

Meanings values and life course: A study of participants' experiences at a Scottish outdoor education centre

John Telford
PhD thesis, 2011

Residential outdoor education has had a significant formal and informal presence within the education system of the United Kingdom since the 1950s. However, there is little empirical research into the experiences of participants, particularly from a long-term perspective. The present study investigates the meanings, values, and impacts that participants attribute to a five-day residential experience at Ardentinny Outdoor Education Centre, near Dunoon, Scotland. Participants attended the Centre as school pupils between 13 and 16 years of age. Ardentinny Outdoor Education Centre operated as an educational facility under the auspices of the local authority between 1973 and 1996. Participants were contacted between 2007 and 2008, hence a minimum of 11 years after the Centre closed.

Semi-structured questionnaires ($n = 110$) and interviews ($n = 14$) were used to generate data regarding participants' experiences. These were analysed using a hermeneutic approach. Supplementary data were generated from archival documents and interviews ($n = 29$) with various stakeholders in Ardentinny Outdoor Education Centre, ranging from local authority education officers to Centre managers and instructional staff. These supplementary data contribute towards a nuanced interpretive account of participants' experiences that has both breadth and depth.

The data suggest that participants' experiences at Ardentinny Outdoor Education Centre represented highly significant events in their school career. Principal findings relate to themes of achievement, independence and responsibility, and the development of more adult relationships. Seventy-two percent of questionnaire respondents claimed that their experience at Ardentinny Outdoor Education Centre continued to influence their adult lives. This influence was manifested in a variety of ways ranging from a love of the outdoor environment, to choices regarding use of leisure time, to employment choices.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social practice, particularly the concepts of *field* and *habitus*, provides a framework to interpret participants' expressions of the nature of their experiences and the impact those experiences did or did not have on their lives. From this perspective Ardentinny Outdoor Education Centre presented participants with a safe and authentic experience that differed sufficiently from their previous life experiences to allow for the opportunity to develop new understandings of self and the social world. These new understandings were expressed in different ways and at different times over participants' subsequent life course. Understanding the relevance of field and habitus with regards to learning environments and the home environment provides new understandings of the process and impact of outdoor education.