really unique things with kids in challenging times because they have that relationship. (PTB staff member)

The long duration of the program also allows staff to challenge the youth to venture beyond their comfort level, by building on their growing experience and confidence. It is all part of the extended learning process.

The outdoor classroom provides a unique, transformative environment that manages to capture the interest and imagination of the youth and that invites opportunities for exploration and discovery.
I think also too, it is sometimes more of a reconnection or a rebuilding of a relationship. As children we have had outdoor experiences. We have seen things for the first time. As we get older, we may not seek out those environments as much or we are motivated by other things, and we are brought back into the outdoors. Certain smells of locations, or sights, can bring us back to some of those moments that remind us about something from the past. Those are beautiful circumstances that I remember from the past, or some teenagers who are going through some challenging points in their life, going through a lot, getting in trouble with the law, etc. We bring them to the outdoors and these kids will just walk the beach for hours, heads down, engaged, looking at stuff, completely engaged in what is going on, and totally regress to like 7 year olds who are excited. Just the beauty that it allows, it is non-judgmental. Those relationships, I think everyone has the capacity to have them. Like any relationship you have got to maintain them and keep them connected. (PTB staff member)
CHAPTER 5: THE JOURNEY AHEAD

This research project is focused on identifying, and exploring the core components and unique characteristics of the Wilderness School at Power To Be Adventure Therapy Society. The following recommendations are based upon the interviews that I had with the PTB Wilderness staff members and upon field observations. The research has affirmed my belief in the merit of OEE and of the merit of this particular program. I am convinced of the value in having OEE programs more widely recognized and implemented.

Ongoing Development of Recruitment Process

The recruitment process is a vital step that leads to the success of the PTB Wilderness School. The process starts well before the program begins, and relies on the knowledge and support of key partners in the community (i.e. schools administrators and counsellors, etc.). Recently, the intake process was modified to place a stronger emphasis on long-term commitment to the program by youth participants. The recruitment process should continue to be monitored and assessed according to the success rate of program completion. Participants exiting the program should be asked to participate in exit interviews so that PTB staff members can continue to modify the recruitment based upon the participants’ needs and challenges. Multiple stakeholders play a role in the recruitment process; particularly, PTB staff members, school staff members, parents and youth participants. Youth are more likely to commit to the program if participation expectations are clearly outlined prior to entering the program. Just as participating youth
are prepared with “front loading” before an experiential challenge, applicants are “front loaded” during the recruitment process to prepare them more completely for the four-year commitment to the program. Participation rates increase when youth participants are supported by family members, school staff members and PTB staff members. Further training with school staff members (who refer youth to the PTB program) may also lead to higher program completion rates.

Group Cohesion

An overwhelming challenge of the program is serving the youth in a continuous, consistent manner. Throughout the year, staff members have just one weekend a month to work with the youth and it is challenging to develop and re-establish group cohesion each time they meet. Currently, staff address this issue by spending one-on-one time with each of the participants outside of the program by doing outdoor activities, going to the climbing gym, attending their sporting events, etc.

We see them only once a month, it is very difficult to maintain those relationships...it’s a challenge to maintain a sense of group cohesion and trust, that goes to the emotional needs. I’m not sure how we would do that, but recognizing that in that month, even if it was a ritual, figuring out how to get them back into the space. Once they are back in that space, they can move forward. It feels like we take a couple steps back before we start moving forward again. (PTB staff member)

A recommendation is for staff to continue raising awareness of this challenge within the group. By inviting the group’s initiative and input, creating and developing group culture and cohesion, becomes an ongoing group goal. Such a goal could flounder without
regular attendance and intention. Continuing to create and develop group culture and cohesion provides incentive and motivation for youth to return each month.

**Youth Leadership**

Throughout the program, youth learn to identify and celebrate their strengths and unique characteristics with pride. They are challenged to step outside of their comfort zone and try new activities, whether it is trying a new outdoor activity or learning to speak from their heart and share heartfelt thoughts and emotions.

