“Being Comfortable with the Uncomfortable”: Adolescent Girls’ Experiences of an Extended Outdoor Adventure Program

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Abstract
This study examined the impacts of long-term exposure of outdoor adventure programming (OAP) for adolescent girls. This qualitative study shares the stories of the 8th grade students at the French Broad River Academy for girls, which is a private middle school that integrates OAP into its curricula located in Asheville, North Carolina, USA. Students reflected on what OAP has meant to them during their 2.5 years at the school. Photo-elicitation methods were used to capture these experiences. Girls took pictures of their outdoor experiences over the course of their final semester and then used these pictures as a prompt to tell their stories during focus group interviews. Emergent themes from the focus group interviews included: Relationship & Community, Perseverance & Resiliency, Enjoyment & Finding Beauty in Nature, Leadership & Confidence, and Individual Growth. This study indicates that adolescent girls’ participation in OAP can build self-confidence, increasing their likelihood of a bright future.

KEYWORDS: Adolescent girls, outdoor adventure programming, photo elicitation, focus group interviews

Introduction
This study examined the impacts of long-term exposure of outdoor adventure programming for adolescent girls. Through a narrative style of inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Marshall & Rossman, 2016), this qualitative analysis shares the stories of the 8th grade students at the French Broad River Academy (FBRA) for girls, which is a private middle school that weaves outdoor adventure programming (OAP) throughout their curricula. Students reflected on what OAP meant to them during their three years at the school. Photo-elicitation methods were used to capture these experiences. Girls took pictures of their outdoor experiences over the course of their final semester, and then used these pictures as a prompt to tell their stories during focus group interviews. Emergent themes from the focus group interviews provide a window into the power of longer term, iterative outdoor adventure programming for girls, which could help to justify the added expense of prolonged OAP offerings (Galeotti, 2015).

The idea for this study originated through personal reflections of the primary researcher (hereafter referred to as “I”) on my years as an adolescent girl and my time as a program direc-
tor for an all-girls adventure summer camp. During my adolescence, I felt misunderstood. I did not trust authority figures, was extremely self-conscious, and often depressed. I habitually felt the grips of childhood bliss and teenage culture simultaneously ripping me apart during those younger years. The pressure from peers to mature quickly and conform to feminine societal expectations stifled the adventurous little girl begging to roam freely in the woods. Wanting to feel accepted among my friends, I left behind the young, independent, opinionated, barefooted girl for the insecure, approval-seeking, conforming teenager. Through my college outdoor leadership program and a summer camp counseling job, I rediscovered the girl from my childhood. I look back on my adolescence and cannot help but think what it would have been like to have someone show me that the girl from my youth was always meant to be a part of me. Rediscovering her helped me find my voice, passions, and a healthier view of myself.

My research into adolescent development and my professional time spent with girls revealed that my experience is not singular; many girls have similar stories regarding their adolescent years. I have had the opportunity to work within girls-specific summer camp programming over the past few years. I built close relationships with many campers, staff, and alumni. During this time, it was common to hear their stories of extraordinary growth and broadening perspectives discovered through camp experiences, only to return to a world that does not understand or embrace this new development within them. Thus, I believe the stories of adolescent girls within OAP are something to further explore. I desire to provide support to young girls who are experiencing similar life challenges as I did in the vulnerable stage of adolescence. Sharing the stories of young girls who have benefited from the growth of outdoor adventure programming will allow their voices to be heard and hopefully speak to ways in which we can support adolescent girls in programs and schools. This study examines the stories of the 8th grade girls at the French Broad River Academy.

**Literature Review**

The adolescent years are a vital yet frequently challenging time (Witt & Caldwell, 2018), especially for girls. Girls experience specific challenges more often than boys, including mental health issues, poor self-body image (Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016); low confidence (Steinberg & Morris, 2001); and limited interest in physical activity (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2020). OAP can provide pivotal growth experiences and tools to help young girls navigate these difficulties. Numerous studies have measured the positive outcomes from programs utilizing the outdoors as a platform for growth and support for girls (Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016; Hubert et al., 2020). However, examining the impact of OAP on adolescent girls is still relatively new, and notably, most research in this area has focused on programs of shorter durations (a few days to two weeks). The question of the relationship between program length and participant outcomes has been ongoing and yet, little research has investigated an outdoor adventure program embedded in a middle-school setting (Rushford et al., 2020; Sibthorp & Jostad, 2014). Therefore, further research is needed to examine participants’ perceptions of their learning, growth, and related outcomes following participation in outdoor adventure programming over multiple years.

