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A small-scale evaluation of instructional approaches and perspectives on the benefits of adventurous education for young people

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ABSTRACT

The addition of Outdoor and Adventurous Activities (OAA) throughout the national curriculum for physical education in England and Wales has added a new dimension to the often-questioned traditional teaching curricula associated with competitive sport. Yet, the research base linked to the field of OAA has limited insight into the views of the instructors who integrally facilitate such experiences. This study analysed the perspective of instructors regarding their perceptions of the benefits associated with OAA participation for young people, but also some of the pivotal teaching approaches used to optimise such developments. Six OAA instructors from the United Kingdom participated in a cross-sectional qualitative case study and were interviewed to gauge their perspectives on the benefits and teaching approaches utilised in adventurous education. The emerging dominant theme demonstrates a link between the specific and intentional pedagogic strategies of the instructors and the intended developmental outcomes for young people.

Introduction

Traditional physical education (PE) curricula have been questioned regarding their impact on students' learning, health, phyco-social behaviours, and motivation (Chen & Garn, 2018; Green, 2014). With greater emphasis often placed on competition, Ennis (2017) demonstrated how some pupils endure PE, subsequently associating negative experiences with other physical activity environments in later life (Herold, 2020; Ladwig et al., 2019). Consequently, there have been calls for a greater emphasis on Outdoor and Adventurous Activities (OAA) within PE curricula (Department for Education and Skills, 2006), whereby valuable and transformational experiences have been recognised as foundational outcomes stemming from elements of risk, challenge, and adventure (Reed & Smith, 2021; Sutherland & Legge, 2016). Therefore, in securing a place within the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) (Department for Education, 2013), Wainwright and Williams (2020) suggest that young people have the opportunity to participate and obtain the holistic outcomes associated with these experiences across different learning domains. For example, OAA participants have reported development across the cognitive, social, psychological, and physical domains (Peng & Lau, 2022).

Despite OAA's position in the curriculum, Doran (2016), Beames et al. (2017), and DeLange et al. (2019) acknowledge limited theory-guided research in the field of adventure. Further, Wainwright and Williams (2016a, 2016b) and Thomas (2019) consider how models-based approaches and

strategies often aim to enhance adventure pedagogy, demonstrating some of the relationships between contemporary theory and practice. This was built on recently by Mees and Collins (2022) who demonstrated how Outward Bound instructors draw on Hahnian approaches to participant development. They also captured some of the complexity that comes with working toward the development of young people in the outdoors, showing how context, situational awareness, and appropriate strategies are drawn from practical wisdom (Mees & Collins, 2022).

However, DeLange et al. (2019) highlighted that instructor focused studies are under-researched which sometimes overlooks the important views of those who facilitate adventure-based activities. Instructors play a pivotal role in shaping the benefits that can be drawn from OAA experiences, especially through selection, planning, facilitation, progression, and reflection which are often at the core of OAA practice (Mees et al., 2020). Whilst the experience alone can be beneficial, with skilled instructing the benefits can be enhanced (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014). Whilst we acknowledge that there are a range of benefits to OAA participation, when exploring instructor perspectives on the benefits of OAA, it is also necessary to consider what role learning transfer might play. Brown (2010) suggests the very concept of learning transfer needs to be revisited in OAA, others (e.g. Cooley et al., 2016; Meerts-Brandsma et al., 2019) have concluded that students do transfer their experiences and learning from OAA into other contexts, however this remains a contentious field. This study seeks to build on this by evaluating instructor perspectives on the relationships between instructional approaches and the perceived benefits of OAA for young people.

This study set out to explore the perspectives of six instructors and intends to offer at least some insight into the beliefs and situated experiences of instructor practices. To assess this, the overarching research questions were: *What (if any) are the perspectives of OAA instructors on the benefits of OAA for young people? How do instructors facilitate and deliver OAA in order for these benefits to be achieved?* The paper starts off by outlining the relevant literature as it relates to the importance of OAA in the lives of young people.

Please note that this study did not assess actual outcomes in participants but focused on the effects the instructor's perspectives had on how they facilitated OAA. This responds to the call from DeLange et al. (2019) on the need for further study into instructor perspectives.

What the literature tells us

This section places the study in context and offers a rounded synthesis of the current literature relating to participant outcomes and instructor perspectives. We begin by providing a definition of OAA, where we draw on experiential education literature, and then continue to evaluate literature relevant for the present research.

