Adolescent identity development has traditionally involved culturally-guided rites of passage. In modern Western society, there is a lack of such experiences available to young people. The prevalence of problem-behaviours and psychological distress in adolescence is symptomatic of students who are ill-prepared for the rigours of adulthood in the 21st century. The responsibility for providing developmental experiences for adolescents has increasingly been placed on schools. Adventure-based education is an innovative approach to teaching a secure sense of self, developing personal responsibility and acquiring coping and communication skills. Traditionally, adventure education has varied from school camps, to expedition programs, to longer-term extra-curricular programs such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. More recent applications include employing specialist adventure education teachers in schools, placing more emphasis on dramatic and creative arts as healthy challenges, and utilising expeditionary learning principles in school classrooms. Overall, empirical evidence from over one hundred studies suggests that adventure education programs are comparable in educational outcomes with other forms of innovative classroom-based affective education and psychotherapeutic self-esteem outcomes. Clearly, governments, schools and researchers should be looking to develop partnerships to better facilitate access to such opportunities for all adolescents.

About the author

James is a lecturer in the Centre for Applied Psychology. He has a particular interest in researching adolescent and adult development. James worked for 10 years as an outdoor education instructor, researcher and consultant. Currently James is involved in researching the role of mental health, coping skills, life effectiveness skills and resilience in human development. In addition, James teaches in the area of personality, intelligence and research methods. James is particularly interested in forging research and evaluation partnerships with local providers of intervention programs for youth. Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to James Neill, Centre for Applied Psychology, University of Canberra, ACT 2601; email: james.neill@canberra.edu.au.
Adolescent identity development has traditionally involved culturally-guided rites of passage. Often these rites of passage have guided young people towards maturity through physical and spiritual developmental challenges. However, in modern Western society, there is a lack of such experiences available for young people. Problem-behaviours such as delinquency and drug-abuse can be seen as natural risk-taking behaviours seeking expression in a ‘riteless’ society which has lost touch with the inner needs of its adolescents. Likewise, the disturbing prevalence of adolescent psychopathology and sub-clinical states of psychological distress can be seen as signalling that many young people feel as though they have not acquired sufficient coping capacities for the impending task of adulthood in the 21st century.

Clearly, there is a need to better understand the developmental needs of adolescents and to build healthy experiences which can better guide adolescents through the formative period of identity development. Whilst, there is also a need to provide effective acute care for incidences of dysfunction, it is argued that preventative efforts, which aim to foster a secure sense of self and teach a wide range of coping skills, are in need of greater attention.

The responsibility for providing meaningful developmental experiences for young people has increasingly been placed on schools. Schools have become the training ground for children and youth in Western society and, increasingly, are being seen as interventions site for primary and secondary prevention programs (Compas, 1993). Generally speaking, schools have responded to the call for education of the whole person by including personal development as part of the curriculum (such as citizenship, health and physical education, religious studies, etc.) and by offering extracurricular activities (such as school plays, sporting activities, camps, etc.) as a companion to the mainstream curriculum. Unfortunately, unlike academic curriculum, educational approaches to adolescent development vary substantially between schools, with some private schools extremely well-resourced whilst there are limited resources available for state schools to undertake substantial personal development programs for students.

One highly adaptable form of prevention program which is being increasingly utilised in creative ways with schools is known as outdoor education or adventure education. The common philosophy of adventure education programming includes the beliefs that:
- adolescents are more capable than we generally acknowledge;
- human potential can be unlocked through challenging experiences in supportive group environments;
- development through ‘psychological inoculation’.

At best, adventure-based programs can be well-conceived, meaningful integrations of academic curriculum with carefully facilitated adolescent development processes in a supportive outdoor environment; at worst, adventure-based programs can be disorganised, inappropriately designed, and poorly facilitated experiences from which students stand to lose more than they gain. On average, however, research indicates that camping and adventure education programs are reasonably effective means for enhancing adolescent self-esteem, self-concept, locus of control, and so on (Cason & Gillis, 1994; Hans, Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards, 1997; Marsh, 1999; Neill & Richards, 1998).

The evidence for the effectiveness of these experiential learning techniques in schools suggests much potential for utilising adventure-based techniques. However there are substantial variations in the outcomes for different programs. The overall short-term outcome for adventure education
programs, as measured by meta-analyses of over 100 studies, is approximately .35 (Cason & Gillis, 1994; Hans, 1999; Hattie, et al, 1997; Marsh, 1999). This can be compared favourably to innovative, affective classroom-based programs (.28) and self-esteem outcomes for psychotherapy (.37) (Hattie, et al, 1997). Furthermore, it appears that the rich experiential environments provided by adventure education programs facilitate effective transfer to everyday life, with growth continuing well after the immediate buzz of the program (Hattie, et al., 1997).

Adventure programs have been developed in a wide range of formats (see Table 1). For the more traditional formats, useful comparative outcome research is available; however for more recent developments, further experimentation and investigation awaits.

Table 1.
Models of Adventure-based Education Programs in Schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential – Camp</td>
<td>Sport &amp; Recreation</td>
<td>Cost-efficient, residential</td>
<td>Isolated experience, residential, recreational focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential – Expedition</td>
<td>Outward Bound</td>
<td>Personal develop aims, residential, proven outcomes</td>
<td>Isolated experience, needs expense/resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist Educator</td>
<td>Outdoor Education Group</td>
<td>Integration of adventure delivery with curriculum &amp; students</td>
<td>Needs school-level commitment/vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longitudinal, Extra-curricular Program</td>
<td>Duke of Edinburgh Award, Scouts</td>
<td>Length, cost-efficient, multiple domains</td>
<td>Needs motivation of students &amp; teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor &amp; Mobile</td>
<td>Mobile Team Challenge, USA</td>
<td>Availability &amp; flexibility</td>
<td>Not well known or evaluated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential Challenge</td>
<td>Intertouch (Czechoslovakia OB)</td>
<td>Flexibility, learning styles</td>
<td>Not well known or evaluated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative &amp; Dramatic</td>
<td>ELOB, USA</td>
<td>Full curriculum integration</td>
<td>Needs government commitment/vision &amp; evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notable features of effective school-based primary prevention programs which can be recommended are that the program:

- be physically oriented,
- use the school context, but outside of the immediate school environment,
- take place in a residential setting,
- be of a long duration,
- be conducted by therapists or trained group leaders,
- incorporate the aims of adolescents, parents and teachers, and
- include teachers, parents and others involved with adolescents as targets in the program (Compas, 1993; Neill, 1994; Neill & Richards, 1998).
Conclusion

Modern Western culture provides limited opportunities for healthy, guided rites of passage. Schools of the 21st century will need to respond to student and social needs by adapting curriculum delivery to facilitate the healthy psychological development of children and adolescents. There is more than sufficient evidence to justify educators and policy makers making more room for implementing adventure-based programming in mainstream schooling.

References