**Adolescent Development**

Early adolescence (ages 10 to 14) and mid-adolescence (ages 15 to 17) are stages in an individual’s life that are broadly known as precarious developmental stages (Witt & Caldwell, 2018). Various physical, mental, and emotional changes and transitions occur during this time (Gilmore & Meersand, 2014; Perry & Pauletti, 2011). Due to these changes within the body and

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1The students who come to the school all identify as girls. All students in this study were cis-gender females with one non-binary student.
mind, adolescents are especially susceptible to environmental and other contextual influences surrounding them, such as peer pressure and reckless desires/curiosities (Hubert et al., 2020). Combined, these changes can considerably affect how well adolescents adjust and navigate their relationships with peers, parental figures, and themselves. While further research into the physiological and social development of adolescents is needed, the literature does agree that there is a set of unique developmental challenges (e.g., puberty and social changes) that affect all aspects of a young person’s life (Gilmore & Meersand, 2014; Hubert et al., 2020; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). However, what of the challenges specifically faced by girls?

Adolescent Girls

According to Perry and Pauletti (2011), gender and sex play a significant role in managing the aforementioned challenges. Research shows a few significant differences between adolescent girls and boys, which include abilities and interests, self-image, social relationships, aggression, and depression (Hubert et al., 2020; Perry & Pauletti, 2011). Due to the seriousness of depression, we examine it further here.

Rates of depression in children are generally equal between sexes until 10 to 15 years of age. At this point, the rate of depression doubles for girls and continues to trend upward through middle adulthood (Hubert et al., 2020). Furthermore, girls are also more susceptible to thoughts that can lead to depression, including self-blaming, poor body image, and negative social comparison (Gilmore & Meersand, 2014; Perry & Pauletti, 2011).

These areas of concern stem from gender role stereotypes, societal influences, beliefs, and values from friends and family, leading to adolescent girls’ preoccupation with beauty, fitting into those gender role stereotypes, and peer pressure (Galeotti, 2015; Whittington, 2006). Compounding these challenges, current trends in social media use create significant societal influences, which hold power over adolescents (Wicks, 2020). One way to mitigate these challenges is through OAP.

Outcomes of Outdoor Adventure Programming for Adolescent Girls

Previous research has documented various outcomes for girls participating in OAP including vital social and life skills such as resiliency (Whittington & Aspelmeier, 2018; Whittington & Budbill, 2013; Whittington et al., 2016), confidence, courage, positive body image, and empowerment (Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016; Hubert et al., 2020; Whittington, 2006). Additionally, OAPs can help girls address depression, poor body image, and eating disorders (Gilmore & Meersand, 2014; Girl Scouts Research Institute, 2020; Juoven et al., 2004; Steinberg & Morris, 2001), and provide space for girls to explore social expectations, body changes, and identity (Whittington, 2011). A review of the existing literature on OAP for adolescent girls shows overall outcomes of resiliency, courage, positive body image, a break down of gender stereotypes, relationship significance, and long-term impacts.

Resiliency

Research on OAP has shown beneficial results supporting youth resilience (Whittington & Aspelmeier, 2018). Additionally, Whittington and Budbill (2013) studied the outcomes of a specific adventure education program for girls, Dirt Divas, a mountain biking program for adolescent girls ages 11-16. One of the desired outcomes for Dirt Divas is to support girls’ resiliency. In a qualitative study, Whittington and Budbill (2013) found improved resiliency especially in correlation with the relational-cultural theory (RCT). This theory suggests that psychological growth occurs in relationships. For example, young girls who have healthy connections with their peers will support each other, learn how to make mutual contributions to the well-being of others, be more courageous, and thereby improve their confidence. While this is just a single
case, there are many programs like Dirt Divas, and as Schofield (2007) suggested, the greater the similarity between programs, the greater the potential for generalization beyond the single case.