The study context

Conceptualised by Dewey (1938),, we draw on the basis of experiential education, which we describe as the process of learning through direct experience, whereby knowledge is constructed and deepened through personal reflective practice (Berry & Hodgson, 2011; Chiu, 2019; Gülen & Taş, 2019; Humberstone & Stana, 2011). We do so following Hodgson and Berry (2011) who suggest that through compelling adventurous activities that are grounded in experiential learning practice, learners are encouraged to embrace risk and challenge. Unlike passive and narrower forms of classroom-based study, learners engage with the real world with real consequences in authentic outdoor environments, often in environments away from the school setting where they stay for an extended period of time in an OAA centre.

OAA and its (potential) position within the physical education curriculum

In a more general sense, Gibb, while addressing the Education Reform Summit in 2015, outlined the general purpose of education for young people, stating that they should have 'the resilience and moral character to overcome challenges and succeed' (Department for Education, 2015, para. 2). Interestingly, Booth and Neill (2017) and Gray (2019) highlight how the development of psychological, emotional, and physical resilience in learners may be considered some of the hallmarks of OAA. Alongside this, numerous studies (Boyes et al., 2018; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013; Ewert &Overholt, 2014; Gray, 2019; Reed & Smith, 2021) ascribe resilience development with OAA participation, thereby matching the curriculum goals in England and Wales with the implementation of such programmes (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2008; Department for Education, 2013). Despite this, Gough (2007) acknowledged that outdoor learning activities are often marginalised in favour of what Reed (2022a) described as narrow curricular endeavours which focus on standardisation and academic achievement.

OAA and lifelong pursuits

It has been noted that OAA has links to the development of lifelong physical activity (Dustin & Schwab, 2014; Maude, 2010; Thomas, 2015a; Wainwright & Williams, 2020). Pupils may be able to access authentic and meaningful experiences by tapping into and building an enthusiasm for adventure. Within this, Dustin and Schwab (2014) discuss the importance of choosing activities such as hiking, camping, kayaking, and mountain biking to ensure participation can be achieved throughout a variety of settings with lifelong viability. Essentially, it is necessary to select activities that are perhaps a little easier to access away from the OAA environment.

While more evidence is available in the wider PE context, childhood memories have also been used to determine relationships between physical activity-based experiences and successive adulthood physical activity behaviours and attitudes (Ladwig et al., 2019; Waite, 2007). From the retrospective survey presented by Ladwig et al. (2019), 56% of 1028 respondents connected their best memories of school-based PE to enjoyment, while 18% associated a lack of enjoyment with their worst. Meanwhile, Waite (2007), focussing on outdoor education, suggests that memories of the outdoors and of OAA are mostly positive, supporting the concept of positive youth experiences leading to sustained engagement.

Holistic development

Identified throughout the literature (Edwards et al., 2016; Firm & Griggs, 2012; Griffin, 2020; Lawrence, 2018; Wainwright & Williams, 2016a), OAA appears to have a major impact upon the affective domain of learning, whereby many holistic qualities including values, self-concepts, and motivations are developed. This links into personal growth more broadly, which has been recognised as ' . . . one of the most visible and advertised outcomes of adventure education' (Ewert & Garvey, 2007, p. 29), whereby direct and purposeful exposure facilitates both intra and interpersonal developments (Sheard & Golby, 2006). Moreover, Scrutton's (2015) findings demonstrate that participants who present with relatively poor personal and social skills tend to benefit most from OAA. Despite this, Scrutton (2015) noted a significant loss of benefits ten weeks post-intervention, attributing this to limited classroom integration and euphoria.

It is also noted that higher levels of self-concept development have been identified throughout adventure-based programmes compared to traditional PE programmes (Gibbons et al., 2018). Hodge and Mackenzie (2019), Lawrence (2018), and Wainwright and Williams (2016b) support this, highlighting that increased competence and an individual's initial success will directly impact the development of self-confidence. Meanwhile, Gray (2019) focused on the development of psychological resilience in OAA and recognised that individuals must step out of their comfort zone (mentally,

emotionally, and physically) to understand what they might have missed had they remained in a comfortable place.

Alongside this, Gray and Martin (2012) note that participation in OAA is not risk free, which Gray (2019) further associates as a by-product of natural environment engagement. However, the systematic review presented by Brussoni et al. (2015) demonstrated that within an increasingly risk-averse society, fewer opportunities are present for children to learn risk appreciation skills. Participants may also experience increased stress from the challenging nature of such activities (Mutz & Müller, 2016), arguably allowing them to recognise their stress response. Chang et al. (2018) further contends that short-term programmes can temporarily relieve physical stress or even reduce psychological stress, which DeGroot et al. (2018) and Dustin and Schwab (2014) also associated with direct engagement in the natural environment.