A core component of the fourth year program is to actively engage in serving the community, to mentor the younger youth, and to develop the notion of a citizenship skill. One way to serve the community would be to raise awareness of the program and inform interested or related parties about the program. To that end, it is recommended that fourth year students could participate and offer their voice and experience in a presentation to an audience of peers, school board staff members, community members, donors, PTB Board of Directors, etc. The personal expression of a student can be persuasive and compelling, promoting self-confidence and pride in their ability to overcome challenges and achieve new accomplishments.

The mentorship aspect of the program continues to evolve, driven in part, by the needs of the youth and the areas that they wish to explore and develop, and by the program mandate of developing citizenship awareness and skills. It is recommended that the Programming Committee of PTB assist staff members to explore the future development of the mentoring component. The goal would be to establish a plan and
format around mentoring that could lead to youth opportunities for internship opportunities or for employment elsewhere. For example, leadership and outdoor skills learned through mentoring are transferrable skills that enable youth to work at a plethora of outdoor programs and camps.

Cultural Programming

In 2006, 60% of the youth participants identified themselves as Aboriginal (Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society, 2009). Many of the programs take place on traditional Coast Salish territory. The First Nations youth, who attend the program, bring their culture, heritage, knowledge and experience with them. Living and learning in Coast Salish territory increases the awareness of Aboriginal culture and provides a natural opportunity for all of the youth in the program to learn about the history and people of this land.

It is recommended that PTB continue to develop cultural programming within the Wilderness School. Elders, knowledge keepers, youth workers and First Nations mentors can be hired to share culturally-appropriate teachings in a respectful manner, with the understanding that many cultural teachings are private and belong to the Coast Salish people. In developing this area of the program, there are great opportunities for inter-generational learning and storytelling and PTB can continue to cultivate a space where all cultures are honored, respected and celebrated. Eventually, PTB will have the opportunity to offer up intern and staff positions to the youth who are currently enrolled in the Wilderness School.
Consistency with Program Objectives

An enthusiastic “family” of staff, participants, parents, volunteers, donors and Board members surround PTB. This culture naturally generates excitement, and fabulous ideas constantly emerge for new program ideas, new clientele, etc. This can, however, be distracting and ultimately destructive if the program loses its focus and is persuaded to alter its route (for example, potential funding opportunities, etc.). It is strongly recommended that the Wilderness School develop in a manner that is consistent with the mandate and learning objectives of the program. The best way to do this is to evaluate the program regularly, build upon the successes and develop programs in a manner that builds upon the experiences and skills of the previous year. In the word of one of the staff members:

*If we spread ourselves thin, we are less resilient. Really thinking about what is unique that we offer. I think we have identified it. It is the middle ground between complete clinical treatment models and complete recreation. So then let’s provide that. (PTB staff member)*

Accreditation of the Wilderness School

An important educational goal of the Wilderness School is to have the course accredited with the School Board and Ministry of Education. Both Trails Youth Initiatives (TYI) and Earthquest have accomplished this within the Toronto and Vernon school boards, suggesting its feasibility. Having the program accredited would be an added incentive for participating youth and would formally acknowledge the learning inherent in outdoor experiential education. It is recommended that PTB draw on its key
champions (community partners, donors, parents, etc.) and statistics from similar programs (eg. 76% of graduate TYI students go on to post-secondary education) to convey the value and importance of this program to the Ministry of Education. Dropout rates, isolation from peers, bullying, abuse and health and wellness are of concern for all school boards. Programs like the Wilderness School, TYI and Earthquest have an educational approach that supports student growth and increased opportunities for leadership, emotional literacy, peer support and confidence building.

Securing a Permanent Base Camp

Attaining a permanent site for the Wilderness School is a long-term goal, one that the Board of Directors includes in their Strategic Plan. Although the mobility factor poses logistical, financial and cohesion challenges, it also keeps the program fresh and creative and is the most practical option at this time.