**Courage**

Girls ages 9 to 11 generally do not question their self-worth. They are confident in their thoughts and feelings, and they are outspoken about it. However, this confidence erodes throughout adolescence (Whittington & Mack, 2010). In the face of cultural pressures, social inconsistencies, and gender stereotyping, many girls find themselves losing their voice, which is ultimately their courage (Whittington & Mack, 2010).

Whittington and Mack (2010) attempted to record outcomes related to courage among the girls who participated in the Passages Northwest programs. They used quantitative methods to collect data via pre-and post-program questionnaires. Overall, there was growth in courage amongst the girls, specifically expressive (e.g., speaking or sharing in front of a group), physical, and moral courage. This study’s four main themes—acceptance/confidence, perseverance, interpersonal relationships, and voice—show that the girls were able to experience courage during the adventure program, and also that they planned, post-program, to be courageous at home or school.

**Positive Body Image and Breaking Down Gender Stereotypes**

In contemporary Western society, and through social media influences in particular, femininity emphasizes beauty and outward appearances as a top priority for girls (Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016; Whittington, 2006; Wicks, 2020). OAPs that focus on positive development among girls can offer avenues for them to resist and challenge these social stereotypes. Outdoor adventure programs for girls offer positive gender identity development and body image, challenging gender constructs and promoting perseverance, strength, and determination (Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016; Galeotti, 2015; Whittington, 2006). Barr-Wilson and Roberts (2016) found that body image can impact girls in outdoor adventure settings. They interviewed girls who participated in a California-based adventure program, Girl Ventures, before and after the course (immediately after and three months after). All participants indicated their body image perceptions were improved during and immediately after their course. Most claimed that their body image was still positively affected three months after the course was completed (Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016). Three main influences affected the participants’ view on positive body image: the instructors, nature, and relationships with other girls on the trip.

**Relationship Significance and Long-Term Impacts**

Whittington (2011) studied the long-term impact of participating in a wilderness adventure program when she interviewed girls at three different stages after their trip: 6 months, 18 months, and 5 years following the course. The entire course consisted of a year-long mentoring program, a weekend paddle-making event before the main trip, and a 3-week canoeing expedition. Five years post program, this study showed that girls’ participation in an adventure program results in long-term positive impacts on their abilities in technical-skill development, communication, teamwork, leadership, and perseverance (Whittington, 2011).

A reoccurring theme in the related research is the significance of relationships for adolescent girls and their development (Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016; Hubert et al., 2020; Sammet, 2010). In OAPs designed to foster relationship and community amongst girls, more significant growth in areas such as increasing self-esteem, resiliency, courage, and going against gender stereotypes are present (Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016; Whittington & Budbill, 2013). The design of OAPs is inherently communal, and these studies reveal how powerful outdoor experiences can be when it comes to aiding the positive development of adolescent girls.

In summary, adolescent development is challenging for young people, and research shows it is especially difficult for girls. Previous studies confirm that OAP supports adolescent girls in developing social skills and building confidence, resilience, courage, self-worth, and positive body
image. While there is a growing body of literature in support of these benefits and outcomes for adolescent girls who participate in outdoor adventure programming, further case analysis would strengthen the generalizing power of the aforementioned claims. In an effort to contribute to this growing body of literature, this present study chose a case location unique amongst the examined research. Although described later in further detail, this inquiry examined the outcomes of adolescent girls who participated in an OAP regularly over the course of 3 years. As such, it provides a window into the impact of longer-term, iterative outdoor adventure programming for girls, which could help to justify the added expense of prolonged OAP offerings (Galeotti, 2015).

**Methods**

Through a narrative style of inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Marshall & Rossman, 2016), this study used qualitative methods to tell the stories of the 8th grade students at the French Broad River Academy (FBRA) for girls in Asheville, North Carolina, USA. Narrative inquiry is a method of exploration that uses storytelling to uncover nuance and make meaning. It provides the opportunity for dialogue and reflection and allows the participants of the study to tell their own stories (Wang & Geale, 2015). Narrative inquiry is the study of how humans experience the world. As early as the mid-1800s, narrative inquiry has been used within sociology and anthropology, and more recently (beginning in the 1980s) has grown in popularity within the field of education (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Beyond telling a story, narrative inquiry allows researchers to understand the participants’ experiences. It allows researchers to get information that the storyteller may not consciously know, allowing for hidden assumptions to rise to the surface. This form of methodology allowed the FBRA girls to share their OAP experiences in the form of stories during focus group interviews. Photo-elicitation focus group interviews and an inductive thematic analysis process used in this study resulted in a rich collection of emergent themes that help tell the story of these students. Specifically, these data express the meaning of OAP for these adolescent girls over an extended period.