Additionally, teamwork and leadership qualities are commonly cited as developments gained through OAA whereby group activities develop communication and interpersonal qualities from participation (DeLange et al., 2019; Gülen & Taş, 2019; Thomas, 2015a). DeLange et al. (2019) and Sutherland and Legge (2016) also emphasise the development of social processing skills, such as team cohesion, developed when working in a team during OAA. Other outcomes also relate to participants letting down barriers and shifting social perceptions (Sutherland & Legge, 2016), learning to share roles and responsibilities (Gülen & Taş, 2019), developing interpersonal competence (Thomas, 2015a), and advancing critical thinking and communication. The above supports the belief that OAA enhances students' general life skills.

One potentially limiting feature of OAA is that it separates pupils from their home or schooling context, thereby potentially creating isolated learning experiences which cannot be implemented when back home (Brown, 2009; Wainwright & Williams, 2016a). However, Cooley et al. (2016) highlighted students' increased intention to transfer learning back to their studies and home realities when enjoyment was heightened. It has therefore been noted as fundamentally important that instructors deliver experiences which facilitate learning transfer from the adventure context into another (Brown, 2009). Potential transfer can be increased with skilled delivery by instructors, for example, using effective reflection processes during and after OAA (Everley, 2011).

Risk in OAA: What themes are present?

In order for full affective benefits to be realised, the literature suggests that OAA content must consider several factors. Further, OAA instruction is often underpinned by complexity and context-specific decisions (Mees & Collins, 2022), it is therefore challenging to pinpoint specific pedagogies that may be employed through so-called drag and drop approaches. However, guided by Metzler's (2017) design specification for models-based approaches, Wainwright and Williams (2016b) identified four non-negotiable features of OAA for maximum student benefit, these are: mainly outdoors; challenge by choice; experiential learning; and managed risk.

Beyond this, Thomas' (2019) teaching and learning strategy framework introduces four key strategies, these are: experiential learning; carefully sequenced and placed activities; facilitative teacher style; and active engagement. What Wainwright and Williams' (2016b) proposed model and Thomas' (2019) strategy framework have in common is a general aim to enhance and perhaps stabilise pedagogy in OAA. Comparisons can therefore be made to the design of Barrett and Greenaway's (1995) Dynamic Adventure Environment Model where several factors surrounding risk contribute to the intended outcome.

Beyond the framework explanations, Allison et al. (2011) recognised a lack of Dewey's (1938) continuity principle throughout OAA programs, suggesting participants are treated the same regardless of their backgrounds or histories. From a different perspective, Reed and Smith (2021) reinforce that, whilst fear remains a central pedagogic tool in OAA, some young people lack the necessary skills to interpret and grow from their experiences, thereby acknowledging the requirement for different approaches dependent on group skill set and background.

In many ways, this provides a rationale for the present study, as it remains largely unclear how the facilitation of activities in OAA can account for individual learner needs and outcomes.

Instructor roles

The literature indicates that participants often consider instructors to be an influential component of their learning development throughout OAA (Asfeldt & Hvenegaard, 2014; Burns et al., 2015). This is something DeLange et al. (2019) associate with characteristics such as being supportive, role modelling, fostering safety, and providing constant feedback. However, Sutherland and Legge (2016) argue that instructors may occasionally lack knowledge of schooling, curriculum, and assessment, potentially losing sight of the activities educative value and therefore the loss of value in the affective domain (Legge & Remington, 2017).

Martin and Priest's (1986) Adventure Experience Paradigm visually represents the '... balance of perceived risk and competence to assess a state of peak adventure' (Hollenhorst et al., 2003, p. 21). Sometimes, misadventure emerges when the risk of an activity becomes greater than the competence required to complete the task (Bunyan, 2011; Carpenter & Priest, 1993). Allison et al. (2011) and Reed and Smith (2021) acknowledge that each participant will subjectively express and comprehend the activities, which Carpenter and Priest (1993) explain is because of differing levels of competence and risk in each setting. Therefore, this should be reflected in the instructors planning and structuring of the activities (Bunyan, 2011), thereby providing a multiplicity of experiences (Allison et al., 2011) to ensure peak adventure is achieved for all.