The logistics of organizing the Wilderness School as an afterschool program are too challenging and unrealistic at this time. Youth attend different schools and PTB does not have a suitable location that youth could drop into for after-school programming. This would require both a suitable location and the addition of staff.
Professional Development

Staff members at the Wilderness School play an important role in modeling and teaching emotional literacy. It is recommended that PTB staff members continue to access ongoing training through professional development, so that they are able to further develop their skills. Staff members benefit from ongoing seminars and training related to mental health, learning to detect signs and symptoms and referring youth participants to appropriate health care professionals. It is recommended that staff members continue to be paid for their time to debrief, to reflect on the program components and to collaborate on program development, as this is an important learning process for ongoing professional development.

Evaluation

Ongoing evaluation (of the program, youth and staff members) by the youth and staff members is a core component of the ongoing evolution of the Wilderness School, and a necessary one, as new staff members are hired and new participants are recruited each year. The inclusion of youth input is unique to the school and helps to steer and devise a program that is engaging, safe and educational while also reflective of the needs and ideas of the participating youth.

Staff members monitor the progress of youth through written reports that are distributed three times a year. These reports highlight attendance, health issues, risk management, self-care, personal development and relationships with peers and staff. The
self-evaluation that youth provide plays an important part in the evaluative process. The reports are shared with parents, teachers, counselors and probation officers (if they have any involvement with the youth justice system), and can have a significant impact on their lives.

Evaluation procedures, be they written and/or oral, are vital expressions of those active in the program. The evaluation process seeks and incorporates staff and participant input. It is recommended that PTB continue its policy of systemically evaluating the program and of conscientiously using the feedback from those evaluations to adjust and develop the program. Their present democratic approach to program development broadens the ownership and vested interest in the Wilderness School program.

Parent Involvement

Staff members have been trying new methods of getting families more involved. Recently, they offered a kayaking day where the youth taught their parents how to paddle; the youth were the experts sharing their knowledge with family members. This was an extremely successful event. Staff identified their desire of getting families involved based upon the goals that the youth had identified. It is recommended that the staff members continue to intentionally encourage parent participation and offer family-oriented events, particularly in the local community, as these are easily accessible. By attending an event, parents signal their support of their child and pride in their accomplishment. It also allows an opportunity to build stronger staff/parent relationships and strengthen the support network for the youth participants. Parents gain a greater

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understanding of the PTB program, allowing them to relate better to their child’s experiences.

Donor Involvement

Donors play an important role for the PTB Wilderness School, supporting the program through their generosity and funding. Donors are informed about the program through letters, reports and media coverage. Donors are invited to attend some of the activities and events such as graduations. It is recommended that donors continue to be informed about developments in the Wilderness School and the ongoing pursuit to have the four-year program accredited.

Conclusion

The Power to Be Wilderness School continues on its evolutionary journey, absorbing and building upon its successes and morphing into a more effective model. The school has carved out a unique niche in the field of outdoor experiential education in Canada, based upon its strengths: active youth participation; committed staff members; a focus on healthy relationships and pro-social behaviour; community-based programming; voluntary participation; the creation of a safe place to express oneself; the length and mobility of the program; and, reconnecting or building a relationship with the natural environment. The youth involved continue to have the opportunity to experience and benefit from these strengths. While doing so, they explore and foster respect for Mother
Earth, paddle atop shimmering waves and enjoy shady refuge in the arms of ancient cedar trees.

Each youth brings gifts, skills and talents to the program: energy; motivation; laughter; dreams; ideas; and, strengths that have yet to be discovered. It is an important to support programs like the PTB Wilderness School that encourage and enable youth to gain rich knowledge and discern their unique abilities. Adolescence is a challenging time, and anyone who has read this far, has maneuvered his or her way through those challenging transformative years.