**Site and Participant Selection**

Since its beginning in 2013, the French Broad River Academy for Girls (FBRA) has strived to provide a holistic education for grades 6-8, teaching approximately 75 students each school year. The sample for the study was the 2021/2022 8th grade class (n=24). The 8th grade students (rather than the 7th or 6th) were chosen because they have more OAP experiences from the previous 3 years. Along with a varied, weekly academic schedule, lessons are accompanied by field experiences via a comprehensive OAP related curriculum of whitewater paddling, climbing, hiking, skiing, service learning, and international travel. This OAP provides a structured environment for students to take risks, face and overcome challenges, and build confidence along with leadership skills that will serve them for years to come (FBRA, 2021). As a participant researcher, I joined the students and instructors six times throughout the semester on outdoor programming days to better understand the program and build rapport with the students prior to data collection.

**Data Collection**

**Photo-Elicitation Focus Groups**

Photo elicitation was chosen for this study because it provides access to the personal values and understanding of the participants. The participant-chosen photos provide rich emotional content thereby eliciting a deeper understanding of the students’ experiences (Loeffler, 2004). Within this study, photo elicitation consisted of participants taking pictures over the course of a semester, and then using the pictures to share their story during focus groups, at the end of the semester. There were three different focus groups, each with eight students.

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As part of the FBRA outdoor adventure programs, the students each received a disposable camera with 24 exposures. They used this camera to capture and interpret their experiences while participating in their outdoor field lesson days. Following IRB approval, the study was introduced in October, 2021 and the students received the following prompt with their camera:

Take pictures of what you want to remember most about your time during outdoor activities at the FBRA. Take photos of what means the most to you during these experiences. Please try and take pictures spread out throughout the semester. A suggestion would be about seven photos a month. These do not have to be staged photos – feel free to take candid shots of places, people, your friends, selfies, literally whatever you want. This will be different from pictures you take on your phone because they are permanent and will ultimately tell a story through film.

The cameras were collected near the end of the semester, and the film was developed digitally. The students each received an email with a link to a private Google Photos album where they selected five pictures they felt best represented their semester and the story of their OAP experiences over the past 2.5 years. The participant-selected photos were printed and then brought to the three focus groups held on December 9, 2021. During the focus group, each student shared their story using their five chosen images. The pictures themselves were not analyzed as data. Rather, they were a form of expression that the students could use to help tell their stories.

Utilizing a Focus Group Interview Script, each student first shared their story, then they responded to a series of semi-structured questions, which allowed the leader to facilitate a group discussion. The stories and conversations were recorded via audio and video. The audio recording was transcribed verbatim using Descript, transcription software. The prompt for the storytelling section was: “What does outdoor adventure programming at French Broad River Academy (FBRA) mean to you”?

Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcriptions from the focus group interviews. Inductive thematic analysis requires that the researcher collect detailed information from participants and then through a coding process form the data into categories or themes. The categories or themes were then compared with related literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data for this study consisted of the transcriptions of the students’ storytelling and facilitated conversations during the focus groups. The themes were determined as a result of coding patterns within the transcripts as opposed to determining themes a priori (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The step-by-step process of data analysis went as follows:

Step 1: Each focus group interview was listened to prior to running each recording through Descript (an online transcription program), and the resultant document was checked for errors. Where necessary, confusion was resolved by reviewing segments of the recording.

Step 2: Focus Group 1 transcript was re-read and coded in Excel. The transcription was divided into brief excerpts, cell-by-cell, in an Excel document and placed in the left-most column of the spreadsheet. Coding columns were placed to the right of the text. After completing the coding process, a code map was created in Word, listing all the created codes (n=41).

Step 3: Focus groups 2 and 3 were similarly coded. When applicable, I decided to code using the same or similar words to the list of codes generated from the first Focus Group Interview transcript. Two additional code maps were made for Focus Groups 2 & 3.