Approach and methods

Research design

In seeking to understand OAA instructors' viewpoints, a qualitative approach was employed which, resting on the methodological foundations put forward by Cohen et al. (2018), allowed the study to explore the social and cultural constructions of participant realities. The study was grounded within the interpretivist paradigm and explicitly focussed on the meanings and nuance of participant experiences as co-constructed by participant and researcher. This perspective reflected the writing of Yilmaz (2013) who acknowledged how a social constructivist epistemic foundation provides 'a framework which is value-laden, flexible, descriptive, holistic, and context sensitive; i.e. an in-depth description of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the people involved' (p. 312). The research questions were: *What (if any) are the perspectives of OAA instructors on the benefits of OAA for young people? How do instructors facilitate and deliver OAA in order for these benefits to be achieved?*

Additionally, with OAA being central to the research, the study also reflects a case study design, which Thomas (2015b) notes must focus on one area to produce a detailed inquiry of a singular phenomenon. Moreover, case study designs offer a level of flexibility (Albon et al., 2015; Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018) particularly within the types of research questions addressed and the methods of data collection (Albon et al., 2015). As Flyvbjerg (2006) stated '[c]ontext-dependent knowledge and experience are at the very heart of expert activity. Such knowledge and expertise also lie at the center of the case study' (p. 222). The instructors in this study were considered experts within their context-dependent environments for practice in the United Kingdom. It is important to note that although the instructors shared common characteristics (to fit the criterion-referenced sampling approach) the individual participants were not working together in the same place. The 'case' here may therefore be considered 'semi-bounded' as it is not a common 'place' which knits together this case study, but instead the case is characterised by a common 'practice'. We invite the reader to be mindful of this as we present the study's findings as only a small number of voices frame this practice-informed case study.

Data collection

The study employed semi-structured interviews to gather rich data on the nature of instructor experiences and perceptions. Drawing on Kallio et al. (2016) and Crone and Lozano-Sufrategui (2019), the semi-structured approach afforded flexibility during the interviews and ensured that participants had opportunity to take the interview in directions that were important to them. The interview questions were developed and situated within the present literature and possible follow-up questions and prompts were available in each interview (Cohen et al., 2018). Prior to data collection, a pilot study involving a full interview run-through with a volunteer was undertaken and provided opportunity to consolidate the interview technique and content (Malmqvist et al., 2019). Resultantly, to help with the overall flow of the interview, the sequencing and wording of some questions changed. Key topics within the semi-structured interview centred on instructor's experiences of OAA, their perceived benefits of OAA, strategies utilised within their instructing to develop the possible benefits, and barriers to effective instruction.

Four of the interviews were conducted using face-to-face interactions and interview locations were mutually agreed between the researcher and participant. However, geographical location issues and COVID-19 prevented face-to-face interviews with two instructors, therefore Microsoft Teams was used instead to facilitate the interview process. Whilst Hanna (2012) notes the low environmental impact and time-effective nature of interviews using electronic mediums, Crone and Lozano-Sufrategui (2019) stress that rapport development can be more difficult to establish. Consequently, prior to the interview commencing online, the interviewer allocated more time for initial introductions, thereby maximising the opportunity for establishing good rapport. The texts of Ormston et al. (2014) and Holmes (2020) were adhered to in order to achieve 'empathetic neutrality', i.e., across each interview, the interviewer strived to avoid obvious, conscious, or systematic bias and remained as neutral as possible. Within the interviews, no obvious power dynamics were at play within the researcher–participant relationship and we noted the recommendations of Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009) in promoting the participants' equal participation in the research process. All interviews were recorded on two audio devices (8th generation iPad and 2020 MacBook Air) to account for any recording errors and full records of what was said were retained in preparation for the data analysis.

Sampling and participants

A purposeful criterion sampling approach was initially employed (Staller, 2021) with participants having: at least two years adventurous activity instructing experience; instructional experience in a range of adventurous activities; and worked with a range of ages (including children between four and 18 years). Prior to data collection, participants viewed an information sheet containing an outline of what their research involvement would entail (Wiles, 2013). This facilitated the informed signing of a consent form, which acknowledged their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Cox, 2018).

Six OAA instructors participated in the study (Table 1) and were all recruited through email contact. The participant sample aligned with the study's aims and objectives, thus improving the overall rigour and trustworthiness of the conclusions (Campbell et al., 2020). Through this process, a comprehensive understanding of each participant was obtained. However, despite criterion sampling kickstarting the recruitment process, three participants were recruited using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was based on the recommendations of the three initial participants who provided key information on other participants suitable for the study (Geddes et al., 2017; Suri, 2011). One distinct limitation of this process was that five of the participants recruited were male. The data and findings within this study should be engaged with by the reader with this in mind alongside what Reed (2022b) described in terms of how research design may marginalise voices in OAA research.