The PTB Wilderness School program is also in adolescence, exploring new experiences and strategies for teaching and learning. The program continues to evolve and is evaluated and modified according to the needs of the youth participants. I sincerely appreciate the time and stories that each of the staff members have shared with me, and I thank the youth for inviting me to their spring camp and treating me with respect. I am excited to witness the transformative process that youth experience in this program as they foster relationships with themselves, each other, nature and the community.

The outdoors has been the best classroom for me, providing holistic education opportunities. I have been both a student and teacher in the Eurocentric model of education and acknowledge its practical application in attempting to educate the masses. Many students thrive in this setting; however, many others do not. Alternative models of education, such as Outdoor Experiential Education, offer hands-on learning for youth in a setting and format that is meaningful, relevant and potentially catalytic to future learning.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Hello my name is Sarah Cormode and I am conducting a study entitled *Identifying Core Components of the Power to Be Wilderness School*. I would like to invite staff members of the Wilderness School to participate in this study, as you have valuable knowledge and experience in outdoor experiential education and the Wilderness School.

The interview will take no more than an hour. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. The purpose of the interview is to identify the core components of the Power To Be Wilderness School, as related to curriculum, teaching and learning styles, and the outdoor learning environment.

You will have the opportunity to review your transcript and make any changes before I analyze the data. You will also have the opportunity to make any further additions to your transcript.

To participate in this study or to obtain more details, please contact Sarah Cormode at 250------ or by email at cormode@uvic.ca
APPENDIX B: SCRIPT FOR RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

Hello my name is Sarah Cormode and I am conducting a study entitled Identifying Core Components of the Power to Be Wilderness School. I would like to invite staff members of the Wilderness School to participate in this study, as you have valuable knowledge and experience in outdoor experiential education and the Wilderness School.

I am conducting a study entitled Identifying Core Components of the Power to Be Wilderness School. I would like to interview you so that I can identify the core components of the Power To Be Wilderness School, as related to curriculum, teaching and learning styles, and the outdoor learning environment.

The interview will take no more than an hour. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time.

You will have the opportunity to review your transcript and make any changes before I analyze the data. You will also have the opportunity to make any further additions to your transcript.

I have arranged for a private conference room to conduct interviews, but I can also meet you somewhere else if that is more convenient.

I can send you a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview if you would like.

Do you have any questions?

Are you willing to participate in an interview?

If no: Thank you for your time. [end]

If yes: Great, would you like to schedule a convenient time right now? Would you like me to send you a copy of the interview questions and consent form? You can reach me at 250-------- or by email at cormode@uvic.ca
APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Participant Consent Form
Identifying Core Components of the Power to Be Wilderness School

You are invited to participate in a study entitled Identifying Core Components of the Power to Be Wilderness School that is being conducted by Sarah Cormode, Masters candidate in the School of Curriculum and Instruction, at the University of Victoria.

The principal investigator is Sarah Cormode and her supervisor is Dr. Ted Riecken, the Dean of Education at the University of Victoria. Dr. Jason Price, Faculty of Education, University of Victoria, is the second committee member for this research project. If you have any questions or concerns, the contact information for the principal investigator and committee members is listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Investigator</th>
<th>Phone</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Cormode</td>
<td>(250) 853-3729 work</td>
<td><a href="mailto:cormode@uvic.ca">cormode@uvic.ca</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Ted Riecken, Dean of the Faculty of Education</td>
<td>(250) 721-7757</td>
<td><a href="mailto:deaneduc@uvic.ca">deaneduc@uvic.ca</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Jason Price, Faculty of Education</td>
<td>(250) 721-7830</td>
<td><a href="mailto:jasonp@uvic.ca">jasonp@uvic.ca</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250) 472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca.

Purpose of this Research
To identify core components and unique characteristics of the Wilderness School program at Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society, related specifically to curriculum, teaching pedagogy, and the learning environment.