Step 4: All three code maps were evaluated, and codes were collapsed into themes (categories of similar ideas), thereby creating a fourth code map.

Step 5: Representative participant quotes were chosen to exemplify the themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
In summary, using the framework of narrative inquiry, the student's stories were analyzed and placed into themes (Loeffler, 2004). The themes were determined when concepts emerged in repetition from the stories and responses to the scripted questions. The themes helped answer the original research question: What are the individual and collective experiences of the 8th-grade students participating in outdoor adventure programming (OAP) at the French Broad River Academy for girls?

Trustworthiness

Throughout this study, researcher trustworthiness was a goal (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research design was initially evaluated by an expert panel including representation from FBRA. Additionally, the use of the cameras on FBRA expeditions was introduced well-before the research began in order to help the participants become familiar with their use. Further, repeated observations of the research site/community provided a context from which to interpret, with integrity, the participants’ narratives. Two forms of digital recording, audio and visual, were used to ensure the accuracy of the transcription process. During data analysis careful note-taking strategies, such as the coding spreadsheet and coding maps, helped to prevent any drift in the definition of the codes by providing continual opportunity for comparison between quotes and codes. Finally, member checking with the participants and the FBRA administration helped to affirm results.

Limitations/Constraints

The primary limitation to this study is the privilege in which OAP is steeped. Schools and programs that do have the resources should focus on immersive OAP for their students. However, it is important to mention that these activities require significant OAP for their students. For most organizations, there are endless roadblocks to making these programs happen, such as funding, access to outdoor areas, well-equipped and trained staff, and other resources such as transportation. Regardless, it is important to advocate that more adolescent girls have these types of opportunities.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the focus group transcriptions resulted in five themes that emerged across all three interviews: Relationship & Community, Perseverance & Resiliency, Enjoyment & Finding Beauty in Nature, Leadership & Confidence, and Individual Growth. Along with these primary themes, the last paragraph in this section highlights two secondary themes (exclusion within small groups and autonomous moments) that although slightly less represented, are still essential to give voice to each student. The results and discussion have been organized by theme, followed by in-depth descriptions and representative student quotes.

Relationship and Community

Relationship and community was the most discussed theme within the focus group interviews. The students consistently talked about how vital bonding with their classmates was and felt they had made life-long friends at the FBRA. One student said,

I wanted to take photos that had people in them, because I felt like people were what made the experience. I would not want to be camping in a hurricane by myself. I really think the only reason that this experience was so amazing and enjoyable was having everyone to laugh and to sing with and to cry with...we're practically family, really. I could trust anyone with anything.

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Students frequently discussed how all the challenging things they experienced as a group during the OAP brought them together. For example, one student said,

Every time I look at [these pictures], it makes me so emotional seeing the growth of our friendships and bonding and connection and community and I think the reason our relationships with each other and with the teachers are so strong is because of these trips that we go on because...we struggled in the rain and the cold and it’s very unique and it really strengthens everything about you and the people around you.

They were able to see each other at their high points (having a fun time on a trip, conquering fears, learning something quickly), as well as at their lowest points (homesick, cold and wet in the elements, struggling to feel successful at a skill or specific role of the day). The students felt that the challenging experiences they had together and the intimate moments they shared, like long hours riding in the van or talking while hiking, provided the foundations for growing friendships with peers, connecting with and feeling supported and heard by their teachers, and creating a sort of family/communal experience. Having supportive relationships also seemed important to them when it came to progressing in outdoor technical skills and growing in confidence and leadership individually.

The emphasis that these students placed on relationships, friendship, and community within their stories supports previous research that highlights the significance of relationship for adolescent girls and their positive development in areas such as self-esteem, resiliency, courage, and going against gender stereotypes (Barr-Wilson & Roberts, 2016; Whittington & Budbill, 2013). Additionally, this supports Whittington and Budbill’s (2013) findings where improved resiliency was evident with distinct support for the relational-cultural theory (RCT) suggesting that psychological growth occurs in relationships. An RCT model demonstrates that in mutual, supportive relationships, individuals are inspired to offer support to the people around them, be more courageous, and grow in confidence. This can help girls maintain their voice and value connection and relationship with others (Whittington & Budbill, 2013). The current findings and previous studies (e.g., Sammet, 2010; Whittington & Budbill, 2013) make clear the importance of fostering healthy relationships and community within youth development programs, particularly for girls.