Table 1. Participant information.

Instructor Name (Pseudonym)	Age & Gender	Years Instructing	Activity Specialties and Experience
Rupert	21 male	4	Paddle sport, holiday and residential camps abroad, and water sport centres.
Derek	43 male	20	Multi-activity, residential camps, and managerial role in large OAA company.
Daniel	22 male	3	Sailing—holidays and residential camps abroad, and ski technician role.
Archie	42 male	24	Multi-activity, residential camps, and managerial role in a large youth organisation based on adventure.
Mae	37 female	19	Multi-activity, residential and watersport centres, county council roles linked to OAA, and Duke of Edinburgh facilitator.
Jason	39 male	15	Rock-climbing, former PE teacher, adventure activity company owner, high end/risk adventure activities

Data analysis

The initial stages of data analysis required Author A to manually transcribe the audio recordings, which facilitated initial familiarisation with the data. To avoid over-sanitising the transcripts, Hastie and Glotova's (2012) suggestions on including 'ums', 'ahs,' 'like,' and 'you know' was adhered to and added contextual depth to the data. To ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality, the OAA instructors' identities were obscured at this point and pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

After transcribing the data, a deductive thematic analysis was undertaken with specific intent to recognise, organise, and offer insight into the key patterns being constructed in each interview. The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage process for thematic analysis; 1. Data familiarisation (transcribing and reading), 2. Generating initial codes (interesting features relevant to the research questions identified and grouped), 3. Searching for themes (synthesising codes to create initial themes), 4. Reviewing the themes (between the two researchers involved in the analysis process), 5. Defining and naming themes (generating clear definitions of final themes), 6. Producing the report (through the writing up process). Data were analysed individually by two of the researchers before coming together to agree on key themes and sub themes (stage 4 above), using this process of interrater reliability to help ensure trustworthiness in the analysis process (Belotto, 2018). Each thematic analysis stage was engaged with, which enabled patterns to be identified from the lived experiences, perspectives, and behaviours of the OAA instructors.

However, to avoid the systematisation of qualitative data analysis within Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, Hayfield's conversation with Braun and Clarke (Braun et al., 2022) was drawn on to recognise the thematic analysis framework as a starting point for making sense of the data. No pre-existing coding frames were therefore employed, and the construction of themes was grounded in reflexively engaging with the content of each interview. Whilst this prolonged the initial analysis process, it ensured that the analysis closely resembled the content of the data, and that the positionality of the researchers was closely monitored.

Trustworthiness and limitations

To ensure trustworthiness within the findings, we employed Guba's (1981) four key considerations. The first of these is the truth value concern which was addressed by sharing individual interview transcripts with participants and asking whether this was an accurate record of the interview (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). The second concern centres on applicability and, whilst we acknowledge the small-scale nature of this study, the findings are not aimed to be generalisable, but may be transferable dependent on specific contexts and practices (Smith, 2018). The third concern assesses consistency and whether the same findings would be generated if the study were to be done again. We have taken every effort to achieve this through, firstly, having Author A complete the collection of data and data transcription, and, secondly, having Authors A and B conduct the analysis using interrater reliability measures previously outlined. The final concern centred around neutrality which has been

achieved through the recommendations from Ormston et al. (2014) around the maintenance of empathetic neutrality during the research process.

Major limitations centre around the small-scale nature of the sample which, although problematic, generalisability was not the intention of the study. The researchers therefore prioritised deep exploration amongst a smaller sample to uncover nuance and complexity within the instructor's role. A second limitation concerned the use of online interviews. These were employed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the geographical dispersion of the participants. It can be noted that rapport can be harder to develop in online environments, however mitigations were put in place to address this through the use of introductory questions and general discussion alongside the deliberate use of facial expressions to show interest and intrigue in this environment (Oliffe et al., 2021). We also note the benefits of online interviews highlight by Oliffe et al. (2021) such as a participant being in a familiar environment which may assist interviewee comfort.

Findings and discussion

Two dominant themes emerged from the analysis. First, instructor perceptions of developmental outcomes in their practice. And secondly, the efficacy and importance of certain pedagogical approaches to achieve these outcomes. This section moves through each in turn and demonstrates instructor perceptions on OAA impacts later in life, personal and social growth, student—facilitator relationships, learning transfer, and a pedagogy of care.