Importance of this Research
The Wilderness School at PTB formed in 2006 and is currently starting their third cohort of youth participants. As the program evolves, it’s important to identify and evaluate the core components of the program to ensure that objectives are being met. This research is important as it provides a venue for staff to provide feedback regarding the program, and the staff team can continue to develop the curriculum based upon its strengths, successes and needs. This research will contribute to the emerging field of adventure therapy here in Canada. There is very little literature on the topic as most research to date has been conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Participant Selection
You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a staff member at the Power to Be Wilderness School with experience in outdoor experiential education. Jason Cole provided me with your name and contact information as you have first-hand knowledge and experience.
working within the Wilderness School. Jason Cole will not be made aware of your decision to participate or to decline to participate in this study. If you decide to participate, he will not see any of the information that you may provide.

**What is involved?**

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview. The questions you will be asked during the interview are attached to this form. You can choose not to answer any question. I anticipate that the interview will take about an hour depending on how much information you choose to share.

**Risks & Benefits**

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. Your participation in this research may help improve the curriculum and teaching methods used within the Wilderness School. This research provides an opportunity to share your vision and ideas for the future of the Wilderness School.

**Compensation**

As a way to thank you for participating and to recognize the value of the information you may provide, you will be given a gift as a token of our appreciation. If you agree to participate in this study, this form of compensation to you must not be coercive. It is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to study participants. If you would not participate if the compensation were not offered, then you should decline.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be discarded.

**On-going Consent**

I will document your interview using a digital audio recorder and then create a written transcript that does not include your name or any information that could identify you. This interview transcript will then be examined by the principal investigator, Sarah Cormode. If you would like an opportunity to review your transcript and make any modifications (additions or deletions), please check the box below.

□ Yes, I would like to review my interview transcript

**Anonymity & Confidentiality**

Your decision to participate in this study (or to decline) will not be communicated to anyone at your organization. When I transcribe the recording of your interview, I will remove any information that could identify you or other people you might discuss in the interview. Your name will not appear on the transcript and I will not include your name in any reports that come from this study. All of the transcripts will be kept in locked cabinets or in password protected computer files and will not be shared with anyone outside the research team without your written consent.
Dissemination of Results

The results of this study will be shared with others through written reports and presentations. I intend to share the overall results with persons and organizations interested in Outdoor Experiential Education through meetings, conferences, workshops, and academic journals.

If you would like to receive a summary of my findings, please check the box below.

☐ Yes, I would like to receive a summary of our findings

Disposal of Data

Once your interview has been transcribed, I will erase the audio recording. I will keep copies of the transcripts of the interviews, but these will not include names or information that would identify any individual.

Consent

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

_________________________________  __________________________  _____________
Name of Participant                      Signature                          Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and the researcher will take a copy.
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research Questions

- What is your role in the Wilderness School at Power to Be?
- How do you define teaching?
- How do you define learning?
- How do you define curriculum?
- What are the core qualities of your own personal teaching philosophy?
- What are the unique characteristics of the wilderness school program that you offer?
- What are the core components of your curriculum?
- How do you teach the components of your curriculum? [Probe answers to relate back to their answer in the previous question]
- Are you aware of a framework around which your curriculum has been developed? Please explain this framework.
- How do you describe your physical teaching environment?
- What have you learned about teaching in the “outdoor classroom?”
- Is it important for these lessons to take place in the outdoor environment? Why?
- In your opinion, do students develop a relationship with the outdoor/natural environment? What does that process look like?
- What do students learn that is specific to learning in the outdoor environment?
- Do you address the physical needs of students in your curriculum? How? Please explain.
- Do you address the mental needs of students in your curriculum? How? Please explain.
- Do you address the emotional needs of students in your curriculum? How? Please explain.
- Do you address the spiritual needs of students in your curriculum? How? Please explain.
- If you had unlimited resources, how would you teach the curriculum (relate to mental, physical, spiritual, emotional)?
- Is there anything more that you would like to see included in the curriculum?
- Are there any other questions that you think I should ask?
- What do you think the youth bring to the program?