**Perseverance and Resiliency**

The second theme was perseverance in the face of challenges and resiliency. Students frequently shared stories of dealing with challenging weather while out on field days or overnight trips. They spoke of these experiences fondly and said that it taught them to learn how to “be comfortable with the uncomfortable.” That was a phrase that was used repeatedly. They shared stories of overcoming fear and accomplishing hard things together. For instance, one student said,

So, this picture was taken right after our [three-day trip] to the Chattooga [River]. I know personally, I was pretty scared [for this trip] because there are supposed to be really hard rapids and stuff, and I didn’t feel ready for it before. But then when I actually got on the river and started paddling, I just remember how everybody there had my back and that [it was] going to be a really fun day. This picture was taken after that and it kind of shows everybody’s excited. Like we conquered it!

They also frequently spoke of having ownership and power over their attitudes and experiences. Despite outside circumstances, they kept saying how they knew it was up to them to make a day fun or exciting. These students took responsibility for their reactions to challenging circumstances, choosing to positively frame the difficulties they experienced. One student said,
It was kind of like a long uphill walk to go to [the bouldering area], and we had to carry these really big mats for bouldering, so, if people fell, they wouldn't get hurt. And the other person had to carry two backpacks. And me and [Lara] were the leaders of the day. And it was like really hard walking. Like we could've made it really negative because it was really hard uphill, but everyone made it so positive, and it was really fun to walk up the hill with the [crash pads].

They also referred to feeling strong and being able to overcome physical challenges. Perseverance and resiliency have both been shown to improve following participation in an OAP. Whittington (2011) found that these life skills are evident within OAP and can provide lasting positive effects for participants at least five years after the experience. Learning how to persevere through challenges at a young age can increase the quality of life for these middle school students in various ways. They will apply this growth to academics, athletics, relationships, and other life challenges while in high school and beyond. Building resiliency and perseverance through outdoor adventure programming will directly aid in the various mental health challenges that adolescent girls are prone to experiencing (Whittington et al., 2016).

**Enjoyment and Finding Beauty in Nature**

Enjoyment was a clear theme interlaced in each of the focus group interviews. Students spoke of having fun, singing songs, sharing in conversation with friends, the joy felt from being immersed in an outdoor experience, camping along the river, playing games, and feeling community connection. In one story, a student shared their experience on an overnight trip,

It was night, and we had just finished cleaning up dinner and everyone was playing red light, green light on the beach...There was a cooler by the canoes, kind of far away, and as I walked over and I filled up my water, I just kind of stood there, and I watched everyone playing, and the moon was super high and it was reflecting on the river and I said to myself, this is the pinnacle of joy right here. I could see the laughter and I could hear the laughter from the other campsite across the river and it was just this moment where I was like, I never want to leave.

Other stories revolved around enjoying riding in the van together and appreciating the time they get to spend outside of the classroom during their school week. Other emergent concepts of enjoyment included finding beauty in nature and feeling a sense of being at peace and calmness. For example, one student said,

I feel like because of the places and stuff we get to do with FBRA, I have found my happy places. I remember this one moment...the last night of the Congaree...I was walking to the van...and I just looked up at the sky and it was super clear, and it there were like a million stars...it was just gorgeous and...it made me so happy.

Time in nature is essential for positive youth development, where youth are engaged in places and activities that allow for active and direct contact with the natural, non-human world (Garst, 2018). Interacting in nature feeds the health and well-being of young people, such as improved concentration, reduced stress, better overall disposition, and enhanced creativity. Experiences outdoors can also help form youth’s ethics, understanding of their world, and their opinions of themselves (Garst, 2018). More specifically, recent research reveals that fun and enjoyment, especially outdoors, promote mental and physical well-being amongst girls (Hubert et al., 2020).
Leadership and Confidence