Developmental outcomes associated with OAA participation

OAA and impacts later in life

The literature review highlighted several psychosocial development traits (Gray, 2019; Harwood et al., 2019) said to enhance students' general life skills throughout OAA participation (Gülen & Taş, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Instructors supported this notion. For instance, Mae described how OAA can develop '*communication, resilience, great determination, all the kind of things that you are going to need to kind of get through life, cos, let's be honest, there's some rough parts.*' Daniel also linked to this, recognising how meaningful OAA '*engages their [students] minds, helps them learn different skills that they can use later on in life.*' The link to the influence of OAA later in life featured throughout the data and was characterised by Derek who acknowledged that '*if something's scary then getting over the fear is massively beneficial, and if you can learn how to do that . . . you can apply that to all sorts of things in life.*'

In highlighting the development of skills for life, the instructors reinforce some of the outcomes synonymous with OAA practice. These outcomes, as described by Hodgson and Berry (2011), are associated with activities that are authentic and which hold real-world consequences. However, both Beames and Brown (2016) and Reed and Smith (2021) acknowledge how the links between risk, danger, and learning bring with them practical and pedagogical limitations for outcomes in OAA.

Despite this, all six instructors commented positively on the value of OAA experiences that are grounded in activities likely to instil risk in unfamiliar learning environments. Archie's summary captured the general perspective of the participants when stating that learning outcomes link to having '*to work out how to communicate with each other in a very different environment and work together to survive.*' The acknowledgement of risk and survival in OAA perhaps draws on some of the traditional foundations of adventure, something that emerged in Davidson's (2001) study where one student (Simon) stated how outdoor education helped participants 'learn how to survive even if it's in the city—doing stuff that's outdoors' (p. 17).

Whilst much has been said on the benefits OAA can offer for the affective learning domain (Edwards et al., 2016; Firm & Griggs, 2012; Griffin, 2020; Lawrence, 2018; Wainwright & Williams, 2016a), the instructors highlighted how OAA experiences can create the foundations of healthy

activity habits. This often centred on increasing autonomous motivation for future physical activity which aligns with the work of Ladwig et al. (2019) surrounding positive experiences and future physical activity habits. Jason noted how students who are not typically active in school '*are empowered to use the outdoors*' and how, for those who '*don't play competitive sports (at school), then they have a way to be physically active.*' Archie agreed, suggesting that it should not be about '*climbing the highest mountain or, you know, paddling across the biggest lake, it is about forming that (physical activity) habit.*'

Of course, adventurous activity participation has been linked to lifelong physical activity habits (Dustin & Schwab, 2014; Maude, 2010; Thomas, 2015a; Wainwright & Williams, 2020). What the instructors identify here is the limitations of PE curricula in developing healthy lifestyle practices, something Solmon (2018) noted when describing PE programmes as remaining grounded in the traditions of sport. Interestingly, former PE teacher, Jason, acknowledged how OAA spaces can provide a meaningful alternative to traditional discourses of sport and participation. Alongside this, when Archie describes OAA participants as not needing to climb the highest mountain or paddle the biggest lake, we see the importance of choosing low-impact and low-skill activities to establish lifelong participation. As Dustin and Schwab (2014) identified, this is but one reason why 'venturing beyond the brick and mortar of a school's physical plant into nature' is of critical importance (p. 31).

Personal and social growth

Much research identifies personal and social growth as significant outcomes in OAA (Bowers et al., 2019; Cumming et al., 2021; Ewert & Garvey, 2007) which encompasses both intra and interpersonal development (Sheard & Golby, 2006). The instructors picked up on this, encompassing self-concept development, increased resilience, and developing teamwork and communication as at the heart of positive OAA experiences.

The link between OAA and increased participant confidence was a dominant theme. Mae described how '*I think it's brilliant for self-confidence, (it) helps build resilience especially like doing (the) Duke of Edinburgh and things like that.*' Meanwhile, Daniel drew on the importance of young people completing activities they did not think they could do as '*if you do something you didn't think you'd be able to, um, it just boosts your confidence.*' However, Rupert highlighted confidence as a barrier to regular adventure activity participation stating, '*I know there are so many people that want to be able to do it, but don't feel they can for whatever reason, (they) might not have the confidence to come down every week*'.

In order for participants in OAA to access personal and social growth, instructors linked their experiences to the comfort zone model. For Archie, the significance of '*resilience and grit*' in OAA is critical, and he acknowledged how '*we talk about them [resilience, grit] quite a lot (and it) is really important.*' However, it was Jason who acknowledged how participants must '*step outside of that [comfort zone]*' in order to access the benefits Derek identified when describing meaningful, authentic, adventures which require both '*mental strength*' and '*emotional intelligence.*' These findings correlate with Gray (2019) who attributed individuals stepping out of their comfort zone to psychological resilience development.