The third theme that emerged was leadership and confidence. The students reminisced on their experiences with formal types of leadership such as being leaders of the day (which consists of helping the teachers make decisions on logistics, making sure the group has their needs taken care of, and encouraging the group in times of challenge). Regarding casual leadership abilities, students learned how to speak up and use their voice amongst the group. One student spoke of their leadership experiences sharing,

I feel like I really learned how to be a good leader and noticing what the group needs and how I'm feeling myself. And, just noticing how everybody's feeling as a whole and putting out [my] personal needs and just really noticing each individual person, but also everyone. I can notice if one person's not feeling good and having a positive mindset, because if you have a public mindset, you can really bring the whole group up and, say, [if] you have a negative mindset, then it's going to...make the whole group feel bad. So, I really learned...[how to be] with a group and be a good leader.

Students also commented about their willingness to take more risks, socially and physically. Another theme that emerged was the development of confidence. The students occasionally spoke of confidence as feeling like they could overcome some physical challenge or certainty about a specific outcome. However, they predominantly spoke of confidence as assurance in themselves and how this program and their experiences helped them learn to feel comfortable in who they are and feel the freedom to express themselves in front of their friends and teachers. They discussed how this was going to help them make new friends and relationships when they go on to high school and other life situations. One student shared,

I feel like having those good connections with people has helped bring me to find myself more. I'm also more connected with who I am, and I'm more comfortable with who I am because of the people. I don't feel nervous, and I don't have to hide anything. And I think learning how to feel open and good about yourself is a skill that we all have now. And I think that is really important for in high school and on, because you have to present yourself with confidence and feel comfortable with who you are. And I definitely feel like all my friends and peers have brought me out of my shell, a lot.

Growth in leadership and confidence is an important outcome of this OAP program. Girls tend to have a poor view of themselves and are easily susceptible to depression because of it (Perry & Pauletti, 2011). The OAP program at FBRA, and other similar programs, are crucial to helping young girls grow in confidence, improve their views themselves and develop leadership skills (Whittington & Mack, 2010).

Individual Growth

Individual growth was also discussed during each focus group interview. These stories and conversations consisted of many things, from growing in their ability to feel compassion toward others to being flexible under stressful and shifting circumstances in the field. One student answered the question, “Is there something you have learned from these activities that you feel you will carry on after graduating from FBRA?” by saying, “I think it teaches you to have positivity with things. Like, Oh! This might not work, and that's okay.”

Students also spoke of feeling more self-aware, positive, and proud of themselves. They shared stories of feeling more empathy towards other types of people, being resilient, and an overall feeling like they had grown as a person. When discussing the freedom to fail, one student said,
I feel like another thing that we can kind of apply...outside of school is learning [from] your mistakes and failures. We try a lot of things for the first time here, like some of us have never climbed before, or canoed before, skied all that kind of stuff. And so we're obviously not going to be good when we first start, so just knowing that if you're not great at it, or you fail at it in the beginning, then you can learn a lot from it instead of just saying, I can't do this.

Skills such as flexibility, compassion, self-awareness, and learning from mistakes are all things that should persist and continue to grow throughout an individual’s lifetime. Developing these individual growth attributes allows someone to create and sustain strong relationships in life, collaborate and communicate well with others in a workplace setting, and maintain a growth mindset. Whittington (2011) found how individual growth from OAP participation continues years after the initial experience. Because of this, there is even more reason to believe in the significance of the extended exposure to OAP that FBRA provides.

Secondary Themes

The previously mentioned five themes were consistent throughout all three focus group interviews. However, a few themes emerged less frequently, and are examined here.

Class Size

Students mentioned the size of the classes at the school and on trips. Due to small class sizes, students can easily get to know one another and bond. However, it was also clear that some students felt left out or excluded because of the small numbers. For example,

Having such a small community of 24 people, [the] exclusion is so much more evident...Like we have an amazing bond and connection, but...there's still flaws in the system where we're not perfectly connected as we would think with no exclusion or anything. At a larger school or program if there are more people, it gives you more options for a person to find their people.

While inclusivity and compassion are cornerstones at FBRA, students will still form closer relationships with some peers more than others. OAP environments like FBRA foster the ideal environment for relationship development among girls because they consist of small group sizes and physically and mentally challenging tasks that require trust and cooperation (Whittington & Aspelmeier, 2018).