However, Allison et al. (2011) noted that each participant will subjectively engage with challenging and stressful OAA activities. What the instructors did not consider is 'whether the risk + fear = growth hypothesis remains relevant' within contemporary OAA practice (Reed & Smith, 2021, p. 11). Looking back to Martin and Priest's (1986) Adventure Experience Paradigm, this supports the notion that different adventure experiences can develop based upon the diverse backgrounds and perspectives within any group of young people in OAA contexts.

Teamwork and leadership qualities were commonly cited as positive outcomes in OAA by the instructors. For instance, Rupert described how '*the most common (benefit of OAA) is obviously teamwork,*' whilst Daniel acknowledged that OAA '*can increase teambuilding, getting people to*

work together as opposed to sitting on their own.' Jason also linked the benefits of OAA to the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising the requirement for in-person, face-to-face communication:

> *I think that's quite important, that leadership and teamwork, and also the set of skills to relate to people. So, I mean, as you saw in the pandemic, people being able to communicate with one another face-to-face and not just on Teams is really important* (Jason).

The data also indicated that OAA offers a form of alternative participation in sport as '*(OAA) can bring people out of their shell, who potentially wouldn't be good at normal sports like football and rugby*' (Daniel). This emphasis on participation and encouraging young people to explore what they did not think possible was also discussed by Mae as OAA '*brings people out of their shell, but it also brings things out of them that they didn't even know they had in them*.'

Sutherland and Legge ([2016](#)) presented a similar view of OAA participation as indicated by the above data, and suggest that outcomes related to individuals letting down barriers and shifting social perceptions are an important feature in OAA practice and participation. The findings of the present study coincide with this, evidenced further through Derek who suggested how OAA processes can encourage '*the quiet kid at the back (to be) much more talkative, much more interactive*.' Here, Daniel placed emphasis on '*a quiet student overcoming something like a rock jump . . . they're a completely different person by the end of the week*.' Whilst Barrett and Greenaway ([1995](#)) identify the first ingredient of outdoor education to be overcoming a fear, it remains unclear in light of contemporary literature (e.g. North et al., [2022](#); Reed & Smith, [2021](#)) whether the relationships between discomfort, fear, and participation continue to provide instructors with the necessary tools to support learning.

Instructor approaches: Participant—facilitator relationships and learning transfer

Participant - facilitator relationships

With fear and uncertainty recognised as central elements in OAA (Reed & Smith, [2021](#)), and acknowledging Taniguchi et al. ([2005](#)) who sketch out of the importance of perceived risk in adventurous learning, the literature presents a tension on the place and use of uncertainty and fear in OAA. This is not a new debate for the profession given Davis-Berman and Berman ([2002](#)) called for a paradigm shift two decades ago which focusses our attention 'not on moving out of comfort zones, but on reinforcing safety, security and challenge' (p. 305). As they go on to acknowledge, building a relationship between instructor and student is critical in developing a secure environment where students feel they can challenge themselves (Davis-Berman & Berman, [2002](#)).

Daniel picked up on the importance of relationships and suggested how this '*is helpful because you can encourage them [young people] . . . you can push them a bit harder*.' This was echoed by Derek who described how '*it's about trying to build a relationship that means they [young people] trust you, or believe in you, and that they want to follow you and they want to do what you're asking them to do*.' Aligning with Shooter et al. ([2010](#), [2012](#)) and Sibthorp and Jostad ([2014](#)), the instructors associated building relationships and trust as central aspects in the enhancement of OAA participation and outcomes. It is suggested here that building rapport with students assists them in reaching their full potential. Drawing on Povilaitis et al. ([2019](#)) review of 27 articles which discuss how instructor behaviour affects participant outcomes, the data aligns with the notion that interpersonal support is established through 'positive instructor—student relationships' that, at their core, require 'encouragement, interest, trust, and commitment' to be developed (p. 229).

Whilst student—facilitator relationships were identified as important, Rupert expanded further and offered initial insight into an aspect of practice we feel is important to report on. Drawing on what we tentatively describe here as a pedagogy of care, we see how an outdoor education instructor intentionally factors in empathetic and caring moments in practice. '*I like to pull people aside and just make sure throughout my session that people are coping*' (Rupert). Rupert continues and

says how he likes to '*make sure that everything's going OK for them, that everything's alright, and give them a chance to think about what they've done so far.*' We feel this is important as, whilst the literature acknowledges how fear might limit the potential for learning (e.g. North et al., 2022; Reed & Smith, 2021), limited work demonstrates how an instructor might adequately approach this in order to support participants. What Rupert touched on here aligns with Schumann et al. (2009) who identified instructor empathy and patience as essential in the development of positive OAA learning environments.

Long-term psychosocial benefits: Reflection and onward strategies

Many authors note how OAA learning processes are both constructed and deepened through personal reflective practice (Chiu, 2019; Gülen & Taş, 2019; Humberstone & Stana, 2011). However, the efficacy and impact of isolated or one off learning experiences have been questioned which, for Chiu (2019) and Thomas (2015a), necessitates intentional and effective reflection moments. In the interviews, instructors outlined reflective strategies which centred on the development of '*good questions*' (Derek), offering '*chance to think*' (Rupert), and acknowledging that '*you'd also be reflecting all the way through*' (Derek). This continuous mode of reflection echoes Thomas' (2015a) findings on signature pedagogies in Australian outdoor education. Much like Derek, one of Thomas' (2015a) participants, Jordan, described how 'right from the student's first experience, there is structured verbal learning and written learning, reflective expectations' (p. 123). This may be linked back to the pedagogy of care seen in Rupert's practice where he would '*pull people aside and just make sure throughout my session that people are coping . . . and give them a chance to think about what they've done so far.*'

However, despite instructors facilitating reflective practices, literature shows how it can be challenging to transfer these reflections into other contexts (Brown, 2009; Wainwright & Williams, 2016a). With Scrutton (2015) demonstrating a significant loss of benefits ten-week post-intervention, questions are raised as to whether teachers are aware of their responsibility to continue and implement the learning taken from the OAA context. Mae picked up on this, suggesting that transfer beyond the OAA programme is '*often left for the teachers more so than us.*' Daniel also reflected on this, saying how it is the teachers' responsibility to '*then transpose those skills (learned in OAA) into the classroom.*' In many ways, this was positioned as a core frustration in the instructor's practice.

The quotes from Mae and Daniel suggest instructors are happy to facilitate the foundations of knowledge transfer throughout sessions, but that teachers are ultimately the agents who must consolidate the learning when back in the school environment. With data highlighting instructors' expectations of teachers to transfer learning, it questions whether teachers are aware of their responsibility and whether OAA experiences are an isolated aspect of young people's education. This reinforces the value of teachers assisting instructors throughout OAA planning stages to enhance knowledge transfer into the classroom (Bowen-Viner et al., 2017). Further, this highlights an area for future practice and research relating to the processes of OAA transfer to the home and/or classroom space, thereby mapping how the benefits of OAA can be maintained post-experience.

Conclusion

This study aimed to critically assess instructor perspectives on the benefits, outcomes, and teaching approaches which characterise adventurous learning endeavours. Despite an indication that some literature has overlooked instructors' personal viewpoints (DeLange et al., 2019), the present evaluation has highlighted many key aspects of OAA practice. What emerged from the data reinforced the integral role of instructors' intentional approaches to delivering OAA. Often, the instructors concurred with many of the benefits highlighted throughout current literature, particularly those relating to self-concept, social developments, and resilience.

Interestingly, whilst acknowledging the value of certain characteristics, including challenge and increasing perceived risk, the discussion unveiled a degree of holistic and caring approaches with instructors placing significant importance on developing relationships with student groups. However, it was also discovered that instructors are unsure on the efficacy of learning transfer beyond the OAA environment when this is left to visiting staff members. Being a small-scale project, this is an aspect of the study that may warrant further research, and we do not claim any form of universalism when presenting these findings.

Recommendations for research and practice

This study has explored the many perceived benefits and associated teaching approaches of six OAA instructors in the United Kingdom. The study's findings may be used to inform future research and practice to ensure OAA maintains and builds its position within school curricula and wider society. Whilst the literature primarily focusses on such benefits within the affective domain of learning, the instructors also associated OAA experiences with life-skill development positioned within the cognitive domain of learning. It is therefore recommended that future practice explores these aspects, whilst encompassing the perspectives of those who integrally facilitate OAA activities. Such advancements within the field will ensure young people are supported in their experiences with the most effective teaching approaches to maximally attain the benefits of OAA. Further, the ways in which learning transfer is supported post-activity, alongside instructor concerns that present approaches may be ineffective, represents an important consideration for the field, one which appears to be a recurring theme in research and practice.

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Disclosure statement

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