Student Autonomy

An additional theme that emerged was the desire they felt toward opportunities for increased autonomy. The times that the students cherished the most or thought they could bond the most with their friends were times when their teachers were not around. During one conversation about autonomy, a student said,

I'm not saying this is a bad thing, but everything is so structured and planned and there's a plan for every day, but I think that the times that we actually make the most memories is when things go off plan. [The] moments where it is unscheduled and we just get to hang out with our class, or if there's a really bad thunderstorm, like on the Congaree, and we all go sit in our tarps for an hour silently, or just when [unplanned] things happen, is always the most impactful.

The desire and need for autonomy are crucial for youth development and a sign that the adolescent is supported by healthy adult relationships (i.e., parents and teachers) (Larson & Walker, 2018). Much of what young people are involved in today is structured. School, after-school programs, sporting events, music lessons, are all chosen, organized times, leaving students feeling like they have little free time. Therefore, taking the students’ desire for autonomy seriously is
important. Young people want and need more time when they feel like they get to choose what they do and OAPs can provide a unique opportunity to facilitate increased autonomy (Daniel et al., 2014). More autonomous moments can allow for more social growth, independence, and confidence in adolescent girls.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study suggests several positive outcomes from the OAP at the FBRA and specifically speaks to this type of programming for adolescent girls. Using narrative inquiry, this study focused on the participants’ own words to elevate their unique experience as adolescent girls participating in an OAP. The themes that emerged were Relationship & Community, Perseverance & Resiliency, Enjoyment & Finding Beauty in Nature, Leadership & Confidence, and Individual Growth. Along with the emergent themes, the findings of this study suggest that FBRA is generally achieving its goals of developing courage, determination, compassion, and curiosity.

One obstacle of this study was the function of photo elicitation as a data collection method. It was a cumbersome process for the researcher (logistically) and the teachers at the school (physically and logistically). For example, to keep the students from having to be responsible for their cameras all semester, the school kept them in labeled bags in a closet. Before each field lesson, it was the teacher’s responsibility to make sure the cameras made it on the trip and were distributed to each student. Sometimes students would forget to take pictures because the camera would be in their backpack, or they would all be in a dry bag while on the river, which means they forgot about them. It was also a lot of work to develop the pictures, have students pick from the digital files on time, and then print them. Disposable cameras and developing the photos are also expensive; one camera can range from $13-$20.

However, despite these challenges, photo elicitation was still a suitable method for this study for numerous reasons. First, to ensure engaged participation, FBRA students are not allowed to have their personal phones on trips, so the disposable cameras were a good option for capturing pictures. Second, a lot of the students mentioned how much they enjoyed the process of taking the photos. For instance, they said that using the cameras required them to give more thoughtful intention about what they were experiencing in the moment. One student said, “I really enjoyed having my own camera and just being able to like take one picture [and] not being able to see what it looked like. So, it was just like, you couldn’t change it back.”

Lastly, having the photos on the day of the focus group interviews was valuable. They gave the students inspiration, something tangible to take as a memory, and something for the listeners to see while the storyteller spoke. This use of photos appears important as today’s youth interact with media regularly; the use of images and video are a primary form of communication and connection for them (boyd, 2014). This makes photo elicitation an opportunistic form of data collection when working with this population. Therefore, the negative aspects of photo-elicitation with disposable cameras are simply things to consider for a future researcher contemplating this method.

Considerations for Future Research and OAP Programming

This study affirmed the effectiveness of FBRA’s approach to OAP. While the type of programming offered at the FBRA is not possible for every school or program, these findings suggest that more OAP for adolescent girls over an extended period would have great benefits. Somewhat unique to FBRA, the students spoke specifically to the change they experienced from 6th grade to 8th grade. Importantly, the student’s excitement and appreciation for OAP at FBRA was sustained over multiple years. This suggests that the benefits of OAP are not limited to novel experiences, and that iterative exposure can continually deepen participant’s growth.
In conclusion, outdoor adventure programming for adolescent girls offers the opportunity to build community, facilitate the growth of perseverance and resiliency, encourage a love of nature, create enjoyment, teach confidence, practice leadership, and foster personal growth. Participation among adolescent girls can contribute to healthier communities with self-confident young people, providing positive directions for a brighter future.

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